



What 'Other Devils'? The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi Revisited

Brian Willan

To cite this article: Brian Willan (2015): What 'Other Devils'? The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi Revisited, Journal of Southern African Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03057070.2015.1116234](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2015.1116234)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2015.1116234>



Published online: 26 Nov 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

What 'Other Devils'? The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* Revisited*

BRIAN WILLAN

(Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Rhodes University)

Sol Plaatje's novel, Mhudi, first published by the Lovedale Press in 1930, has been subject to considerable critical attention, and now has canonical status in South Africa. The circumstances of its publication have also been seen as a cause célèbre of the way missionary presses, as gatekeepers, could subvert authors' intentions and exercise censorship. This case, in relation to Mhudi, was first made by Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray in 1978. They argued that an oral narrator had been removed from the 'original' text, thereby undermining its connection with the oral traditions upon which it drew, and thus changing the nature of the text as a whole, and that other textual changes had had the effect of 'emasculating' and 'diluting the original style' of the book. This view has remained largely unchallenged and accepted as conventional wisdom, providing the justification for a new edition of Mhudi (Heinemann African Writers, 1978; Penguin, 2005) that reverses some of the changes made, drawing upon a typescript in the Lovedale Press archives. In this article, I revisit the evidence and the assumptions underlying these arguments and conclude that there is nothing to suggest that changes made to the text were not entirely at the author's volition, and that Plaatje's role and agency as author, and that of the Lovedale Press as publisher, have been seriously misrepresented. I explore some of the broader issues raised, including the interaction of author, publisher and ideology, and also the ways in which interpreting 'author intention' can be subject to a range of external influences.

Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, first published in 1930, has been the subject of considerable critical attention. Largely ignored in literary circles until the pioneering work of Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray in the 1970s, it has since then gained a secure place in the South African literary canon. In the 1990s critics found in it a text for the new South Africa, highlighting, among other things, its democratic credentials, its re-writing of history from a black perspective, its roots in oral history, its heroine's feminism. Linked to this new-found canonisation was the recovery of an original and supposedly more authentic typescript, which came to light when records of the Lovedale Press, the original publishers of *Mhudi*, were transferred to the Cory Library, Rhodes University, in 1976. This typescript, rather than the Lovedale Press's printed text, then became the basis for a new edition of the book published by the Heinemann African Writers Series

*I am most grateful to Professor Laurence Wright, Professor David Johnson and Dr Peter Midgley for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, and to Liz De Wet (Cory Library, Rhodes University) for her help in connection with the manuscript of *Mhudi*.

(HAWS) in 1978, and subsequently in a Penguin Modern Classics edition (2005), the most widely read and used edition today.¹

The argument that the original Lovedale edition of *Mhudi* was, in one way or another, subverted, or 'bowdlerized', was made by Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray in 'Printers' and Other Devils: The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi*', published in *Research in African Literatures* in 1978.² The Lovedale text was, they claimed, 'in some places garbled, inconsistent, erroneous, and possibly even changed for ideological reasons'; the newly discovered typescript, by contrast, 'reveals that there is a considerable difference in intention, in tone, in style, and in form' between the two, and they believed that this typescript 'was closer to the original version and intention' of the author. They point to several key areas where the typescript diverged from the Lovedale edition of the book: in particular the elimination of a supposed oral narrator from the published text, and a series of other textual changes that had had the effect of 'emasculating' and 'diluting the original style of the book'. Revd Robert Shepherd, chaplain at Lovedale, and convenor of the publications committee, is identified as a prime suspect in the affair.

Stephen Gray restated the argument the following year, in the final chapter ('The Emergence of Black English') of his *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, but he went further.³ Here the publication of *Mhudi* by the Lovedale Press is presented as a case study that sheds light on 'the tensions that have to be taken into account at the junction where oral literature is transposed into the written'. Importantly, the qualifications and hesitations of the first article are cast aside.⁴ Now there is no mention of the crucial fact that the changes to the typescript – incorporated by Lovedale in their edition of *Mhudi* – are in Plaatje's own hand. The possibility that Plaatje himself was the agent of these changes is thus silently discounted. Instead the argument is that we have a 'systematic screening of the author', his writing 'about African values from an African point of view' subverted, and he is to be seen rather as 'one who blindly conforms to the norms of white English literature'.⁵ Lovedale's edition of *Mhudi* was the product, moreover, 'of a secret imbroglio waged between Plaatje and his white editors at Lovedale', something that is taken to be symbolic 'of the dilemma of a considerable amount of African English literature'.⁶

Or again, as summarised by Gray in another piece a few years later, where the argument for 'censorship' is made even more explicitly: *Mhudi*, he claims here,

is one of the first works [in South African literature] in which the author's artistic control was subordinated to screening by ideological control, that is censorship In the case of *Mhudi*, when the publication was eventually allowed, it was only in a form condoned by a conservative missionary press. This involved extensive re-writing or 'toning down' which, with hindsight, we can see was considerably to the manuscript's disadvantage.⁷

1 Rhodes University, Cory Library, Lovedale Press records, MS 16,323, typescript of *Mhudi*; Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi*, Heinemann African Writers Series, edited by Stephen Gray with an introduction by Tim Couzens (London, Heinemann Educational, 1978); Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi*, Penguin Modern Classics, edited by Stephen Gray (Johannesburg, Penguin, 2005). The HAWS/Penguin text has also been used as the basis for translated editions in French, Dutch and Italian. Other editions that reproduce, or are based directly upon, the original Lovedale edition, are as follows: Quagga Press (Johannesburg, 1975), with an introduction by Tim Couzens; Ad Donker (Johannesburg, 1989), with an introduction by Tony Voss; Jonathan Ball (Johannesburg, 2011), a re-release of the Ad Donker edition, published in e-book as well as paperback format.

2 Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray, 'Printers' and Other Devils: The Texts of Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi*', *Research in African Literatures*, 9, 2 (1978), pp. 198–215.

3 Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1979), pp. 170–82.

4 To give one example: Couzens and Gray write (p. 210): 'Whoever entrusted himself with the task of getting *Mhudi* up to scratch (perhaps Plaatje himself) was one bred on Pope, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, one who would rather have his new novel drop a well worn cliché than an observation about the forgotten black past'. Virtually the same sentence appears in Gray (p. 178), but with the proviso '(perhaps Plaatje himself)' omitted.

5 Gray, *Southern African Literature*.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 172–3. It is also, Gray contends, 'one of the few such imbroglios that can be chronicled in detail'.

7 Stephen Gray, 'Redefining the Canon: The Case for Douglas Blackburn, Stephen Black and Sol T. Plaatje', in Michael Chapman, Colin Gardner and Es'kia Mphahlele (eds), *Perspectives on South African English Literature* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1992), pp. 71–2. The chapter was written in 1985.

