

Ethnographic Romance: Allister Miller and Settler Writing in Swaziland

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Summary

This article situates *Mamisa, the Swazi Warrior*, in the rich tradition of settler writing and, more specifically, within the genre of imperial romance. It draws upon translation theory to argue that Allister Miller's novel is an extended act of ventriloquism that attempts to rewrite Swaziland by submerging the reader in a primitive world in order to open temporal and spatial borders to prospective pioneers and obliquely attract further European settlement.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel plaas *Mamisa*, die Swazi krygsman, midde in die ryk tradisie van setlaarliteratuur, en meer in die besonder, midde in die genre vorstelike romanse. Dit put uit die vertalingsteorie om aan te voer dat Allister Miller se roman 'n uitgebreide aksie van buikspraak is wat poog om Swaziland te herskryf deur die leser te betrek in 'n primitiewe wêreld om temporale en ruimtelike grense vir voornemende pioniers te open en indirek verdere Europese nedersetting te lok.

In their conclusion to *De-Scribing Empire*, Alan Lawson and Helen Tiffin remark on the male settler subject and his complex and ambivalent relationship with Empire and colony:

He is both mediator and mediated, excluded from the unmediated authority of Empire and from the unmediated authenticity of the indigene. From this half-empowered limbo he fetishises yet disparages a Europe which in turn depreciates him while envying his energy, innocence, and enterprise. Simultaneously he fantasizes, displaces, and desires the indigene completing the hierarchy of parallel loathing and desire.

(Lawson & Tiffin 1994: 231)

Allister Miller was one such settler figure, whose writings oscillate between attraction and repulsion as he attempts to mediate between Swaziland and Europe in an effort to lure more settlers to the country.

One story, perhaps accurate, describes Miller exploring the wilds of Swaziland in the 1880s in an oxcart with a piano on board. To my mind, the wagon represents his restless efforts to pin Swaziland down, to represent it, to appropriate and inhabit its space, to map it, shape its territorial contours; the piano, his compulsion to mark Swaziland as a cultural space in which primitive Swazis are celebrated as models worthy of development. The cart and the piano, then, are emblems of realism and romance, or empire and culture, that dual strain that has been such a potent force in the development of the novel. But, just as it is generally recognised that the real and romance are never fully independent from each other, neither can the romantic image of Miller's piano and cart erase his intent, which was to map, or translate Swaziland and its culture.

During the past fifteen years the field of translation studies has probed the link between translation and colonisation. Susan Basnett and Harish Trivedi note "the role played by translation in facilitating colonization And the metaphor of the colony *as* a translation, a copy of an original located elsewhere on the map has been recognised" (1999: 5). In this sense translating is comparable to mapping, which seeks to represent a geographic space and in the process displaces the original landscape. J.B. Harley writes, "To catalogue the world is to appropriate it so that all these technical processes [the means of producing maps] represent acts of control over its image which extend beyond the professed uses of cartography. The world is disciplined. The world is normalized" (1922: 245). Further, just as the theory of translation also makes room for the art of translation, so too does the technology of the cartographic process often incorporate various forms of decorative art on maps, which, in their complex textuality, signal how the map is less science than cultural production. Mapping, then, is an act of translation, an attempt to tame the landscape, but as with the cliché, "something gets lost in translation"; in mapping a territory the social space is appropriated by science, even as it is represented as something aesthetically pleasing. Science and art intermingle, but in each case the cartouche – the visual and textual aesthetics – tends to mask the very deliberate technical processes at work. Similarly, in his discussion of translation theories, Lawrence Venuti notes how a fluent strategy, a process by which the translator attempts a kind of invisibility of presence,

effaces the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text: this gets rewritten in the transparent discourse dominating the target-language culture

and is inevitably coded with other target-language values, beliefs, and social representations, implicating the translation in ideologies that figure social differences and may well arrange them in hierarchical relations In this rewriting, a fluent strategy performs a labor of acculturation which domesticates the foreign text, making it intelligible and even familiar to the target-language reader, providing him or her with the narcissistic experience of recognizing his or her own culture in a cultural other, enacting an imperialism that extends the dominion of transparency with other ideological discourses over a different culture.

