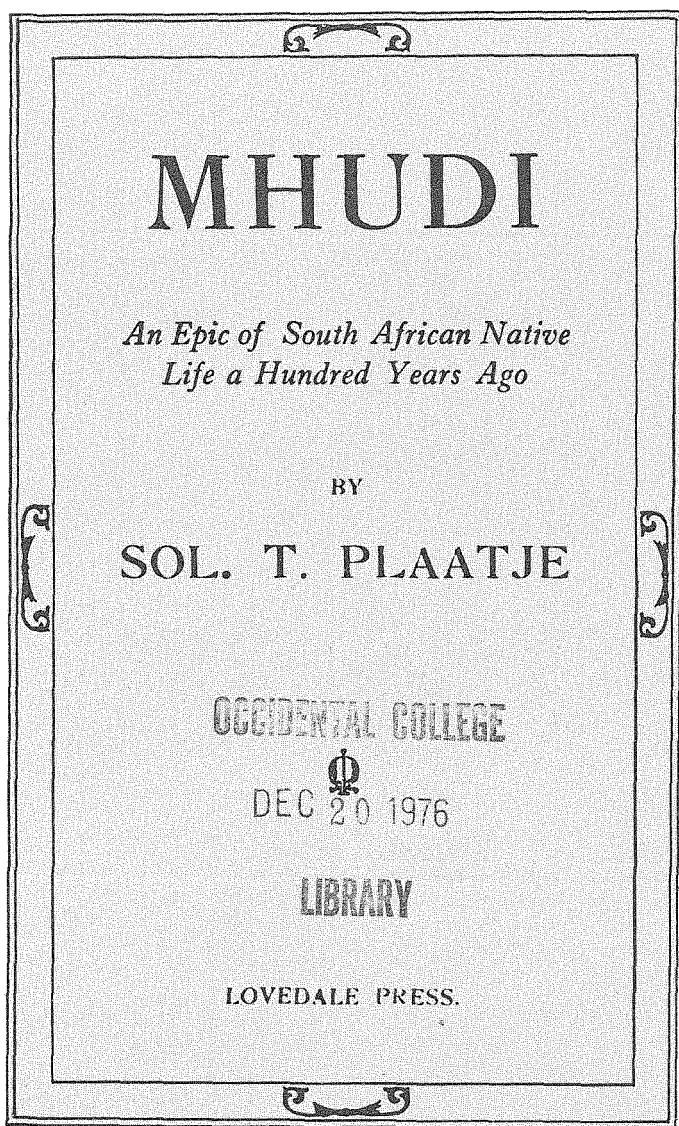


December 1976

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Munger **Africana** Library Notes



Sources of the First Black South African Novel in English

Stephen Gray
Introduction by Hallett Smith

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Munger **Africana** **Library Notes**

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Sources of the First Black South
African Novel in English: Solomon
Plaatje's Use of Shakespeare and
Bunyan in *Mhudi*

Stephen Gray

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PREFACE

Just as the art historians tell us that any painting owes more to previous paintings than it does to observed nature, so every literary work of art has its literary sources. Sometimes these are not evident to the casual reader. It takes the scholar to search them out, to show how they made their way into the literary work, and to indicate their significance for the writer and for the serious reader.

Such a task has been performed by Stephen Gray, himself a poet and novelist, for the pioneering novel Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago by Sol T. Plaatje. Source study is of course only one way of attempting to realize the value of a piece of writing, but it is an important way. One may enjoy the pastoral charm, the humor, the satiric commentary on many aspects of life in Shakespeare's As You Like It without ever having heard of Thomas Lodge's novel Rosalynde, its source, but a reading of the novel and a careful comparison of it with the play can bring the reader far closer to the mind of Shakespeare than he can get in any other way.

Plaatje himself was a Shakespearian. He translated five of the plays to make them available to African readers who could not read them in English: Julius Caesar, The Comedy of Errors, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, and Much Ado About Nothing. Accordingly, Stephen Gray knew where to look first for important influences on Plaatje's work.

Imitating Shakespeare can be a dangerous business for any author. It has been said that Keats was the only imitator whom Shakespeare did not ruin. But one must discriminate: it is a matter of how the imitation is undertaken and for what purpose. Stephen Gray shows how Plaatje the novelist used a dramatist's method for his characterization and his structure. Such a demonstration is valuable for the reader of the novel because it sets

him on the right course -- it teaches him what not to expect, the ordinary narrator's method of narration.

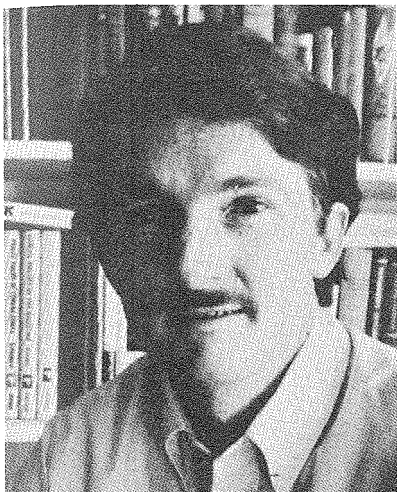
Some of Shakespeare's imaginative freedom and some of his language, naturally familiar to the African translator, also enriches Plaatje's *Mhudi*. But the debt does not diminish the borrower. Students of American literature are familiar with the fact that Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, usually regarded as one of the great masterpieces of that literature, shows a fundamental dependence upon the language and feeling of Shakespeare. Melville's style has been criticized for this reason, as has Plaatje's, but the works seem to survive the criticism.