Fortunately, however, with the publication of the HAWS edition in 1978, *Mhudi* could be 'rediscovered as an act of historical revelation and, indeed, be published in its original form for the first time'. Again, no acknowledgement that the 'extensive rewriting', the handwritten changes to the typescript, which Lovedale incorporated into their published text, was carried out by Plaatje himself.⁸

This argument (whether in its stronger or weaker form), and the wider significance of *Mhudi* as an exemplar of missionary censorship of African writing, has been influential and has remained largely unchallenged. Laura Chrisman, for example, in her *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje*, citing 'Printers' and Other Devils', accepts simply that the Lovedale text was 'bowdlerized'.⁹ Phaswane Mpe thought that Couzens and Gray had shown that 'Lovedale Press edited the text severely in a deliberate effort to remove what they saw as politically and ideologically subversive material', as a result of which 'the first edition of *Mhudi* suffered artistically'.¹⁰ Malvern van Wyk Smith, similarly, cites *Mhudi* as a prime example of the way in which 'submissions by aspirant black authors were substantially revised and edited to make them acceptable', acquiring as a result 'an elevated post-Victorian register in preference to the modes of oral narrative which appear in the extant manuscript'.¹¹ Horst Zander, in his survey of black South African literature in English, published in 1999, likewise thought that *Mhudi* was published with 'severe alterations that profoundly changed the nature of the book', noting that 'these modifications were evidently initiated by Shepherd himself'.¹²

Nor has the significance of the story of *Mhudi*'s publication by the Lovedale Press been confined to the field of South African literary history. Robert Fraser, pushing the boundaries of the burgeoning field of book history, took the episode to exemplify the complex transformations that occur when 'a flourishing repertoire' of oral tradition is converted 'into a printed text under particular, localized conditions', adding that his own examination of the typescript in the Cory Library 'confirms suspicions first raised in 1978 by Stephen Gray and Tim Couzens while editing the book for the African Writers Series'. 'The likelihood is', Fraser says, that 'the Christians of Lovedale' 'required a novelistic chronicle with less subjective, rawly political power than Plaatje's original version had supplied. In his eagerness to see his work between hard covers', we are told, 'this is what Plaatje at length agreed to', forced to accept the distortions of a 'missionary text' that sought 'to bring the story into line with received preconceptions of "native" life'.¹³ What Lovedale did to *Mhudi* has become, in other words, a *cause célèbre* of missionary censorship, or bowdlerisation, of African creative writing.

Thus has a conventional wisdom come into being. There have been a few dissenting voices. Tony Voss, in his Introduction to the Ad Donker edition of *Mhudi* in 1989, which uses the original Lovedale edition, agreed that the text had undergone some changes, 'being even further removed from an oral culture in the process, with its topical political comment muffled', but considered that the Couzens and Gray argument suffered from its dependence upon the notion

8 An editorial note in the Penguin edition states simply that 'this edition contains the complete text of the novel as originally published, correlated against the author's own typescript from the Cory Library for Historical Research'.

9 Laura Chrisman, *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 163.

10 Phaswane Mpe, 'The Role of the Heinemann African Writers Series in the Development and Promotion of African Literature', *African Studies*, 58 (1999), pp. 105–22.

11 Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature* (Kenwyn, Juta, 1990), p. 38; later on (p. 41), he comments that some of the 'rich tradition of tribal oral literature' in black African writing 'was undoubtedly suppressed, as in Plaatje's *Mhudi*'.

12 Horst Zander, *Fact-Fiction-Faction: A Study of Black South African Literature* (Tubingen, Gunter Nach Verlag, 1999), pp. 116–17.

13 Robert Fraser, *Book History through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2008), pp. 83–6.

of an 'original typescript', and that it 'conceived of the author as having at some fixed moment in time a clear and equally fixed original intention for the novel'.¹⁴ Michael Green, for his part, found 'Gray's case for the greater coherence of the draft' to be 'overwhelmingly convincing', but that his account of the way 'Plaatje was bullied into making the changes he did by some hypothetical missionary press editor [was] highly conjectural at best', and that it was important 'to respect Plaatje's decisions to go into print with the version he did, and not treat him as the passive victim of the mode of production available to him'.¹⁵

Michael Chapman also had some concerns, seeking an understanding of Couzens' and Gray's argument in the circumstances of the 1970s. While contending that Robert Shepherd, convenor of the Lovedale Press, 'published the book despite his disagreeing with several of the author's criticisms of Western and Christian standards', Chapman is not persuaded 'that the missionary press exercised pernicious control over its authors'. The Couzens and Gray argument, he thought,

is best seen as part of their own Africanist recovery programme in the 1970s: they offer no evidence that Plaatje was forced to alter his manuscript, and it seems doubtful that Shepherd was a more restrictive gatekeeper, or any freer of his own prejudices, than most other publishers. Instead of dwelling on the ambiguities of dependence as though conspiracies were involved, therefore, it is more productive to continue to identify what is independent and illuminating about the writers' utilisation of their African and Western commitments'.¹⁶

Voss, Green and Chapman make important points, but they did not engage with Couzens' and Gray's argument in any detail, and they have not unsettled what has become an established conventional wisdom. A recent, well-informed survey of Plaatje's 'decade of creative mobility' (1912–1922), for example, concluded that 'for *Mhudi* to be published Plaatje had little choice but to accept delay and some compromise with the missionary press at Lovedale', and that it was reasonable to conclude

that a bowdlerisation and obfuscation of Plaatje's original text occurred to make the published book more conventional and palatable fare for a missionary text: less syncretism, excision of the narrative framing of an oral history tradition, and a weakening of the female protagonist's influence.¹⁷

In this article, I want to look again at the story of *Mhudi*'s publication by the Lovedale Press in 1930, and to examine more closely the evidence and assumptions that underlie the case that Couzens and Gray make in 'Printers' and Other Devils'. The fact that I reach very different conclusions in no way diminishes my admiration for their contribution, here and elsewhere, to promoting an appreciation of *Mhudi* and in conveying this to a wider audience.

Lovedale Press and the Manuscript of *Mhudi*

Some background is necessary to understand the context and circumstances surrounding *Mhudi*'s publication. Plaatje had written *Mhudi*, it is known, in 1920 when he was living in London, having stayed on after his work as leader of the South African Native National Congress delegation to England the previous year. He mentions having just completed the book in a letter written to Silas Molema, a headman in Mafeking and his former business partner, in July 1920. Three months after this he departed for Canada and then the United States, seeking unsuccessfully during the 18 months he spent in North America to find a publisher for it. He sent his manuscript to Macmillan, Harper Brothers, Scribners, Harcourt – all leading American

14 Tony Voss, 'Introduction', in Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1989), p. 21.

15 Michael Green, *Novel Histories: Past, Present and Future in South African Fiction* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), p. 60.

16 Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (Harlow, Longman, 1996), pp. 210–11.

17 Janet Remington, 'Solomon Plaatje's Decade of Creative Mobility, 1912–1922: The Politics of Travel and Writing In and Beyond South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39, 2 (2013), pp. 425–46.

publishing houses – but they declined it. On his return to London in 1922, an approach to the London firm of Allen and Unwin elicited a more positive response. After receiving what must have been a favourable report from his reader, Allen and Unwin's senior partner, Stanley Unwin, responded with an offer to publish the book. The only problem was that he required a £75 subsidy, which Plaatje did not have and could not raise. Plaatje then tried some other London publishers, but to no avail.¹⁸

Plaatje returned to South Africa in 1923 with his novel still unpublished. No more is heard of it until November 1929, when, returning to literary concerns after years of political campaigning, he contacted the Lovedale Press to ask if they were interested in publishing not just *Mhudi* but 'some of Shakespeare's plays' which, he told them, he had translated into Setswana. In approaching Lovedale, he would have been well aware that, thanks largely to the appointment of Revd Robert Shepherd a few years earlier, Lovedale were now keen to expand their range of publications in both English and the vernacular languages. They had recently published an English-language novella, *An African Tragedy*, by R.R.R. Dhlomo, a young Zulu writer, and were displaying definite signs of being rather more adventurous in their publishing than hitherto.¹⁹

Plaatje's proposals were considered by the publications committee at its meeting on 29 November 1929, and it was agreed that Mr Chalmers (the vice principal of Lovedale) and Revd Robert Shepherd, the convenor, should 'go into the matter with Mr Plaatje'. Unsurprisingly, in view of the unresolved orthographic situation so far as Setswana was concerned, they decided not to pursue a further interest in Plaatje's Shakespeare translations, but they were keen on *Mhudi*. At the following meeting, less than a week later, having had a chance to look at Plaatje's manuscript, the minutes record the following:

Mr Chalmers and the Convenor reported that they were favourably impressed with Mr Plaatje's MS *Mhudi*, and it was agreed to accept it for publication at our convenience, should the missing chapter be furnished by the author and terms satisfactory to both parties be arranged.²⁰

Both issues were satisfactorily resolved. Plaatje signed a contract on 19 March 1930, providing for a first edition of 2,000 copies, with a royalty of 10 per cent payable after 700 copies had been sold.²¹ The publications committee also reported that it had accepted Plaatje's suggestion that the book should be priced at 5/6 a copy, and this too was incorporated into the contract. At some point Plaatje supplied the 'missing chapter'. This, it is possible to deduce from the typesetter's pagination mark-up, was chapter 22, the 'Exodus' chapter – perhaps the most powerful chapter of the book, containing Mzilikazi's bitter lament over his fate, and that of his people, and his haunting prophecy of what lay ahead for the Bechuana at the hands of the Boers.²²

18 For details of Plaatje's earlier attempts to get *Mhudi* published, see Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1984).

