

A Moment in the Past: William Tsikinya-Chaka

TIM COUZENS

In the first half of this century there was a strong demand for Shakespeare amongst blacks. A performance by the Diocesan Training College at Grace Dieu in Pietersburg of some scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* was so successful that the students themselves produced a simplified version of *Julius Caesar* soon afterwards. A reviewer in the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu*, while aware of some radical omissions, was full of praise: "To perform *Julius Caesar* and to leave out Mark Antony seems a contradiction in terms, and yet it is true to say that while the play was on he was hardly missed from the stage. The climax of the play arrived with the murder of Caesar at the Capitol, and this was particularly well staged." The performance of the plays, added the reviewer, "even in simplified form, can be of real educative value."¹

The mission schools were keenly active in the teaching of Shakespeare. Dan Twala was at Lovedale in 1924 and remembers the syllabus contained *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Tempest*. "I used to boast being able to quote to the other students", said Twala. "Everybody thought he was great when he could quote a word or two from Shakespeare."² When King Edward Masinga became the very first black radio broadcaster in the Forties and was given at first five minutes, then fifteen, for his programme, he sometimes turned to drama:

I translated Shakespeare when what was known as the Zulu programme was steadily growing and I tried to mimic the white broadcast as much as possible, and I tried to solidify my position as much as possible. I didn't like my masters to say, "Uh, well, you can go away now. This thing you have started here is not worth it", so I tried as much as possible to make it as good as theirs.

Extracts from the plays were reproduced on glass records but none seem to have survived.³

Opportunities to see a Shakespearean play were very rare, however. In the early 1930s, when Sybil Thorndike visited Johannesburg, special permission had to be obtained for black dramatist Herbert Dhlomo and a friend to attend one of her performances in the City Hall. Cut off from live performances, not allowed (until very recently) into public libraries, early writers laboured under extreme difficulties. But whites and white theatre also suffered. What, after all, would Shakespeare have been like without the majority of his audience?

Indeed, at a conference in Lesotho in 1973, Bernth Lindfors virtually advocated the scrapping of the Bard from African school syllabuses.⁴ His suggestion, not surprisingly, was met with some dismay, but it is not without merit. It cannot be said that Shakespeare found his way into the hearts of the majority of black students. But there was a moment in the past where things might have been different.

One writer took his love for and contemplation of Shakespeare extraordinarily far. He had the insight, breadth of vision and stature to match his mentor, too. This was the remarkable Solomon Plaatje. Plaatje, born 1876, died in 1932, was a pioneer



Sol T. Plaatje

From the photograph by Lizzie Caswall Smith, The Gainsborough Studio, London. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Historical Papers, Library of the University of the Witwatersrand.

South African journalist, starting two newspapers just after the turn of the century in Mafeking and Kimberley; he helped found the African National Congress in 1912 and, in subsequent years, played a vital role in its continued existence; as a writer he published one of the most important early political works in the history of the country, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), the first novel in English by a black South African, *Mhudi* (1930) and, posthumously, the only diary of the siege of Mafeking by a black participant (ed. John L. Comaroff, 1973; reissued 1984 as *The Siege of Mafeking*). In addition, he was a pioneer in linguistics and lexicography in this country.

In the early Days of Innocence, when things were in some ways easier, Plaatje did see a Shakespeare play:

I had but a vague idea of Shakespeare until about 1896 when, at the age of 18, I was attracted by the Press remarks in the Kimberley paper and went to see *Hamlet* in the Kimberley Theatre. The performance made me curious to know more about Shakespeare and his works. Intelligence in Africa is still carried from mouth to mouth by means of conversation after working hours, and, reading a number of Shakespeare's works, I always had a fresh story to tell.

Then he read one:

I first read *The Merchant of Venice*. The characters were so realistic that I

was asked more than once to which of certain speculators, then operating around Kimberley, Shakespeare referred as Shylock.