If, as Shakespeare's friend and rival, Ben Jonson, said, he was not of an age but for all time, it is not surprising that he could cross the boundaries of cultures as well as the boundaries of centuries. In 1969 Wale Ogunyemi made a Yoruba adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and the next year a thirty-year-old Zulu author, Welcome Msomi, wrote as his third play a version of the *Macbeth* story called *Umabatha* which was so successful that the whole production was later taken to London at a cost of thirty thousand pounds.

The other author Stephen Gray finds as an important influence on Plaatje is the "mechanic preacher" who served his time in Bedford jail and wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This book, of course, arrives at a frontier with the missionaries because it is one of the plainest and simplest of all introductions to the Christian faith. But it is also a literary masterpiece. An American boy on the Kentucky frontier in 1788 later said of the book that "although it was declared to be a dream, all the characters became to me as real personages." As Stephen Gray points out, the portrayals of bravery and cowardice, of commitment and betrayal in *Mhudi* get much of their strength from the models in *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

I find Stephen Gray's study of Plaatje sensitive and illuminating.

Hallett D. Smith



STEPHEN GRAY's first volume of poems, called It's About Time, came out in 1973. In collaboration with Cecil Skotnes he has since produced The Assassination of Shaka (McGraw-Hill), The White Monday Disaster and Baudelaire's Voyage. He is the editor of Writers' Territory (Longmans), On the Edge of the World and A World of Their Own (Ad. Donker, Johannesburg), and anthologies of Southern African writing in the seventies. His novels are Local Colour (Ravan

Press, Johannesburg) and Visible People (Rex Collings, London).

He was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1941, and spent several years as a student in Cambridge, England, and in the Iowa Writers Workshop, United States, and currently lectures in English at the Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg. He is working on an introduction to Southern African writing in English, and is general editor of Quagga Press's African Fiction Library which republished Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi in 1974.

HALLETT D. SMITH (Ph.D., Yale) is a distinguished Shakespearean scholar. He has written or edited six books and numerous articles on the Elizabethan period. For twenty years he was Chairman of the Division of the Humanities at the California Institute of Technology and is Professor Emeritus of English. Dr. Smith is a Senior Research Associate of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. He has been a Phi Beta Kappa Senator and national lecturer, a Guggenheim Fellow, and won the Poetry Chapbook Prize of the Poetry Society of America. Dr. Smith will be Berg Professor at New York University in the Spring Term, 1977.

TWO SOURCES OF PLAATJE'S MHUDI

Stephen Gray

The small amount of debate there has been about Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi (written in the late 1910s, first published in 1930) has proceeded in not much more than terms of preliminary biocriticism and plot synopses. It has been cursorily dismissed by Jahn (in A History of Neo-African Literature) as having a style which is merely "padded" and "Victorian," and in The African Image Mphahlele finds the dialogue no more than "stilted." Although it is one of the first full-length novels in English by an African writer, it receives no mention in Dathorne's African Literature in the Twentieth Century, even though a direct successor of Plaatje like Peter Abrahams, who features powerfully in Dathorne's book, chose to reinterpret large sections of Mhudi in his Wild Conquest (1950). This is the centenary year of the birth of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, and his reputation as a crucial figure in the evolution of African fiction is at an unfortunate low.

Yet a contemporary novelist like Bessie Head, engaged on much the same territory as Plaatje was, on discovering Mhudi forty-five years after its first publication, can find the following to note: "The wonder of Mhudi is the ease with which new patterns are assimilated by the people and the chiefs with no great show of excitement as though that was the natural thing to do."¹ It is this transitional stage between the imitation of, and the incorporation and transformation of, European

models that Plaatje exemplifies so clearly. An analysis of Mhudi, then, in terms of sources and influences, might help to reinstate this complex novel as a document of seminal importance in African writing.

Mphahlele does commend Mhudi for the way "poetic justice, the dream-like quality of the narrative, the use of the pathetic fallacy, and the weaving in of songs, are in the tradition of Bantu oral literature."² But in Mhudi, Plaatje is able to weave into his story an equally powerful range of overlapping European literary modes as well, and the balance between the two cultures that he maintains gives him his extraordinary strength.

To illustrate this it is necessary to refer to his two main sources, Shakespeare and Bunyan, to determine what he found useful and appropriate to his ends.

On this matter of imposed or inherited sources, Plaatje as a pioneer figure without precedent was caught in a tension that still exists in South Africa virtually unchanged since his time. At one extreme of the English South African spectrum is the maintenance of Shakespeare as a supreme cultural symbol, or at least as an unsurpassable educational text, and at the other is a certain ferment about the conditions of independence necessary for the creation of a local (English) literature. The commissars of official apartheid culture, hardly changed since the days of British supremacy, maintain the view that "Shakespeare is for everyone" (everyone with a metropolitan background, one should hasten to add, and the right colored skin to be admitted to a segregated theater); on the other hand, the contemporary black writer rejects Shakespeare on grounds of distance and time as a figure who, no matter how "universal," is meaningless in terms of the day-to-day struggle to evolve an indigenous literature. "Africans," says Kabwe Kasoma, "get sick of monkeying William Shakespeare," when it comes to the business of forging an independent tradition. "The African Educational Revolution," he says, "is now taking place all over independent black Africa to correct this sad Colonial hangover."³

But Plaatje did "monkey" Shakespeare. And the results of this apparently incongruous process accounted for a large

part of his Mhudi. And Mhudi is by no means a novel that gives in to colonial dominance.

When Plaatje wrote Mhudi he made a number of assumptions about the shape of history, all of which are derived from Shakespeare rather than from any English tradition of the historical novel between the late sixteenth century and the 1900s of his beginning of composition. Various axioms that Shakespeare subscribed to reappear in Plaatje unmodified, indeed as if there had been no cultural changes across the three centuries. Although Mhudi is basically a twentieth century historical novel, it is somewhat of an oddity in that it is conceived in terms of Elizabethan theater.