19 For background on Robert Shepherd and his role in the development of the Lovedale Press, see particularly Jeffrey Peires, 'Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu Revisited', *English in Africa*, 7, 2 (1980), pp. 71–85; R.H.W. Shepherd, *Lovedale, South Africa: The Story of a Century, 1841–1941* (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1941); Tim White, 'The Lovedale Press During the Directorship of R.H.W. Shepherd, 1930–1955', *English in Africa*, 19, 2 (1992), pp. 69–100; G.C. Oosthuizen, *Shepherd of Lovedale: A Life for Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, Hugh Keartland Publishers, 1970).

20 Cory Library, Lovedale Press collection, MS 16,297, minutes of Lovedale publications committee for meetings of 20 November and 4 December 1929.

21 Copy of contract for *Mhudi*, kindly supplied to the author by the late Mr Rob Raven, formerly manager of the Lovedale Press.

22 In the typescript of his MS, Plaatje supplied Lovedale with approximately half of what is now Chapter XXII; in its typescript version this was clearly incomplete, ending in mid sentence ('Many princes and indunas ...'), but Lovedale had nevertheless included it in their pagination of the entire manuscript. The fact that they then marked up every chapter but this one suggests that they were fully aware that it was incomplete and to be replaced. Since there were extensive changes between the typescript and the first part of the (printed) chapter as well, Plaatje most probably supplied an entire new chapter rather than just the second part of it – an interpretation consistent with the minutes of the publications committee, which referred to 'the missing chapter' that was still to come, not a missing part of a chapter.

Couzens and Gray did not have access to the records of Lovedale's publications committee, which came to light only after the publication of their article. The minutes shed some important new light on their argument, however, for its view could not have been more clearly expressed. Chalmers and Shepherd, so it was reported, were both 'favourably impressed' with Plaatje's manuscript, and the committee's decision to accept it for publication came with no proviso other than that terms acceptable to both parties should be agreed, and that 'the missing chapter' should be supplied. No other reservations were expressed, no mention made of any changes they wanted to the manuscript.

The matter of the book's pricing is suggestive too. Normally this would have been considered the province and responsibility of the publisher, especially since they were taking, in this case, the whole of the financial risk. Yet here they are, according to the minutes of the publications committee meeting of 19 March 1930, accepting Plaatje's views on the matter.²³ What this implies is that the relationship between Plaatje and Lovedale was not nearly as one-sided as has been assumed. Undoubtedly Plaatje was pleased to have found a publisher for his book after so many rejections. Equally, however, given Shepherd's ambitions to expand Lovedale's range of publishing beyond educational and devotional texts, Shepherd had just as much reason to be satisfied at being able to sign up one of South Africa's leading black political and literary figures to his list. The speed with which Lovedale reached their decision, and the relatively generous terms offered to Plaatje, lend further support to such an interpretation.

What then of the evidence of the text itself, and in particular the typescript, which is so central to the Couzens and Gray argument? The Cory Library typescript is clearly the typescript from which the Lovedale Press typeset the book, generating a set of proofs (which have not survived), when some further changes and corrections were made. The essence of the Couzens/Gray argument is that some handwritten amendments, duly carried over into the published text, were made to the typescript; that these were of such significance that we should see the uncorrected typescript as a 'somewhat different type of fiction' compared to the published Lovedale edition; and that, therefore, 'interpretation of *Mhudi* should now be made afresh'. The uncorrected version of the typescript was, in their view, closer to the author's 'original' intention, and for this reason, as well as their own aesthetic judgement, was to be preferred.

There is no question, however, but that the handwritten amendments to the typescript are in Plaatje's own hand, and there is no reason to suppose that they were anything other than changes he wished to make himself. In making them, he was simply continuing a habitual practice, doing as he had done before, *Mhudi* having already gone through a number of earlier drafts. Initial (1920) handwritten drafts of several pages survive, much changed by the time of publication, as do subsequent typed drafts of two chapters – one of which became Chapter V, 'Revels after Victory' (actually marked 'VI' in the earlier draft), and the other Chapter XVIII, 'Halley's Comet: its influence on the Native Mind'. Both of these typed chapters are heavily amended by hand, more so indeed than the typescript he would subsequently submit to Lovedale. It is evident, too, that at some point he made yet more changes to the earlier typed drafts of these two chapters and the later 'Lovedale' typescript. These alterations must have been made either when he retyped his earlier drafts, or they appeared in a further intermediate draft, all trace of which has disappeared.²⁴

23 'A letter was submitted from Mr Plaatje suggesting that the retail price of the book be 5/6. This was agreed to and that the edition (first) be one of 2000'.

24 A surviving notebook of Plaatje's (in London University's School of Oriental and African Studies archives, Plaatje papers, STP2/2) contains a passage of text in Plaatje's hand, which is recognisably that which appeared, much amended, on p. 89 of the Lovedale printed text. This includes a reference to *Mhudi*, albeit spelt – interestingly – as 'Mhudie'. Photocopies of drafts of most of the 'Revels after Victory' chapter, and part of 'Halley's Comet: its influence on the native mind', survive in UNISA, Pretoria, Archival and Special Collections, Documentation Centre for African Studies, Molema Papers, Acc. 142.

What is clear from this is, as Tony Voss supposed, that the manuscript of *Mhudi* evolved over a period of time, something that is further substantiated by the varying provenance of the paper – and shades of ink – used in the final typescript. Few of the changes Plaatje made to the two earlier chapter drafts were of huge significance in themselves, simply reflecting his natural inclination to seek to improve the sense and the fluency of what he had written each time he returned to it. They are no different in kind from the type of changes he made to the typescript he submitted to Lovedale: this was simply the way he used to work. The handwriting on the two typescripts is clearly Plaatje's, and the nature of the changes made to the typescript submitted to Lovedale is entirely consistent with those he had been making to the two earlier surviving draft chapters.

Couzens and Gray concede that 'since the changes made to the typescript are in Plaatje's handwriting, it seems reasonable to assume they were made with his acquiescence'. It is difficult to imagine it being otherwise. However, rather than accepting the obvious explanation that he made these changes because he wanted to, they say instead: '[w]hether they were made by his own decision or were dictated to him is uncertain'. No evidence is offered to support the notion that the changes were 'dictated to him'. Such a scenario is unlikely in the extreme and hardly consistent with what is known of Plaatje's character and circumstances. Plaatje was an experienced author and journalist, he had a reputation for independence of mind, and was most unlikely to have agreed to have wholesale changes dictated to him in this way. Shepherd, for one, knew perfectly well the kind of person he was dealing with. He later described Plaatje as 'a man of strong and independent character' and, on another occasion, 'a man of much natural force'.²⁵ Plaatje was no more likely to put up with having changes to his manuscript dictated to him than he was prepared to accept the right of white academics to determine the shape and form of Setswana, his native language – a very public battle going on at just this time and on which he had made his views very plain, and in the strongest terms.