He soon found that Shakespeare spoke to him in his everyday life in recognisable language:

While reading *Cymbeline*, I met the girl who afterwards became my wife. I was not then as well acquainted with her language — the Xosa — as I am now; and although she had a better grip of mine — the Sechuana — I was doubtful whether I could make her understand my innermost feelings in it, so in coming to an understanding we both used the language of educated people — the language which Shakespeare wrote — which happened to be the only official language of our country at the time. Some of the daily epistles were rather lengthy, for I usually started with the bare intention of expressing the affections of my heart but generally finished up by completely unburdening my soul. For command of language and giving expression to abstract ideas, the success of my efforts was second only to that of my wife's, and it is easy to divine that Shakespeare's poems fed our thoughts.

It may be depended upon that we both read *Romeo and Juliet*. My people resented the idea of my marrying a girl who spoke a language which, like the Hottentot language had clicks in it; while her people likewise abominated the idea of giving their daughter in marriage to a fellow who spoke a language so imperfect as to be without any clicks. But the civilized laws of Cape Colony saved us from a double tragedy in a cemetery, and our erstwhile objecting relatives have lived to award their benediction to the growth of our Chuana-M'Bo family which is bilingual both in the vernaculars and in European languages.

Almost at the same moment, then, his own dark Lady and Mr W.S. became life-long passions.

It was certainly no accident that Plaatje befriended Shakespeare: not only was it in the stars, it also had something to do with Tswana society.

Besides being natural story-tellers, the Bechuana are good listeners, and legendary stories seldom fail to impress them. Thus, one morning, I visited the Chief's court at Mafeking and was asked for the name of 'the white man who spoke so well'. An educated Chieftain promptly replied for me; he said: William Tsikinya-Chaka (William Shake-the-Sword). The translation, though perhaps more free than literal, is happy in its way considering how many of Shakespeare's characters met their death. Tsikinya-Chaka became noted among some of my readers as a reliable white oracle.⁵

Shakespeare's works are the product of an extraordinary man, born at a particular time. A multitude of conjunctions, large and small, go to their making. Amongst the larger generalisations one can observe the death of feudalism and the beginnings of the rise of capitalism, religious ferment and monarchical splendour, the demise of feudal marriages and the pursuit of individual love, the growth of English nationalism and the beginnings of colonialism (in Ireland and America). There is, then, no reason to argue with A.L. Rowse's opinion: "These things — place and time — the very dates 1564-1616 — are significant: if he had been born twenty years earlier or later, his achievement would not have been what it was. The time would not have been ripe, or it would have been overripe, for him and his work as we have it. His career and his work, what he made of his opportunity and his providential good fortune, provide a signal example of the fruitful marriage of the right moment with the right man."⁶

Plaatje, too, was born at a propitious time — 1876 — and in the right place. He was taught by German missionaries steeped in the two great writers of England and Germany, Shakespeare and Goethe. He found work in nearby Kimberley — the birth place of the industrial revolution in South Africa. In the siege of Mafeking he was swept up in Imperial war. Consequently he found himself early in his life an active player on the world's political stage.⁷

Just as Shakespeare's acting led him to write, so did Plaatje's profession draw him to his literary activity. Plaatje, before the Anglo-Boer War and during the siege, acted as an interpreter in the magistrate's court in Mafeking. It was a position which ideally required considerable skill, and which there were few people qualified to fill. Plaatje did so with distinction. His translations of Shakespeare, in a way a natural extension of interpreting, are regarded as amongst the best of written Setswana. (It still remains for a mother-tongue speaker to delineate the ins-and-outs of Plaatje's skill.)

It was not only in occupation that Nature showed her wisdom. There was also, for instance, the opportunity. The period between the founding of the ANC in 1912 and his final return to South Africa after two extended visits to England was one packed with activity for Plaatje — delegations, pamphlets, fund-raising, hundreds of speeches. But time was, in those days, slower, and he was compelled to make a number of long sea voyages. Relaxed in forced exile from centres of hurly-burly politics, this is when he liked to translate Shakespeare. In 1917 he sailed from Plymouth to the Cape on the "Galway Castle", the voyage taking twenty nine days rather than the usual seventeen because of war conditions. His translation of *Julius Caesar* was the happy result. *Othello* was begun on a voyage from Montreal to Cherbourg in 1922 and completed the following year on a further Southampton to Cape Town run. Whoever went on those long magical Union Castle voyages can ever forget them? Who would ever think nowadays of translating Shakespeare on a South African Airways cattle-truck in the sky?