It opens with a cast list (a partly inaccurate cast list, and without the Elizabethan sexual segregation). Chapter 1 begins with an introduction that serves the function of a prologue ("Two centuries ago the Bechuana tribes . . . led their patriarchal life . . . hunting . . . pastoral duties . . . swains . . . peasants. . . . Strange to relate, these simple folk were perfectly happy without money and without silver watches. . . . Upon these peaceful regions over one hundred years ago there descended one Mzilikazi the usurper. . . ."). The first enacted scene of the chapter (which is called "A Tragedy and Its Vendetta"), the burning and extermination of the village and people of Kunana, motivates the following decade of action. Twenty-four chapters in all lead the reader through the scourges of Mzilikazi's Empire in the Western Transvaal (as it has subsequently been called) up to his departure for Bulawayo (as he was to name it), and the storytelling is arranged in a broadly alternating pattern. The action cuts from Matabele to Bechuana with increasing speed towards the climax, and a theme that is launched in one chapter is invariably carried through into the next contrasting scene so that balance is maintained and an ironic parallelism is built up in the familiar Shakespearean way.

It is not Plaatje's intention to try for the kind of naturalism we are accustomed to expect from the post-Victorian novelist and that we take as a critical norm today. His characterization is done by the Shakespearean

techniques of soliloquy, dialogue and set-speechifying. If a character has to be described, this is usually done through the mouth of another character, rather than by the narrator himself. Mhudi's informative monologue occupies the whole of Chapters 2 and 3, and it is balanced by Mzilikazi's informative farewell oration in Chapter 22 -- both dramatic set pieces. Plaatje lets a didactic scene play out in dialogue form -- if it involves commoners (as in Ra-Thaga and Phil Jay's discussion of marriage early in Chapter 21) in terms of comic chat, or if it involves the nobility, in a set of formal rhetorical speeches (as in Mzilikazi's victory celebrations in Chapter 5, and the trial scenes under Chief Massouw in Chapter 9 and under Chief Moroka in Chapter 15).

Although Plaatje allows himself a role as author, he appears very rarely in propria persona (only in the "prologue" and at the start of Chapter 12 where he asks if the authorial "we" might be permitted to digress, as if for a "prologue" to an "Act III" in the action). At moments of stress or of intense activity, he breaks into dramatic dialogue form, pure and simple, as in Mhudi's heated exclamations that overlap with Baile's amazed utterances (p. 72)⁴ and in scripted debate (pp. 77-78), a section which includes even extras, such as 1st Companion and 2nd Companion, complete with stage directions. At moments of moody reflection, he introduces the words of songs, as in Ra-Thaga's lyrical "descant upon their happiness in the wilderness" ("Mhudi and I," p. 62), as in the praises of Langa (p. 45) and as in the feast-song of Mzilikazi (p. 159), with its "refrain" for a chorus of a few thousand "leather-lunged men."

The question of whether or not these are also indigenous narrative and dramatic techniques should be raised here, but it is not likely to be answered in full until there is a scholar who has a range that would match Plaatje's own: the language of the Basuto, Qoranna, Hlubi, the Boers and the Tswana, Rolong and Zulu, not to mention the language of the Fish-Eaters (the English). Meanwhile, suffice it to say that the reappearances of these Elizabethan dramatic stock-in-trades are only too obvious in Mhudi. Plaatje chose to dramatize history so that it could be witnessed by the reader, and

he used dramatic techniques, rather than narrative prose statement, as a medium through which to externalize his concerns effectively.

As Tim Couzens establishes,⁵ Plaatje's main concern was not merely to present his scrupulously and personally collected historical detail from oral sources about the 1820s and 1830s, the period of the Mfecane and the Great Trek in Southern Africa, as history per se. He used that period to allegorize about his own 1910s, just as Shakespeare used Holinshed whenever convenient to reflect his own times. Shakespeare's themes of war and peace, justice and honor and power, are Plaatje's, too, and Plaatje learned from Shakespeare that to write critically about his own times and to avoid a censor's clampdown required infinite literary cunning. Mhudi is, in fact, a profoundly polemical and even morally subversive book, yet on the face of it it is no more undesirable than Shakespeare's equally disturbing political parable about "Denmark" must have appeared in its day. One is expected to read through the surface of Mhudi, not just for the history -- even though Plaatje, admittedly, is concerned in his own preface to Mhudi to arrest the disappearance of black history and cultivate its art and literature in the vernacular -- but for its contemporaneity.

Couzens calls Mhudi a "kind of winter's tale of loss and regeneration" (p. 7), and just as The Winter's Tale is a "problem" play, so is Mhudi a "problem" novel. Often the blending of genres is uneasy. But Plaatje is perfectly aware of the kind of curve through which he intends to steer his action. One precipitating event causes a lengthy regrouping of forces into opposing camps, the old tyranny and the new union of allies meet on the battlefield (Battlehill and Mosega, 1837), and both defeat and victory bring about a spirit of miraculous recovery. Mzilikazi is converted from reckless injustice through the purgation of suffering to a new wisdom and fertility; his favorite wife, the sterile Umnandi, is driven through vicissitudes to be, as Plaatje insists, "resurrected" into a new harmony. Mhudi and Ra-Thaga are driven by the tide of events through

the action of a tragedy: from dispossession of their pastoral life, through an Adam and Evedom in the wilderness, through the precarious existence of refugees, to reunion and restitution (they drive into the sunset in a secondhand ox-wagon "being transported from place to place like white people": "Was it real, or was it just an evanescent dream?" [p. 165])).