Even in the unlikely event of Plaatje submitting to such a procedure, it would have been quite impracticable to carry out. He had made hundreds of handwritten amendments to the typescript he supplied to Lovedale, ranging from punctuation and capitalisation through to changes in wording and sentence structure, only a very small number of the total number being singled out and considered to be significant by Couzens and Gray. It would have taken many hours, if not days, for one person to have dictated these changes to another – and there is no evidence that Shepherd or anybody else had looked through the typescript in this kind of detail. Indeed, what is striking about the typescript is the absence of any kind of editing at all. Apart from Plaatje's own handwritten amendments, the only other marks on the typescript are what amounts to a basic printer's, or typesetter's, mark-up. This is confined to such matters as pagination, the positioning of line breaks and a one-off instruction on type size for the chapter headings and the main body of the text.

This lack of attention to copy-editing is reflected in the quality of the final printed product, which, even after proofs were checked by Plaatje, Shepherd and Michael van Reenen (Plaatje's next door neighbour), remained full of errors and inconsistencies, particularly in spelling and punctuation. Nobody, for example, had at any point carried out a proper check of chapter headings in the text against their listing on the contents page, the most basic task of any copy-editor. Six of the chapter headings do not correspond, and different numbering systems – roman for the text, Arabic for the contents page – are utilised. The end product does not, in short, suggest that very exacting editorial standards were applied. When Gray writes of the 'psychological war that took place between Plaatje and his editors', it invites the questions: who were 'his editors' and where is the evidence of their work? Indeed what is the evidence

25 Quotations taken from R.H.W. Shepherd, *Bantu Literature and Life* (Lovedale, Lovedale Press, 1955), p. 96; R.H.W. Shepherd and B.G. Paver, *African Contrasts: The Story of a South African People* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 169.

that they existed at all? Most probably ‘editors’, in the sense implied by Gray, were simply a luxury Lovedale could not afford.

Quite apart from questions of how and when, a more fundamental question is why – why should Lovedale, or Shepherd specifically, have wanted to change Plaatje’s typescript? Certainly it was the case that, as a missionary press, Lovedale’s policy was not to publish anything they considered to be harmful to the missionary cause. Yet there is nothing to suggest that *Mhudi* came anywhere close to doing this. Both Shepherd and Chalmers, as we have seen, were reported to have been ‘favourably impressed’ with Plaatje’s manuscript. There was no mention of any changes being required, and they agreed to go ahead right away. As a committed Christian, and a Lutheran lay reader, Plaatje had no desire to undermine missionary effort. On occasion, indeed, in his journalism in the 1920s, he had gone out of his way to defend missionaries against accusations that were sometimes made against them by some Africans who were not quite so convinced that they were a good thing. Given what they knew of the author, it would have been surprising if Shepherd and Chalmers had expected to encounter difficulties on this score.²⁶

Nor was there anything in the text itself – whether the typescript or the published version – that could be construed as being remotely harmful to the missionary cause. Certainly in *Mhudi* Plaatje is concerned to portray traditional African (or at least Barolong) life in positive terms too, and to counter a view that found no virtue at all in African societies prior to the arrival of the white man. Some missionaries would have agreed with him on this. Wherever missionaries appear in *Mhudi*, as Couzens and Gray acknowledge, they are referred to in favourable terms, and the pre-colonial Barolong are portrayed as being well disposed not only to these missionaries but towards Christianity more generally. Given that the novel was set in the past, there was even less cause for concern. If the chaplain of Lovedale (Shepherd) and its vice-principal (Chalmers) were satisfied with what they saw, then it is unlikely that others at Lovedale would have thought differently. No contemporary reviewer, once the book was published, raised any concern over the issue.

Significance of Changes to the Manuscript

If we can discount the argument that Robert Shepherd, or other unnamed ‘white editors’, imposed unwanted changes upon *Mhudi*, what then of the two alternative explanations that Couzens and Gray offer: ‘preferential change or pragmatic self-censorship’? Both rest upon the claim that there were significant differences between the (unamended) typescript and the Lovedale edition and that there was a pattern to these changes made. It is possible, they argue,

to interpret the cuts and emendations to the text as pointing in a general direction: the detail which counterbalanced a delicate and subtle problem of syncretism, and which favoured a complimentary view that so-called pagan life had its own, no way inferior system of values, has been played down in favour of European, sometimes Christian values.

In the light of this, they urge, ‘the evidence of the typescript is that interpretation of *Mhudi* should now be made afresh, for it is a somewhat different type of fiction from the first edition’. But is it – and what is the evidence?

Couzens and Gray identify five areas where Plaatje’s handwritten amendments are said to effect significant changes. Let us look at them in turn. The first relates to the narrative voices Plaatje uses in the telling of his tale. Their argument is that ‘what was cut by the Lovedale editors’ (the possibility, previously acknowledged, that the changes were made by Plaatje himself is forgotten at this point) ‘was the fact that the whole of *Mhudi*, instead of being a novel written

²⁶ Willan, *Sol Plaatje*, p. 314, and, for example, S.T. Plaatje, ‘Natives and the Mission’, *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, Kimberley, 20 June 1925, where Plaatje writes: ‘I often wonder how many of those who criticize missionary efforts today would have lived (or been born) in this country but for the civilizing work of missionary agents’.

by an objective Victorian-Edwardian type of British novelist, is in fact a narrative *told* to the writer'. This supposed 'fact' rests upon the appearance in the typescript of a character called 'Half-a-Crown', who, they argue, is 'none other than the son of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga' (the two main protagonists of the novel), and who was originally intended as 'the narrator of the whole of *Mhudi*'. Consequently: '[w]e are dealing not with the abstract calculation of the Western historical novel, but with a document of living oral history' – something that 'Lovedale possibly did not understand and persuaded Plaatje to eradicate'. *Mhudi*'s true nature was thus distorted.

Let us look a little more closely at this. 'Half-a-Crown' appears in two places in the typescript of *Mhudi* – before Plaatje decided to remove him. On the first occasion, at the beginning of chapter 12, 'Queen Umnandi', Plaatje wrote: 'Half-a-Crown may be permitted to digress and describe the beauty and virtues of one of King Mzilikazi's wives', before revising the first words of the sentence to 'Here, we may be permitted to describe ...'. Then, five lines later, alluding to Umnandi, he wrote, 'Such was the description of her given to Half-a-Crown that it reminded him of a remarkable passage in the Song of Songs ...', but replaced this with, 'Such was the description of her given to the writer by a hoary octogenarian that it reminded him ...'. Plaatje preferred, therefore, the more impersonal 'we' and the 'writer' to the character of Half-a-Crown, introducing instead the device of 'a hoary octogenarian' as a source of information about Umnandi.²⁷

Couzens and Gray conclude from this that Half-a-Crown and 'a hoary octogenarian' are one and the same, an assumption evidently used to justify a change made to the text for the HAWS edition, which reads: 'Such was the description of her given to Half-a-Crown, the hoary octogenarian, that it reminded him ...'. However, this new version corresponds neither to Plaatje's original typescript nor to his amended version: it is an entirely new construction, and it changes the meaning of what he wrote.²⁸ Other interpretations of the notional relationship between 'Half-a-Crown' and 'a hoary octogenarian' are equally possible.