The two writers had a great deal in common. Shakespeare was "a countryman through and through."⁸ In play after play, there is the knowledge of ancient crafts, the smell of the forests, the sweat of the hunt. Plaatje, too, was a man of the country. He (rightly or wrongly) contrasted an English peasant's vocabulary of four hundred words with "the fecundity of terms and acuteness of idiom" possessed by the Setswana-speaking shepherd who used at least four thousand.⁹ Plaatje's Setswana was rich soil for Shakespearean seed.

Both Shakespeare and Plaatje matured at the time of a great revolution — when oral culture was being largely transformed to a written one. Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, was not literate. Young Plaatje, too, had a skill which reversed the order of wisdom between the old and the young.

During the first week of each month the native peasants of Bechuanaland, and elsewhere, used to look forward to [the arrival of the Setswana newspaper from Kuruman] as eagerly as the white up-country farmers now await the arrival of the daily papers. How little did the writer dream, when frequently called upon as a boy to read the news to groups of men sewing kerosses under the shady trees outside the cattle fold, that journalism would afterwards mean his bread and cheese.¹⁰

When he wrote down his remarkable family tree, dating back twenty generations and transmitted word-of-mouth to him by his grandmother and great-aunts, he was, he said, "the first to put memory to paper."¹¹ Both Plaatje and Shakespeare could draw on a deep well of sayings, riddles, proverbs, folk-tales, songs, and country lore. Shakespeare, wrote Q., "brought all this fairy-stuff up to London in his own head, packed with nursery legends of his native Warwickshire."¹² Plaatje did something similar. Rather than read some of the more recent, somewhat esoteric linguistic criticism of Shakespeare, we can fall back on the nineteenth century scholarship of the delightfully-named Rev T.F. Thiselton-

Dyer, M.A. Oxon., and his substantially researched *Folk-Lore of Shakespeare* (1883) to provide us with comparative data to match the folk-lore of Plaatje (as well as his relative-by-marriage, S.M. Molema, in his book *The Bantu: Past and Present* [1920]). Witches, natural phenomena, heavenly bodies, birds, animals, plants, folk medicine, birth, marriage, death, sports, punishments, superstitions, proverbs — while obviously not one-to-one equivalents — give both writers their richness and freshness.

Sadly, in one respect, the time was out of joint. Plaatje's Setswana translations were problem plays in that nobody would publish them. He was ahead of his time. Only in 1930 did *Diphosho-phosho* (*The Comedy of Errors*, or, more literally, *Mistakes-mistakes*) get printed. And *Julius Caesar* was published by the University of the Witwatersrand after his death. He also translated *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and at least part of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because his writing was not recognised while living, because it was largely forgotten after his death, only very minor fragments of these translations survive. Their loss is part of the South African tragedy.

Over and above his obvious love for and identification with Shakespeare, Plaatje had another purpose in translating his works. He aimed to show that Setswana was a language subtle enough to cope with the greatest of writers and quite capable of taking its own place on the world's stage. Human problems, too, were universal.

Hath not a Mochuana eyes?

Hath he not hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions??

Is not a Mochuana fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter, as a whiteman is??

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like in the rest we will resemble you in that.¹³

Plaatje's tribute to Shakespeare did not stop at translations, however. In a fine essay, Professor Stephen Gray has indicated the influence of Shakespeare (and Bunyan) on Plaatje's *Mhudi*.¹⁴ There is then no need to go into detail here about Plaatje's use of Shakespeare's world view, chronicle-histories, dramatic techniques and imagery. We can confine ourselves to one or two aspects of general tone and structure.