The Matabele scenes generally derive from a chronicle-history play type of static spectacle. The wilderness scenes ultimately derive from Elizabethan pastoral and romantic comedy ("A royal pair never sat down to a meal with greater relish than the rescued Mhudi and her chivalrous companion, as together they partook of the wild beef" [p. 33]). The plotting of Mzilikazi's downfall is straight revenge tragedy ("Whenever [Phil Jay] confided his grief to Ra-Thaga the effect was only to fan the glowing embers of revenge that were burning in his breast" [p. 100]). The miraculous recoveries over the "stream of tears and rivers of blood" (p. 120) make for a tragicomic denouement.

Plaatje tacitly adopts Shakespeare's assumptions about what genres say and do holus-bolus; he accepts without question that Shakespeare's world view as embodied in the plays is available to him, and he is not necessarily concerned with mutating it. But Plaatje also felt, rightly or wrongly, that the Shakespeare he had made himself familiar with was indeed an international means of communication; he knew that he could interpret and prophesy quite shockingly about the death of empires in terms which all English-speaking empire-builders claimed they responded to deeply. As an act of faith in the true English culture, he appealed to a pre-empire writer of England who was anti tyranny and pro an ordered harmony. Plaatje translated The Comedy of Errors (a satirical deflation of superstition, the rule of inhuman law and the cruelty of the master-servant relationship), Julius Caesar (a cynical power play, from which many of the portents -- like the lions and the comets -- of Mhudi are derived), The Merchant of Venice (the underdog's dignity), Othello (with its savage anthropophagus and bogymen revealed in profoundly human

terms) and Much Ado About Nothing into Sechuana, obviously in the belief that English cultural techniques and norms could transcend even the use of the English language.

Mhudi remains a rich store of language dilemmas in English. It not only uses Shakespeare, but is positively boobytrapped with Shakespeare all the way. In his preface, Plaatje begins the allusions; the book describes, he writes, the casus belli "which unleashed the war dogs." In the novel itself, each chief "acknowledges his fealty to Mzilikazi." Old men recount their "wondrous deeds of valour." Girls wear "kirtles" and "peltries." Words like "shambles" are used in their Shakespearean sense, rather than in the modern sense. Mbongis are accompanied by "court-jesters," and kings by "fools." More than once there are "strangers in a strange land." And the main question is: "War, to be, or not to be" (p. 97). When human voices are raised in mass joy, it is a case of "the welkin rings." Above all, "[the chiefs] knew that a Solomonic decision had to be delivered that day; even-handed justice was expected of them and even-handed justice they must dispense or there would be Donnybrook in Thaba Ncho" (p. 106). Nor is the odd speaker averse to coming out with the perfect iambic pentameter, even in a prose context: "the very man I saw departing hence" (p. 35), "the terror of the nations of the world" (p. 85).

Now, in this matter of allusion, Plaatje is often an enormously proficient punster, as in the pun on his own name in the sentence about "Solomonic decision" (Sol = sun is also common). But the profound point is that almost all the Shakespearean allusions above are not used merely derivatively; they are used ironically. There is not much enjoyment to be had in Mhudi unless one spots his witty technique of using Shakespeare parodically to show that (1) the subject matter of his work, which is "an early Native venture" in the field of South African literature "which hitherto has been almost exclusively European" (preface date 1930, p. 17), is also worthy of treatment in the terms of a gloriously snobbish, ruling white culture; and (2) the sentiments expressed by his

black and Boer characters (there is not one English-speaker on stage in Mhudi) are age-old, common to all mankind, and certainly should be familiar to the English imperialists who claim they so love their Shakespeare. This way Plaatje commits a subtle sabotage of the cultural values of Empire and of the missionaries who, for one reason or another, inordinately delayed the publication of this novel for over a decade. He needed to twist Shakespeare, with his tongue in his cheek, to remind the English whites of South Africa that they did not need to look down on black society if their own greatest writer was also full of witches, sorceresses, chimeras, omens, bloodletting and general savagery -- the Wars of the Roses was their Mfecane.

That is the major side of Plaatje's wit. But the use of his own contemporary English jargon, imbedded in the text, is also pretty potent. For example, the word "hinterland," as Cecil Rhodes called his horizon of conquest, is used with a kind of glee by Mzilikazi here; "trek" is used by the Barolong long before the textbook Boer trekkers arrive (and in the same sense that Wilfred Owen uses it in "Strange Meeting"). Place names throughout are used polemically (see "Zimbabwe," "Monomatapa," and no mention of later settlements like Kimberley and Johannesburg). Americanisms like "shimmy" are also skillfully placed. Plaatje even uses the most cool translingual puns, like "black gloom" ("blanke" and "nie-blanke" for "white" and "non-white" are most treacherous South African clichés) (p. 145); and he is happy to confuse terminologies for comic effect ("surely the Boers would be proud to have for an ayah such a noble mosadi as Mhudi" [p. 161]).

This kind of spirited linguistic game is Plaatje's leading characteristic as a stylist. Suffice it to say that one should not be surprised that Plaatje is also quite capable of making covert but extensive allusion to Blake's "The Tiger" (opening of Chapter 9), to Keats's "To Autumn" at garnering time, and abundantly to the King James Old and New Testaments. Nor did Plaatje miss in Shakespeare what a colonial hankering for "news from a far country" might well have missed. Plaatje noted that

Shakespeare, while largely involved with the enormous mass of English experience in England, also contains from his sources the odd African detail. Shakspeare does have his lions, hyenas, jackals, tigers, rhinoceroses, cormorants, deserts, gold, ivory, ebony and even baboons. Plaatje, as it were, merely footnotes Shakespeare from an African point of view.