The second time Half-a-Crown makes an appearance in the typescript is later on in the book, in Chapter XXI, and again he is deleted. 'You know, Half-a-Crown, the Boers can do many things in this world, but singing is not one of them', becomes "'You know", Ra-Thaga used to say, "the Boers can do many things in this world but singing is not one of them"', and Ra-Thaga's account is then continued – in Plaatje's amended version – in the first person ('I have been to Grahamstown and heard English congregations sing ...'), rather than, when he had Half-a-Crown speaking, 'He has been to Grahamstown ...'. Here, then, Half-a-Crown is replaced by a memory of what Ra-Thaga used to say.²⁹

Finally, 'Half-a-Crown' appears not in the body of Plaatje's typescript, but on the reverse of one of the pages of chapter 12, 'Queen Umnandi', which is clearly a discarded earlier draft (not the 'sliver of paper tucked into the Cory Library TS' as Couzens and Gray describe it), and which has survived only because Plaatje re-used the blank reverse side of the folio in order to make an insertion in his final text. The discarded page is actually the first page of an earlier draft chapter (headed 'Chapter 11, Foul Murder and Blind Reprisals'), excised from the final typescript, and begins: 'Your trading trips have never taken you to Buluwayo, Half-a-Crown; so possibly you don't know the Matabele, the ferocious race whose King, Mzilikazi, ruled over this country years before I was born'. It then continues with an account of the rise of Mzilikazi's kingdom and its expansion into lands occupied by other peoples, before they 'reached down here and frightened the Bechuana into submission'.³⁰

A closer examination of this discarded page, and a comparison with the published text, reveals that approximately half of it appears, little changed, on pp. 4–5 of the Lovedale edition,

27 Typescript (hereafter TS), p. 105; the Lovedale edition (p. 94) follows Plaatje's handwritten amendment.

28 Couzens and Gray, 'Printers' and Other Devils', p. 206; *Mhudi* (HAWS edition), p. 91.

29 TS, p. 226.

30 TS, p. 111 (reverse side).

part of chapter 1, 'A Tragedy and its Vendetta'. It seems certain, therefore, that the heading 'Chapter 11' was actually a mistyping of 'Chapter II', and that this was originally intended to follow on at this point – before Plaatje decided to collapse into a single chapter.³¹

The knowledge that, in an earlier draft, Half-a-Crown made an appearance close to the beginning of the book adds substance, therefore, to one aspect of Couzens' and Gray's argument, namely that 'Half-a-Crown' could have played a more substantial role in earlier drafts of the book – but suggests that Plaatje himself had already begun the process of removing him well before he put together the final typescript of the book. Far from this being imposed upon him by Lovedale, in other words, Plaatje had initiated this himself, and at an earlier stage in his manuscript's evolution, most probably completing the process as he gave it a final read through before sending it off to Lovedale.

Several other conclusions that Couzens and Gray reach about Half-a-Crown are open to question. It is difficult to claim, for example, that 'the TS confirms that he [Half-a-Crown] played a crucial and consistent role in the original', given the inconsistencies and contradictions that are evident in the few appearances he made in the surviving typescript: indeed Plaatje's recognition of the confused narrative voice is most probably why he decided to remove both Half-a-Crown and a first-person narrator.

It is also difficult to see how Half-a-Crown could be, as they say, 'none other than the son of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga'. At one point (chapter 5), it is true, Plaatje had a narrator who must have been either a son or daughter of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi, for they say 'That exactly is how my father and mother met and became man and wife' (replaced by 'That exactly is how our hero and heroine met and became man and wife' in the Lovedale edition). There is nothing, however, to connect this person with Half-a-Crown, who is not mentioned here.

A closer reading of a later passage in Plaatje's uncorrected typescript rules out the possibility entirely. In support of their hypothesis, Couzens and Gray cite the statement in the discarded folio, quoted earlier, that Plaatje here 'has Half a Crown actually account for how his parents acquired the information they had about the internal workings of the Matabele Empire at which they could not have been present'. It is clear, however, that it is not actually Half-a-Crown who is accounting for this, for he is the one being spoken to; nor can it be Ra-Thaga who is speaking to him, since the unnamed narrator who is speaking – possibly a son or daughter of Ra-Thaga and Mhudi as in the typescript of chapter 5 – says that Mzilikazi 'ruled over the country years before I was born' – Ra-Thaga being, of course very much alive, in the novel, when Mzilikazi did hold sway.³²

From this review of the evidence, it would be reasonable to conclude, rather, that in earlier drafts Plaatje had both a son (or daughter) of Mhudi and Ra-Thaga, and a character called Half-a-Crown, as distinct narrative voices, before deciding – on understandable grounds – to dispense with them. Half-a-Crown is best seen not as an 'actualized character', whose genealogy it was important to establish, but as a narrative device that Plaatje created but then discarded, completing the task of erasure before he submitted his final typescript to Lovedale. No conspiracy is required to explain this, simply the likelihood of a recognition on Plaatje's part, as he came back to a manuscript that had already gone through many drafts, that this was just the easiest solution, necessary in the interests of both clarity and consistency.³³

31 In all drafts that have survived, Plaatje used Roman numerals at the head of his chapters. Had he meant 'Chapter 11' (i.e. to appear between 10 and 12) he would have written 'Chapter XI'.

32 TS, p. 111 (reverse side). Couzens and Gray, in 'Printers' and Other Devils' (p. 208), quote the passage but omit the crucial words 'before I was born', which rule out the possibility that it could have been Ra-Thaga speaking.

33 An interpretation also noted by Brian Walter in 'Plaatje's African Romance: The Translation of Tragedy in *Mhudi* and Other Writings', unpublished Ph.D thesis, Rhodes University, 2000, p. 230. 'It is possible', he suggests, 'that the consistent persona of the narrator was not fully realised in the typescript, and was dropped for artistic rather than for the political reasons suggested by Couzens and Gray'.

None of this, in any case, is as portentous, or as wide-ranging in its implications, as Couzens and Gray suggest. Half-a-Crown's existence, or non-existence, was scarcely a crucial factor in determining the entire nature of the novel, nor was his presence necessary to 'authenticate' the oral traditions upon which Plaatje drew. These existed independently of the narrative devices of the novel and were an important component of the creative mix Plaatje brought to his novel – indeed they were a starting point for him. 'By the merest accident', Plaatje writes in his preface to the book, 'while collecting stray scraps of tribal history, later in life, the writer incidentally heard of "the day Mzilikazi's tax collectors were killed"', and managed to elicit 'from old people that the slaying of Bhoya and his companions, about the year 1830, constituted the *casus belli* which unleashed the war dogs and precipitated the Barolong nation headlong into the horrors described in these pages'.

Other stories, we also know, came down to him from his own family forebears and likewise found their way into *Mhudi*. When, in the middle of chapter 7, Mhudi tells Ra-Thaga of the time she had 'a narrow escape from a roaring lion', this is based on a story, so he had recalled some years earlier, that he had heard from his great-grandmother. Like the heroine of *Mhudi*, she had been a girl who, in the 1820s, had faced down a lion in the bush near the Kunana Hills, just where the episode in *Mhudi* takes place. In neither re-telling of the tale was she believed until the men of the tribe returned to the scene and saw her footprints, and the lion's pawprints, facing one another.³⁴

The important point is that Plaatje makes use of these oral traditions within a narrative framework of his own creation. They are not a given that dictates the content and form of his novel, or defines its essence, but simply one of a number of elements he draws upon and creatively refashions. In fairness to Couzens and Gray, it should be said that they were by no means alone, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, in privileging oral tradition and in underplaying the creative and interpretive role of the author. As Eileen Julien pointed out in 1992, literary critics found in oral tradition a source of continuity and authenticity that helped to validate the genre of the African novel, setting it apart, and challenging the view of critics who had hitherto seen many African novels as no more than pale, inadequate imitations of their European counterparts. In doing so, however, they had over-reacted: what they lost sight of was the intent of the author, the ways in which authors could shape and appropriate oral traditions in the light of their own narrative goals and in the context of the genre, or genres, they had adopted. Oral traditions were undeniably an important component of many African novels, *Mhudi* among them. Just as important were the ways authors made use of them.³⁵

It is difficult, in any case, to accept the kind of 'either/or' approach that Couzens and Gray postulate, namely that *Mhudi*, 'instead of being a novel written by an objective Victorian-Edwardian type of British novelist, is in fact a narrative told to the writer', and that 'we are dealing not with the abstract calculations of the Western historical novel, but with a document of living oral history'. With or without 'Half-a-Crown' it was simply not a case of one or the other. A more fruitful approach, it might be suggested, needs to focus rather on the interaction between oral tradition and genre, on seeking to understand what the author was trying to do and how he was using his material.