Without any personal political ambition Shakespeare was a deeply political writer. In numerous plays he entered imaginatively into the existence of monarchs and their courtiers, foregrounding their virtues and their vices. By so doing, he showed himself to be at least their equal. The same held for Plaatje. In *Mhudi* he portrayed the world of the Tsidi Barolong under their chief Tauana, peaceful but vulnerable; of the Koranna under the treacherous Ton-Qon; of the fearsome Ndebele under the potentially tragic Mzilikazi; of the Boers, excessively intolerant; of the Seleka Barolong under their Solomonic chief Moroka. In the years between Plaatje's birth (1876) and death (1932), considerable changes had occurred in the power and authority of the chiefs in southern Africa. The more "progressive" chiefs were represented at the founding of the ANC in 1912 but it was a new kind of leadership that was evolving — the kind represented by Plaatje himself, educated, flexible, intelligent, chosen by nature and the people. One of the main themes of *Mhudi* is the apprenticeship of leaders, the training of Prince Hal.

It was no accident, too, that Plaatje translated at least two of the comedies. An essay is long overdue on Plaatje's humour, the gentle nature of which bespeaks a broad humanity. Plaatje's heart, like Shakespeare's, was in the countryside with its regenerative qualities — whether couth or agrestic — and the songs in *Mhudi* have the touch of Arden Forest.

I long for the solitude of the wood,
Far away from the quarrels of men,

Their intrigues and vicissitudes;
 Away, where the air was clean,
 And the morning dew
 Made all things new;
 Where nobody was by
 Save Mhudi and I.

Speak not to me of the comforts of home,
 Tell me of the Valleys where the antelopes roam;
 Give me my hunting sticks and snares
 In the gloaming of the wilderness;
 Give back the palmy days of our early felicity
 Away from the hurly-burly of your city,
 And we'll be young again — aye:
 Sweet Mhudi and I.

Above all, just as Shakespeare's women direct and control the comedies, so does Plaatje rest the hope for the future of his country on the fine shoulders and upright back of his heroine, representative of the rich loam of African womanhood.

Again, sadly, the time was not ripe. *Mhudi* was completed by August 1920, but was not published for ten years — a short stretch before Plaatje's death. Had his epic novel been recognised earlier, would he not have completed more? Had his translations been published immediately (he made desperate efforts to finance them), would he not have done Setswana an immortal service? Should he not have been given enough money for a world cruise with the only proviso that he come back with a translation of the *Complete Works of William Tsikinya-Chaka*?

Probably it was only Plaatje who could have done so. He was the right man in the right place at the right time. He owed Shakespeare a great deal. He would have been too modest to say it himself but Shakespeare owes him, too. By extending Shakespeare into another language and into new literary forms he was enriching Shakespeare in the process. The moment of Plaatje was a moment in the past. Probably it will never come again. But if it does let us hope that we are ready for it.

NOTES

1. *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 20 December, 1930.
2. Interview with D.R. Twala, Dube, Soweto, 26 July 1979.
3. Interview with K.E. Masinga, Umlazi, KwaZulu, 7 January 1975.
4. See B. Lindfors, "Why not African Literature?", *Teaching English in African Schools: Four Lectures* (Johannesburg: The English Academy of Southern Africa, 1973) 45-62.
5. All the quotations are from [S. Plaatje], "A South African's Homage", *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1916) 336-339; reproduced in "Plaatje Centenary Issue", *English in Africa* 3.2 (1976) 7-8.
6. A.L. Rowse, *William Shakespeare: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1963) 1.
7. For a fuller discussion of some of the following, see Brian Willan's magnificent biography, *Sol Plaatje* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1984).
8. A.L. Rowse, op. cit., 52.
9. S. Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents* (London: Kegan Paul, 1916) 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. Unpublished Ms., School of Oriental and African Studies, London University.
12. 'Q', [Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch], Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, 1924) xiv.

13. Page from an unpublished Plaatje notebook (reproduced in "Plaatje Centenary Issue", *English in Africa* 3.2 (1976) 7).
14. "Sources of the First Black South African Novel", *Munger Africana Library Notes* 37 (1976). For a discussion of some epical and biblical influences on Plaatje, see Tim Couzens, "Sol. T. Plaatje and the First South African Epic", *English in Africa* 14.1 (1987) 41-65.
15. S. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (London: Heinemann, 1978) 71.

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