That Plaatje's concern in Mhudi was this kind of Africanization of English and its subject matter cannot be held in doubt. One feels the difficulties he was faced with in using a language which was clotted with alien perceptions and preconceptions, but which was still needed for export back to London and New York; they were Schreiner's difficulties, too, after all. In Mhudi if one finds a "koppie," one can be sure that there will also be an explanatory "hillock" hard by in the text. A "wildebeest" inevitably also has to appear as a "gnu," in case the master race is not prepared to let its language expand and absorb "foreign" words.

But it is an irony that Plaatje would probably not have enjoyed that for his few readers in South Africa today it is the Shakespeare in Plaatje that needs to be footnoted. Plaatje's own footnotes, in the original Lovedale Press edition, served to interpret the unfamiliar vernacular into English; whereas now, while Plaatje's readers understand the "Bayetes," the "Tulas!" and the "Bonas" of the text, they are no longer familiar with the Shakespeare that generated a good deal of Plaatje's interest as a transitional figure.

The other key writer whom Plaatje uses as skillfully in Mhudi is John Bunyan. When in the 1670s Bunyan gave up on sermonizing, pamphleteering and recording the lives of the saints as moral guides to his parishioners and, in prison for illegal preaching, turned to writing The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which is to Come, he was diverting his energies into fiction so that (as he says in his author's apology):

This book will make a traveller of thee,
If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
If thou wilt its directions understand;
Yea, it will make the slothful active be,
The blind also delightful things to see.

The same motto might well be applied to Plaatje's novel; because the two works came to be written under similar circumstances, they have to a large extent a common purpose, and they stand in their respective literary traditions in the same crucial positions. Bunyan's and Plaatje's views of fiction virtually coincide. Bunyan wrote in his apology to The Pilgrim's Progress that he "fell suddenly into an allegory" and:

May I not write in such a style as this?
In such a method too, and yet not miss
Mine end, thy good? why may it not be done?
Am I afraid to say that Holy Writ,
Which for its style and phrase puts down all wit,
Is everywhere so full of all these things,
(Dark figures, allegories), yet there springs
From that same book that lustre and those rays
Of light that turns our darkest nights to days . . .

Sound words I know Timothy to use,
And old wives' fables he is to refuse,
But yet grave Paul him nowhere doth forbid
The use of parables; in which lay hid
That gold, those pearls, and precious stones that were
Worth digging for, and that with greatest care . . .

Art thou for something rare, and profitable?
Would'st thou see a truth within a fable?

Now, from internal evidence alone, there can be no doubt that Plaatje knew The Pilgrim's Progress well enough when he started to write Mhudi. Bunyan's allegory had already played a basic part in black writing in South Africa. According to Albert S. Gérard in Four African Literatures: "Of the whole corpus of European literature, Bunyan's masterpiece is the most widely translated work in Africa. Because of its edifying purpose and allegorical structure, the missionaries found it eminently suitable for African

readers, and it exerted considerable influence on the early stages of creative writing in Bantu languages."⁶

It was first translated into Xhosa in 1886 by Tiyo Soga. When Bunyan's words went into the vernacular, something profound happened. The Pilgrim's Progress opens like this:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world,
I lighted on a certain place, where was a den;
and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and
as I slept I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and
behold I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in
a certain place, with his face from his own
house, a book in his hand, and a great burden
upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the
book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept
and trembled: and not being able longer to
contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry;
saying, "What shall I do?"

Or, as Tiyo Soga would have it, "Yoo! Ndiya Kwenjenjani na?"

This is strong stuff. The figure "clothed in rags" making his outcry of protest could be used many ways. In Soga's version, he still appears undergoing his ordeal complete with woodcuts of English Protestant nonconformists and knights-in-armor, their eyes set on the Delectable Mountains of Heaven, and presumably he goes all the way of Bunyan's text: he is now a Xhosa-speaking Christian turning his back in disgust on the City of Destruction, persevering through the Muddy Donga of Despond and sticking to the Straight and Narrow Path. He is going to encounter the half-man, half-monster Apollyon (glossed by Soga as UMTshabalalisi, iNduna yee Demoni), Beelzebub, King of Lies in Vanity Fair (glossed quite rightly also as iNduna yee Demoni), and at the end of many hair-raising, melodramatic adventures he will dissolve in the River of Death before gaining his place on Mount Zion. The low church missionaries who arrived in South Africa in the nineteenth century, bringing the authorized version of the Bible and Bunyan's resolute pilgrim as their contribution to black culture probably could not foresee that their literary

images would permutate into far more than the stuff of the conversion of black heathendom into -- at that stage -- only the lower rooms of the house of God.

Literature seems to have a dynamic power all of its own that is able to be manipulated, accurately or inaccurately, according to the will of its propagators: Bunyan can be used as the purveyor of the message of Christian humility, piety, obedience and hope for rewards, if not on earth, then at least abundantly in the life after death. The message of Bunyan as it reappears in a work like Thomas Mofolo's Traveller to the East strictly conformed to Bunyan's most narrow Puritan ideals. When Mofolo published this Sotho novel, Moeti oa Bochabela, in 1907, his imagination was in almost total subjection to a Bunyanesque reading of the Bible. From Bunyan Mofolo learned that the parables, allegories and metaphors of the Bible could be extended into everyday life for the purposes of preaching to simple folk, and his traveler, Fekisi, rides on Pilgrim's shoulders much of the way. The opening of Mofolo's black progress goes like this:

In the black darkness, very black, in the times when the tribes were still eating each other like wild beasts, there lived a man called Fekisi.

Yes, I say a man, not a man in appearance only, one knowing how to speak, but a man in speech, in actions, in all his habits. . . .

The story of this man of whom we speak, we have said, is of old times, when this land of Africa was clothed in great darkness, dreadful darkness, in which all the works of darkness were done.