Authorial Will and Literary Judgement

The question of authorial will and intent has an important bearing on Couzens' and Gray's second charge, that the 'process of literary and linguistic revision diluted the original style

34 Related by Plaatje in the newspaper he edited, *Tsala ea Batho*, Kimberley, 21 February 1914, p. 3. The fact that, in retelling the tale in *Mhudi*, Plaatje emphasises to a much greater extent than before the collective bravery of Mhudi's female companions, and not just of Mhudi herself, simply underlines the importance of recognising his creative reworking of the oral traditions passed on to him.

35 Eileen Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992).

of the book' and that 'in the process of "prettifying" *Mhudi* the Lovedale edition has, in part, emasculated it'. They have in mind the 'tiny revisions, hinging doubtless on points of supposed literary correctness', 'stylistic features that have given the well known Lovedale *Mhudi* a slightly bad name', in particular a tendency to forgo 'factual authenticity' in favour of 'the tone of the Bible, Bunyan and the English hymnal', a preference for including 'a well worn British cliché than an observation about the forgotten British past'. They regret, for example, that Plaatje should have preferred to have Mhudi speak of Kunana as, among other things, a place 'where our flocks with the jocund lambs around their dams would frolic' rather than (in his earlier version), a place 'where our flocks increased – most of the ewes feeding two lambs each'; they argue that the effect of the change was to transform the image of a 'stable and prospering African agricultural circumstance into an Augustan or Wordsworthian landscape in which woolly-headed Christians frolic in happy pastoral ignorance', the 'original rural vision' being replaced by 'a revised, imposed vision'.

This is somewhat fanciful: far too much is read into this and other changes, and there is no justification for claiming that this revision – any more than the others – reflected an 'imposed vision'. At risk of being pedantic, the handwritten amendments to the manuscript, including the change referred to above, are all in Plaatje's hand, and there is no evidence to suggest that he was pressured into making them. He made the changes because he wanted to: these were simply the words he preferred to use.³⁶

Rather than imagining some kind of conspiracy, and invoking subjective aesthetic judgments, it is more helpful to seek an understanding of Plaatje's style and use of language. After all, one is still left with a text full of similar stylistic examples even where there is no suggestion of any kind of amendment. The key is to recognise that Plaatje chose to write in a particular style, and genre, and that his use of language, stilted and high-flown as it may seem today, was a direct result. The style he adopted, or drew upon, can be identified as that of the imperial romance, Rider Haggard being a particular influence. Apart from the text of the novel itself, evidence for this comes directly from Plaatje. Writing to Silas Molema in 1920, just after he had completed *Mhudi*, he described it as 'a novel – a love story after the manner of romances; but based on historical facts', and with 'plenty of love, superstition and imaginations worked in between the wars'. 'Just like', he said, 'the style of Rider Haggard when he writes about the Zulus'.³⁷

Plaatje's mention of Rider Haggard has raised a few scholarly eyebrows and clearly did not assist any argument that *Mhudi* embodied a kind of unmediated oral history. Plaatje was 'not concerned', Couzens and Gray say, 'to use the novel form merely in imitation of standard British models of the Haggard adventure type, as the letter previously quoted might misleadingly indicate'. True enough: if one is speaking of ideology, or a view of history, or the way he handles such themes as the relations between men and women, *Mhudi* is a world away from Rider Haggard. But Plaatje said, specifically, 'just like the *style* of Rider Haggard', and there are good grounds for taking him seriously. Here, after all, was a style, and a genre, that lent itself very well to appropriation (Haggard had many imitators), and if Plaatje was seeking a publisher – which he was – then such tales undeniably had enormous popular appeal. What better model to adopt if you wanted to persuade a publisher of the sales potential of what you

36 A comparison of the two versions would suggest a more prosaic reason for wishing to make the change: it avoided a jarring repetition, within the same sentence, of numbers of animals and the word 'each' – ewes 'feeding two lambs each' followed by 'the goats had from two to three kids each'. 'Jocund lambs' may not be to Couzens' and Gray's taste, but the formulation is quite consistent with the tone of the monologue of which it is a part, and the style in which Plaatje had chosen to write.

37 University of the Witwatersrand, Historical Papers, Molema/Plaatje Papers, Da62, Plaatje to Silas Molema, 25 August 1920.

had just written? Plaatje was by no means the only indigenous subject of the empire to be struck by the power – and the potential – of Rider Haggard's storytelling.³⁸

If Plaatje adopted the style, and the linguistic register, of the imperial romance, he at the same time adapted it for his own purposes, undermining and challenging many of its tenets as he did so. He tells his tale from an African point of view and has a female heroine in place of an archetypal male hero. A central concern throughout is to undermine conventional assumptions of male superiority, to play around with male/female stereotypes, to mock male pretensions. It is a style deliberately chosen, and deployed with both irony and humour. If in places his language verges on the clichéd, that is the whole point. Nobody who had read his journalism, or other political works, or his private correspondence, could be in any doubt that he could write differently if he wished to do so.

There are, as it happens, particular similarities, as Tim Couzens first pointed out, between *Mhudi* and *Nada the Lily*, one of Haggard's best-known novels 'about the Zulus':

the Eden of the beginning, the sacking of the town, the wanderings of hero and heroine, the lion stories which are introduced to distinguish courage and cowardice, the tale telling narrator, the entry of the Boers half-way through, the alliance of blacks and whites against 'cruel dictatorship', the tales within tales

and, he might have added, the extensive use of prophecy.³⁹ There were also, one might add further, some noticeable echoes in the language and the constructions used. 'Chaka served us just as treacherously. Where is Chaka's dynasty now?', demands Mzilikazi in his great peroration in the 'Exodus' chapter; 'Next came the turn of U'Faku, chief of the Amafondos. Ah! Where is U'Faku now?', asks Mopo, relating the exploits of Chaka's impis in *Nada the Lily*. In *Mhudi*, the heroine confronts a lion that 'gave a startling roar that shook the earth beneath my feet'; in *Nada the Lily* the lion 'roared till the earth shook'. In *Mhudi*, the heroine 'gathers some roots and wood berries about the slope' as she wanders through the wilderness; Nada, similarly, gathered 'many berries and a root that is good for food'.⁴⁰

This is the context, I would argue, in which Plaatje's choice of register needs to be understood. There is thus no need for Couzens and Gray to express regret – let alone to seek to suggest that the words were not really his – but rather to understand the nature of the style he had chosen to use. And in the same spirit of recognising the influences upon Plaatje's choice of genre, one might point to the distinct possibility that Half-a-Crown's existence, albeit cut short before he could make it into the Lovedale edition of *Mhudi*, may well have owed a debt to Rider Haggard's narrative techniques in *Nada the Lily* too. Which, if this was so, would add an interesting layer of irony to Couzens' and Gray's determination to reinstate him in Plaatje's text.