It is of the days when there was no strong chieftainship, the tribes still ate each other . . . they were as animals . . . the days when the land of Africa still sunk in this low state, still truly in darkness.⁷

Here Mofolo's technique is Bunyanesque, and so is his theme. Mofolo is more an adapter than an innovator. The wilderness that Fekisi has to trek across to gain the Promised Land adapts marvelously out of Bunyan; the raging beasts of Africa readily become the Old Testament

monsters of the Judean desert that Bunyan so enjoyed testing his man against, and Fekisi's ascension into Heaven is as stunning a piece of emotional writing as Bunyan's ending of death and resurrection.

But the irony here is in the way in which the part of Bunyan's passionate message about freedom has been subtly suppressed by the missionaries breathing down Mofolo's neck. Bunyan sat out twelve years in jail in order to protest his right to freedom of religious expression, to protest that each man should reject the deadly Royalist conformity of the High Church and have access as an individual human being to God's glory through his own personal quest for salvation. His was a reassertion of lower-class rights, and even if he let himself be called "Bishop" Bunyan, the entire literary document he gave the world spoke of man's right to be free in God. In Mofolo, at first sight, the message is pretty much the same; but the effect is profoundly different. Fekisi has to desert and reject his tribal roots utterly in order to take his place with the saints in Heaven; he has to reject all things "dark," all things "African," and the fables and similitudes and metaphors and dreams in Mofolo's hands are images of enslavement to the intellectual and moral imports of a Christianity that was the right wing of the empire-builders Bunyan, in fact, detested.

Plaatje, then, is the writer who takes the spirit of Bunyan, but not the letter. In Mhudi he in no way advocates the abandoning of things black; quite the contrary. Plaatje was extremely concerned that black folks should know and understand their own history. Here, describing the pre-Mfecane times that Mofolo so "blackened," he has this to say:

They led their patriarchal life under their several chiefs who owed no allegiance to any king or emperor. They raised their native corn which satisfied their simple wants, and, when not engaged in hunting or in pastoral duties, the peasants whiled away their days in tanning skins or sewing magnificent fur

rugs. They also smelted iron and manufactured useful implements which today would be pronounced very crude by their semi-westernized descendants. . . . [p. 21]

Plaatje's eighteenth-century peasant shepherds and swains (who belong to the same idealized world as Milton's Lycidas or Keats's Endymion) were certainly not living in darkness; rather the opposite. And, a major bit of polemical point-scoring that Plaatje made was that they lived in a world of fables and allegories not unlike that of Bunyan's own preliterate congregation.

It is highly ironic that when one of the first missionaries, John Campbell, preached the gospel among Plaatje's forebearers and the characters of Mhudi in 1820 near Kuruman, he had this to remark about the Tswana fables he collected to take back to Europe:

The following absurd and ridiculous fictions are presented to the notice of the reader only because they exhibit, in a striking manner, the puerile and degraded state of intellect among the natives of South Africa. Who can contemplate the ignorance and imbecility which marks this display of Bootchuanan literature without the liveliest emotions of pity and concern?⁸

This kind of literary judgment is, of course, criminally ignorant, especially when it comes from a man who carried a copy of The Pilgrim's Progress under his one arm and a Bible under the other, both of which, as Bunyan makes clear, are full of "absurd and ridiculous fictions."

There are two portions of Mhudi which are derived from Bunyan's novel and which show how Plaatje was indeed able to use Bunyan to serve his own ends. The first incident has to do with the lions of the Zeerust area, and the second with the case of Lepane, the weary traveler.

It is no easy task to isolate a specific portion of Bunyan's text to show a particular correspondence with

Plaatje's, for the connections are buried; but the following passage does contain a considerable amount of the material Plaatje was to manipulate. Bunyan wrote at one crisis point in his narrative:

So I saw in my dream that he [Christian] made haste and went forward, that if possible he might get lodging. . . . Now before he had gone far, he entered into a very narrow passage, which was about a furlong off of the porter's lodge, and looking very narrowly before him as he went, he espied two lions in the way. Now, thought he, I see the dangers that Mistrust and Timorous were driven back by (the lions were chained, but he saw not the chains). Then he was afraid, and thought also himself to go back after them, for he thought nothing but death was before him. But the porter at the lodge, whose name is Watchful, perceiving that Christian made a halt, as if he would go back, cried unto him saying, "Is thy strength so small? Fear not the lions, for they are chained, and are placed there for trial of faith where it is; and for discovery of those that have none: keep in the midst of the path, and no hurt shall come unto thee."

Then I saw that he went on, trembling for fear of the lions, but taking good heed to the directions of the porter; he heard them roar, but they did him no harm. Then he clapped his hands, and went on till he came and stood before the gate where the porter was. [Penguin edition, p. 78]

After the destruction of the City of Kunana, the scene which we have seen precipitates the action of Mhudi, Plaatje's hero and heroine, Ra-Thaga and Mhudi herself, are dispersed as refugees into the forest, caught with their burdens between the tyrannical, cruel emperor, Mzilikazi, and the dreamy mountains of Moshesh, at the foot of which they will find Thaba Nchu and a rallying point for the allied forces of good in the novel. Plaatje's

story is going to be an obstacle race for the two of them, together and apart, all of which will eventually lead to that happy ending, with Mhudi and Ra-Thaga riding into the sunset, anticipating a New Day. Plaatje's overall message is not how to achieve personal salvation by abjuring the world in favor of God, yet it is not a dissimilar message: through cooperation and intimate mutual understanding, with an equitable sharing of the land and its resources, black and white can face a new dawn of harmony and prosperity, a heaven on earth for all people, if you like. But just as The Pilgrim's Progress, no matter what its peculiar shape, arose out of a burning need to communicate a protest urgently, what should be stressed here is that Mhudi did too, and that both works accordingly adopt extreme measures and use the same subtle techniques in order to register their protests. Bunyan, banned from preaching his word, learned to think subversively on his people's behalf. Plaatje, although never actively banned, had as much trouble getting his message across in the face of white prejudice of the order of Campbell's.

Chapter 2 of Mhudi, called "Dark Days," and the following two chapters, detail the hard times of the two survivors of the old way of life; it is a period in the wilderness for the two of them, equivalent to the period of soul-despair quoted from The Pilgrim. In Bunyan, the dark has descended (a recurring symbol in Plaatje, meaning the dark of racial injustice), the porter is up ahead (in terms of the African colonial experience, portering is an only too obvious symbol of humiliation), but the Lord's house is open nevertheless. Only the lions intervene. In Bunyan the lions obviously derive from Isaiah or Daniel; but, quite comically, they are chained at the door like many a watchdog guarding a tradesman's entrance in South Africa.

In these idyllic early chapters in Mhudi, Mhudi and Ra-Thaga are beset by roaming wild lions, in particular the one that caused their first meeting when Mhudi ran away from it. She also talks about a lion she once outstared, quoting Bunyan's cue line: "In my sleep, I dreamt . . ." (p. 41). "I feel ready to meet

any number of lions as long as you are about," she says later. And the tide begins to reverse.

[Ra-Thaga] never could describe how he managed to reach that lion unobserved and to grip it by the tail. The frightened animal leaped into the air, lifting him so high that he was nearly thrown onto its back; but he held on tenaciously by the tail till the lion abandoning its prey was only struggling to get away; but Ra-Thaga would not let it go. . . . Most Bechuana women in such circumstances would have uttered loud screams for help. Mhudi yielded to the humor of the picture of her husband having a tug of war with a lion; highly amused, she gripped the situation, stepped forward in obedience to Ra-Thaga, and summoning all her strength, she aimed a stab at the lion's heart. The infuriated animal fell over with a growl that almost caused the earth to vibrate. . . . Needless to say, Ra-Thaga was a proud husband that night. [pp. 55-57]

At first sight, if one is unaware of the Bunyan parallel, this kind of scene seems a bit closer to Edgar Rice Burroughs than a true Africa. But it is spiced with the kind of lethal puns of which Plaatje is a master (she gripped the situation while he gripped the lion's tail), and with a wounding tone of deflation ("a growl that almost caused the earth to vibrate" is a cliché twisted into ridiculousness by the added word "almost"). Plaatje, anyway, is a nimble stylist, and with easy bravado he is parodying countless similar scenes recounted by every Great White Hunter who ever spent a week in an ox-wagon and lived to tell the tale. But that kind of satire has a limited objective; one enjoys the potshots Plaatje takes at venerable traditions of white writing in South Africa. One enjoys remembering that there are lion game precedents in popular English literature as well, as in Love's Labour's Lost where a dwarf acts out how Hercules strangling the Nemean lion, and in A Midsummer Night's Dream where the lion gags on Pyramus's corpse.

But the Bunyan connection is the one that is deeply meaningful. Ra-Thaga and Mhudi are lost in a land fairly overrun with lions, lions vicious, lions rampant, lions multiplying, lions that don't mean to lie down with the lamb. We are in Symbol Land here, because the lion that Ra-Thaga almost rode the back of is also a British Lion, and Mhudi has stabbed it to the heart. In the nicest possible way, cheeky Mr. Plaatje is laughing at the Georgian lions that have set up their flag over Southern Africa; and the message is that they have to be tiptoed past, and killed when they trespass.

This incident in Mhudi is also based on one of the Tswana fables that Campbell should have paid more careful attention to. It is dramatized in Mhudi, given a realistic basis and used for a more complex moral. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the elementary home morality of the original fable becomes more multi-purpose in the novelist's hands. The original was called "Hunters and Beasts of Prey," and is Number 10 in Plaatje's collection of traditional texts in his *Sechwana Reader*:

Ancient stories show that there used to be brave people and cowards in Bechuanaland.

Two men once took their assegais and went out to hunt. One of them was a brave man and the other was timid. When they entered the forest, they found a lion asleep. So the brave man caught hold of the lion by the tail and said to the timid man: "Stab it to the heart with your spear while I hold it." The lion jumped up and stretched itself to get free, while the man was holding tightly on to its tail. When he looked around he found that he was speaking into empty space, his friend having fled.

The poor man spent the night holding on to the lion's tail, so that the animal could not turn round and bite him. Meanwhile the other man had gone home and announced that his companion had been eaten by the lion.

When day broke the men of the village made him go before them to show them the remains of his fellow-countryman. They set out and reached the forest, and they found -- wonderful to

to relate -- that the man was not dead, but was still holding the lion by the tail. He told them how the timid man ran away from him on the previous day, and how he himself had been having a tug-of-war with the lion all night, so that he was tired out.

The men of the village thereupon devised a terrible punishment for the coward. They gave him a spear and said he must go in front of the lion and stab it. As soon as he got in front of it, his fellow-countryman let go of the lion's tail; the animal roared and rushed at the timid man and tore him to pieces.

As soon as it had killed him it ran off through the forest, and the villagers retraced their steps and went home.⁹

This moral exemplum is as neat as they come, concise and appropriate to a cut-and-dried situation in a heroic context: bravery wins, cowardice loses; if you betray, you will be punished by public will.