A Contested Ending – and Other Differences in Interpretation

The remaining charges against Plaatje – or 'his editors' – hinge on matters of detail and interpretation, and require both subjective judgement and some imagination. It is difficult, first of all, to understand how simply changing a chapter title, from 'Light and shade of memorable days', to 'A sportive dawn and gloomy dusk' can in itself 'blur or dampen the relationship between cosmic cycle and historical movement', and that the original title 'implies the coming of a period of darkness that would be relieved only with the inevitable release from oppression

38 Robert Fraser draws attention to the way in which readers in the colonies 'disassemble such texts [as *King Solomon's Mines*] and reassemble according to a logic – often a political logic – of their own making'. This was not always understood: when the Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand, a Marxist, 'mentioned to Virginia and Leonard Woolf that he had partly modelled his prose style on Corelli and Haggard, they reacted with shock to his taste'; see Fraser, *Book History*, pp. 175–6.

39 Tim Couzens, 'Sol T. Plaatje and the First South African Epic', *English in Africa*, 14, 1 (1987), p. 53.

40 H. Rider Haggard, *Nada the Lily* (London, Thames Publishing, 1956 [originally published 1892]), pp. 44, 69, 53. I owe the second and third of these examples to Walter, 'Plaatje's African Romance', p. 212, 213; *Mhudi*, pp. 208, 26, 61.

and domination'; or indeed that 'part of the element of political prophecy has been removed in the first edition', as is argued in relation to changes in the 'Exodus' chapter. In fact, a more convincing argument here is that the element of political prophecy is actually strengthened, for this is the chapter that was incomplete in the version supplied to Lovedale. The second half of the chapter, which Plaatje supplied later on, contained the most powerful prophecy of the entire book. If one looks at the chapter as a whole, therefore, the movement is surely in the direction of strengthening the element of prophecy, not weakening it.

Couzens and Gray also allege that 'the hand of change particularly affects military matters within the novel', and they attribute an exaggerated significance – and imagined meaning – to what was essentially a minor, but considered, stylistic change on Plaatje's part. 'As the various age-divisions marched out under their several indunas', so Plaatje wrote originally (when describing the Matabele army), 'they constituted a formidable mass of black humanity. Going through their initial exercises, a thousand limbs would straddle after a thousand different patterns'. Revising it, he replaced 'various age-divisions' by 'serried ranks', and preferred 'thousands of limbs' to 'a thousand limbs'. Couzens and Gray may consider 'serried ranks' a 'dreary description' but it is doubtful that Plaatje would have seen this change as being about 'playing down historical facts', as they claim, any more than the change of 'a thousand' to 'thousands' involved a 'revision of historical views'. Far more likely that he simply felt, as he re-read the passage, that 'serried ranks' was more in tune with the style he had adopted, and that it was better to avoid a repetition of 'a thousand'.⁴¹

Finally, there is the proposition that the celebrated final words of the book, in Plaatje's handwritten amendment, represented a weaker, less meaningful version than that which it replaced. Here are the two versions:

1. As published by Lovedale, incorporating Plaatje's handwritten changes:

I have had my revenge and ought to be satisfied; from henceforth, I shall have no ears for the call of war or the chase; my ears shall be open to one call only besides the call of the Chief, namely the call of your voice – Mhudi.

2. As published in the Heinemann African Writers/Penguin edition, discarding Plaatje's handwritten changes:

I have had my revenge and ought to be satisfied; from henceforth, I shall have no ears for the call of war or the chase; my ears shall be open to one call only – the call of your voice.⁴²

Couzens and Gray prefer the second version, considering that it says more about 'the power of Mhudi's character', Plaatje's amended version, by contrast, 'with its stilted tone and qualifications', being 'far less powerful than the earlier version'. Elsewhere Gray imagines this 'single pure call of Mhudi' to be 'a new one, a rallying call to the peasants of black culture', to be linked to the rise of African nationalism in South Africa.⁴³ Laura Chrisman, from a feminist perspective, prefers this 'one call only' version for different reasons. In her view, the judgement 'passed by the editor of the 1930 Lovedale Press first edition of Mhudi' was in accord with a view that considered Plaatje's 'female-centred scenes and themes' to be anathema, its implied 'privileging of feminine/domestic bonds over those of traditional chiefly authority ... an unacceptable transgression of a properly "native" ideology'.⁴⁴

41 Couzens and Gray, 'Printers' and Other Devils', pp. 211, 212; TS, p. 191; *Mhudi* (Lovedale), p. 168. On the basis of these changes, Couzens and Gray suggest that 'Plaatje's original intention was to show that, despite their thoroughly admirable organization (which he nevertheless abhors), even such a well-constituted army was in turn defeated by the new invaders, the Western-style army with its new technological weaponry that could obliterate the finest African order (who, in turn, are also to be deplored)'.

42 In fact, Plaatje's last sentence went through a further minor change at proof stage as well. In his original typescript he had: 'my ears shall be open only to one call'; he then changed this by hand to 'my ears shall be open to only one call'; while the final published Lovedale edition has 'my ears shall be open to one call only'.

43 Gray, *Southern African Literature*, p. 181.

44 Chrisman, *Rereading the Imperial Romance*, p. 178.

Such readings are difficult to justify. There is no evidence, as we have seen, that the 'editor' at Lovedale made any such judgement, or even existed, while the textual changes were clearly, and deliberately, in Plaatje's hand. What he wrote was what he wanted to say: his concern was with meaning, not style. Chrisman's contention that, overall, *Mhudi* 'argues for the value of the spheres of the domestic, and the feminine, in building a national narrative' is plausible enough: it is not strengthened, however, by a reliance on unsubstantiated allegations of editorial interference and a failure to recognise either Plaatje's own agency or the complexities of his position.⁴⁵

Why, then, might Plaatje have made this particular change? Part of it may very well have been, as Tony Voss put it, because 'as a loyal Barolong, himself descended from the noble line, he took chieftainship seriously and had seen his responsibility to guide and advise his chief on one aspect of his role as a writer and as an intellectual'.⁴⁶ Perhaps, too, one might point to the particular context of the late 1920s, a time when a number of leading African figures, disillusioned at their progressive exclusion from the segregationist state that had emerged, were returning to more traditional forms of identity and association.⁴⁷ Plaatje was no exception. He devoted himself, as is well known, to the preservation of Setswana and its literary forms, expressing the hope – in his Preface to *Mhudi* – that sales of the book would help to raise money 'to collect and print (for Bantu Schools) Setswana folk-tales, which, with the spread of European ideas, are being fast forgotten', thereby 'cultivating a love for art and literature in the Vernacular'. At the same time he became involved in the affairs of the Bamangwato, the largest Tswana chieftaindom in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, advising the young chief regent, Tshekedi Khama, on how to resist the attempts of the Protectorate authorities to reduce his powers.⁴⁸ As he revised his manuscript, therefore, Plaatje may well have thought rather differently, and more positively, about the institution of chiefship than he did in London in 1920.

Of course this is speculation. It is impossible to know exactly what was in his mind as he made these changes to the last lines of *Mhudi*, or when exactly he made them. But we have a better chance of getting closer to this, of identifying the possibilities, if we set aside notions of interference or conspiracy, recognise his own agency in implementing the changes, and pay some attention to the broader social and political context in which he (and others like him), lived and how he – and they – responded to the challenges they faced.

The Heinemann African Writers Series Edition of *Mhudi*

Mhudi has had a complex genesis and reception, notably affected – more than most literary texts – by changing political and ideological circumstance. This is just as true of the Couzens and Gray article, now nearly 40 years old. The argument they made, and the version of *Mhudi* they sought to justify, can be seen as a product of the particularities of its own time: part of 'an Africanist recovery programme in the 1970s', as Michael Chapman saw it, 'an act of deliberate restoration along lines heavily influenced by the collectivist politics of the time', in the view of Robert Fraser.⁴⁹ In arguing as they did, Couzens and Gray sought to counter the largely unsympathetic and patronising critical reception that *Mhudi* had encountered to date, and in a climate – the high apartheid regime of the 1970s – hostile to virtually any form of African writing.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Mhudi* (Ad Donker edition), pp. 21–2.

⁴⁷ See, particularly, Heather Hughes, *First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2011), and Paul La Hausse, *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Identity and History in the Lives of Petrus Lamula and Lymon Maling* (Durban, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Often this was behind the scenes, as is clear in surviving correspondence between Plaatje and Tshekedi Khama. One long letter from Peter Sebina, Tshekedi Khama's tribal secretary, to the Johannesburg *Star* in 1931, in support of the chief regent, was actually written by Plaatje. See 'The Bechuanaland Protectorate: some further native comments', letter from Peter M. Sebina to the *Star*, 8 October 1931, and letter from Plaatje to Tshekedi Khama, 20 September 1931 (copy in Michael Crowder Papers, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London).

⁴⁹ Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, pp. 210–11; Fraser, *Book History*, p. 86.

Consciously or unconsciously, it could be argued, they also projected backwards something of the atmosphere of this time to their account and understanding of *Mhudi*'s publication by the Lovedale Press in 1930: thus it was not difficult to see in the missionary presses the ideological forerunners of state censorship boards when it came to suppressing African protest writing.

My main concern in this article has been to put the record straight: to restore to Plaatje the agency he exercised, to show that there was no conspiracy surrounding the publication of *Mhudi*, no evidence that the book was in any way 'bowdlerised', no reason to believe that the final product was not in accord with his wishes. Had it been otherwise one wonders if he would have been so keen to send out copies of the book to so many people after its publication – and to have taken nearly one-third of the entire print run from Lovedale to enable him to do so.⁵⁰ Or have been quite so ready to thank Revd Robert Shepherd for his help in checking proofs – as he did in the Preface to *Mhudi*.

A proper understanding of the circumstances surrounding *Mhudi*'s publication is important for another set of reasons. For, in a way, the effect of the Couzens and Gray argument was to establish an alibi. If criticisms were made of *Mhudi* – whether of style or substance – the argument could always be made that the true or 'original' text had been distorted, that Plaatje could not be held responsible for something over which he did not exercise control.⁵¹ Even with the supposedly 'recovered' HAWS/Penguin edition, with 'Half-a-Crown' restored so far as was possible from the typescript, the argument could still be made that Half-a-Crown once had a more substantial presence, that the 'oral' elements of the novel had been degraded. All of this has provided a distraction, in other words, from confronting the reality that the Lovedale text was as 'authentic' as any, that it needed to be accepted and understood, and engaged with, for what it was and not for what it was supposed to have been.

What, then, of the new edition that has replaced it? In 'Printers' and Other Devils', Couzens and Gray describe the circumstances that led to the publication of the HAWS edition. They claim that, with this edition, *Mhudi* 'appears for the first time nearly sixty years after its date of composition in an earlier, more original version', and, later on, that 'it fell to Heinemann to put out *Mhudi* in 1978 for the first time as it was written'. This edition has a brief 'Note on the text', which says that the text 'contains the complete text of the novel, here for the first time edited from Plaatje's original typescript', but – beyond a few words about spelling and footnotes – has nothing further to say about the editorial principles that have been applied.⁵²

From the arguments put forward in 'Printers' and Other Devils', and the examples given, it might be expected that the new edition would discard the handwritten changes made to the typescript, returning to the 'original', uncorrected typescript. If the view was taken that the handwritten changes to *Mhudi* were made as a result of some form of censorship, or at least self-censorship, and that this provides the justification for returning to the 'original' typescript, then it ought to follow that all such handwritten amendments should be dispensed with (they make no argument that some handwritten amendments were made by Plaatje of his own free will and some not). But this is not the case. More often than not, the handwritten amendments, despite their supposedly dubious provenance, have been incorporated into the HAWS edition. In the final chapter, for example, there are a total of 11 handwritten amendments: the HAWS edition has incorporated eight of these and rejected three, including the last sentence. Nowhere

50 Cory Library, Lovedale collection, Plaatje file, 'Statement of account – estate Solomon T. Plaatje', 14 July 1932.

51 For example, Couzens and Gray write: 'One may only rejoice in the fact that we now know that Plaatje originally did not write that passage ['where our flocks with the jocund lambs around their dams would frolic'], and that it may not have been Plaatje who changed it at all', 'Printers' and Other Devils', p. 211.

52 An editorial note in the 2005 Penguin edition says, similarly: 'This edition contains the complete text of the novel as originally published, correlated against the author's own typescript from the Cory Library for Historical Research, held in the National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown'. (The Cory Library has the original, the National English Literary Museum a photocopy.)

is the rationale for this selective approach explained or justified.⁵³ In one instance, as we have seen – where 'Half-a-Crown' is conflated with a 'hoary octogenarian' – the text has been adjusted in support of an unproven hypothesis, the HAWS version differing from both corrected and uncorrected versions of Plaatje's typescript.⁵⁴ It is therefore very far from the case that this is '*Mhudi* published in its original form for the first time'.

We have, then, a curious situation. To recapitulate: Couzens and Gray – and then Gray subsequently – argued that the original Lovedale edition of *Mhudi* was subverted, that the text was the product of what amounted to some form of censorship at the hands of the missionaries at Lovedale. I have sought to demonstrate that this was not the case. Indeed I would also go further and suggest – on the basis of the extent of rewriting that Plaatje undertook at proof stage – that Lovedale were particularly accommodating of his wishes, taking in, for example, two entirely new pages at the beginning of chapter XI. No wonder, given the cost and inconvenience that this entailed in the days of hot-metal typesetting, that Shepherd should have pleaded with him – as Michael van Reenen would recall clearly nearly 50 years later – to refrain from making any further changes.⁵⁵

The Lovedale Press edition of *Mhudi* was flawed in many ways, but it did allow Plaatje's voice to be heard, his final thoughts to be incorporated into the text. The HAWS edition took a different approach. In setting out to rescue Plaatje from the imagined interventions of his publisher, and the pressures supposedly exerted upon him, the end result was a text infused with the literary preoccupations of a later era. From the starting point of the argument of 'Printers' and Other Devils', we have perhaps come full circle.

BRIAN WILLAN

Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa. E-mail: brian.willan1@googlemail.com

53 I exclude from this summary of changes to the last chapter those of punctuation and spelling. There are two instances in this chapter – in the HAWS edition – of sentences in which some words have been accepted from Plaatje's handwritten amendments and some not. In the first, Plaatje had originally typed: 'That evening, when drowsy people disposed themselves as primitive travellers usually did, two young persons sat arm in arm under the wide canopy of heaven, with the evident belief that they were already part of each other'. He then amended this by hand as follows (his changes underlined): 'That evening, when drowsy people disposed themselves as travellers usually did, two ecstatic young persons clasped hands gingerly under the wide canopy of heaven, with the evident belief that they were already part of each other'. HAWS combines elements of the two, with: 'That evening, when drowsy people disposed themselves as primitive travellers usually did, two ecstatic young persons sat arm in arm under the wide canopy of heaven, with the evident belief that they were already part of each other' (*Mhudi*, HAWS edition, p. 183; TS, p. 244).

54 TS, p. 226.

55 Author's interview with Michael Van Reenen, Mitcham, Surrey, UK, 29 March 1977.