Within Mhudi it undergoes more ramifications and variations than just in the lion game incident referred to. The theme of brotherhood pervades the novel (Ra-Thaga and Phil-Jay -- i.e., De Villiers -- become blood-brothers and go hunting the empire-building Mzilikazi together; Phil-Jay's people betray the Barolong); and there is a whole chapter of digression in Mhudi analyzing the timid man of the fable (Chapter 11), which determines that the cause of his cowardice is his inability to see things for what they are. Bravery, according to the lion games in the novel, is made by raw experience; it is not for nothing that in the chapters in which the lion games are played, Mhudi puts the staying power and endurance of her man to the test in many ways, before he has acquired all of Pilgrim's determination and resolve.

The second incident, derived from Bunyan as well, occurs in Chapter 17 ("The Spies, Their Adventures"), a catch-all chapter that builds up odds and ends of history and plot with the coming showdown between the Barolong-Boer allies and Mzilikazi's Matabele at the

Battle of Mosega in mind. One reads this chapter as a bridge, perhaps with not much interest, anticipating the worst that will inevitably come. While waiting, one is treated to the brief story of Lepane, which in summary goes like this:

Meanwhile a traveller, named Lepane, was journeying from the land of the Bapedi in the east accompanied by a young man, going to the land of the Bahurutshe in the west. They passed through Mogale's country and heard some whispers about Barolong spies and white men.

The travellers after leaving Tlou's village, where Phil and his friends were hiding, took a rest under a shady tree at the foot of a hill where they fell asleep. On awaking they beheld half a dozen Matebele emerging from a thicket in the depression below their hiding place. Naturally the sight struck terror in them. For a moment they knew not what to do. But the younger man, more resourceful than Lepane, suggested to the elder that they were less likely to be seen if they hide in separate places. So advising Lepane to press close up to the tree trunk, he crawled through the grass and the bushes to find another hiding place.

This plan might have worked very well had not Lepane's nerves unfortunately given way at the near approach of the foe. "Oh spare me!" he cried. "I will tell you of some undesirable persons in King Mzilikazi's country. Just let me live, I tell you, I am not alone."

"He's a liar, shouted his astonished companion from the bush hard by: "kill him, he's alone." [pp. 115-16]

Before Lepane is vindicated in his betrayal and the Barolong-Boer spies are discovered, he is described during his ordeal as "standing with his small bundle behind his back, resting his chest over his hands on the knob of

his walking-cane." Thereafter, he disappears from the story and one wonders why Plaatje gives no space to the unfortunate spies, no details of Tlou's or Mogale's establishments -- just this come-and-go figure of Lepane, one of the most described characters in the entire novel.

There is no accounting for the elaboration of this scene unless one sees that Plaatje has latched onto the familiar Bunyan portrait and is subtly using it to make a strong moral point. Bunyan is not overtly present in this scene, but details of the text give away the fact that Bunyan was in the forefront of Plaatje's consciousness during the writing of this passage. The cave in which the betrayed allies are hidden is related to Bunyan's den/prison; the falling asleep to the first paragraph of The Pilgrim's Progress quoted here; so is the catchphrase about "not knowing what to do." The portrait of Lepane is precisely that of Christian, complete with his bundle and cane. The density of these correspondences is too high for them to be merely coincidental. They are subtly submerged and not very obvious, intentionally. In short, Plaatje's proofreaders at the Lovedale Press (whom he fawningly thanks in the preface to his original edition for doing what was a lousy job) would not have had enough wit to pick the references out, put them together and start getting ideas about Mhudi being a far too witty book.

All these reminders of Bunyan in this incident are there to suggest, at a profoundly deep level, all the things that Lepane should be, but is not. He is not steadfast, he is not faithful, he is not a man of bravery, tenacity and conviction, as Bunyan's hero was. He gives in immediately, to save his own skin, with no idea about saving his own side. Significantly, he is traveling from east to west which, if you've done your homework, you read as traveling away from Mount Zion as fast as you can go (like Mr. Worldly-Wiseman or Superstition or Ignorance in the Christian parable). In Plaatje's eyes, as a squealer and a sellout, he is the most immoral man in the book. The whole Lepane incident is implicitly about commitment and betrayal, and that message is put across by reference to an early English novel with the same theme.

Ultimately Plaatje's responses to Christianity are ambiguous and complex; he works within its framework, asserting his own black version of Christianity strongly, because he believes that all Christians are entitled to reach the Celestial City and that God in his eyes is not necessarily all white. He goes out of his way (in Chapter 12, where "we may be permitted to digress") to clarify his attitudes by quoting from The Song of Songs: "I am black but comely, Oh ye daughters of Jerusalem, etc." He shows how with the slightest adaptation Solomon's beloved corresponds to one of his own characters in *Mhudi*. He is a very canny commentator, never at a loss when using "white" texts for "black" ends.

Plaatje's attitude to Bunyan and his other sources is quite straightforward. He learned from them how to write a consciousness-raising work that is as dense in literary allusions as his chosen forbears'. And, like Bunyan, Plaatje had the habit of insisting that his allegory be fully understood.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bessie Head, in a letter to the author, May 28, 1976.
2. Ezekiel, Mphahlele, The African Image (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 176.
3. Kabwe Kasoma, "Trends in African Theatre with Special Emphasis on the Zambian Experience," paper delivered at the Black Writers Workshop, University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, Gaborone, April 2-4, 1976.
4. Page references to the African Fiction Library republication of Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi (Johannesburg: Quagga Press, distributed in the U.S. by Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C.).
5. Tim Couzens, introduction to Mhudi, Quagga Press edition, pp. 1-15.
6. Albert S. Gérard, Four African Literatures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 34.
7. Thomas Mofolo, Traveller to the East, tr. H. Ashton (London: S.P.C.K., n.d.), pp. 7-9.
8. John Campbell, Travels in South Africa (London, 1822), vol. 2, p. 363.
9. Daniel Jones and Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, A Sechuana Reader (London: University of London Press), pp. 20-22.

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