(Venuti 1992: 5)

Just as world-making and translating can never be neutral acts, neither can the discipline of ethnography. It, too, over the past fifteen or twenty years, recognised how anthropology as a whole has been implicated in the imperialist project, in part, through its insistence on a scientific approach that denied its own subjectivity and upheld an objective process of identifying, naming, analysing, and containing.

This mediation of social, spatial, or linguistic texts, working within a play of power that normalises or appropriates its subject is a common feature also of ethnographic fiction written by the settler in Swaziland. Tensions caused by the interplay between “fact” and fiction, the objective and the subjective, or the literal and the metaphoric, are a major feature of this literature, a characteristic that reveals how, in more general terms, the apparatus of empire attempts to dominate a social space by claiming an objective presence behind the aesthetic literary object.

And this tension informs the literature of Swaziland, as early “European” writers like Allister Miller and Alexander Davis, guided in part by social Darwinist thinking and, even in the 1950s, with the fiction and drama of the anthropologist, Hilda Kuper and her Malinowski-influenced cultural relativism, represent a traditional world in order to rationalise a desire for material gain, or for the beneficial presence of Western culture.¹

Before I turn to Miller’s novel, some background on this early settler is necessary. As Alan Booth tactfully notes, with Allister Miller’s arrival in Swaziland in 1888, “[h]is various undertakings and development schemes over the following sixty years profoundly affected Swaziland’s history, although they rarely turned out to be successful and the effects were not always for the better” (2000: 190). One of Miller’s earliest endeavours was to produce the first topographical map of Swaziland (published in 1896). Speculating on the geopolitics of the region at that time, J.R. Masson examines possible motives for producing the map, and concludes that it was

a project in keeping with his drive to publicize Swaziland and to promote its economic potential, particularly through European agricultural settlement. The map therefore may be regarded as a symbol of his particular vision of a future Swaziland. With hindsight his vision lacked perspective, just as the map lacked accuracy ...

(Masson 1989: s.p.)

Allister Miller was an imperialist par excellence in the grand tradition of British colonial policy. In his entry on Miller, Booth notes that for a time he was advisor to King Mbandzine, and acted as his agent for granting concessions. Later, he was also a member of the Swaziland Concession Commission, where he “pushed for the transferral of up to 90 percent of Swazi territory to the settlers” (2000: 192). Miller also served as a lieutenant on the British side during the Anglo-Boer War, and after the war he actively continued his involvement in schemes to attract settlers. As part of his effort he had also founded a newspaper, *The Times of Swaziland*, in 1897.

Settlement, for Miller, meant a new beginning, the formation of a new nation even, and he attempts to rewrite, or even erase, history in order to inaugurate it. Booth quotes Philip Bonner’s description of “A History of Swazieland” which Miller wrote and published in his paper in 1897 as “an extraordinarily garbled version of events” (2000: 194). Further, one of Miller’s numerous monographs written to promote settlement, enlists the aid of the historian, George Theal to represent Swaziland as a blank space. He probes back to Lourenco Marques to conclude that no evidence of European influence can be found:

nothing remains; nor is there ought to suggest that the barbarians of those early days were influenced by the presence of and contact with a higher civilization. On the contrary, there are indications that sanguinary struggles obliterated every vestige of the white man’s influence, that the people who were the contemporaries of these early traders were themselves driven from their homes, later to be replaced by other tribes who stepped into a blood-stained wilderness, who in their turn gave way to still more modern conquering hosts.

(Miller 1907: 12)

In his Preface to this same monograph, Miller had represented Swaziland as a land of opportunity:

All that is claimed is that Swaziland is the last undeveloped territory on the fertile well-watered slopes of the Eastern Drakensberg which is open to the pioneer and an unprospected mineral belt of great promise ...

(Miller 1907: 8)

Writing this in 1907, Miller is remapping the territory, emphasising its emptiness, how it belongs to no single ancient people. In particular, he presents it as a final frontier, one of the last places where no white influence has been felt: a virgin land. In doing so, Miller implies an oblique dissatisfaction with late imperialism even as he offers the opportunity to begin anew, following the “orgy of the concession boom” (p. 18) which occurred from 1885 to 1889, in which Mbandzine ceded huge chunks of Swaziland to concession hunters, and in which he was a key player. Miller concludes that

it is believed that the fair-play which a sound and sympathetic administration will ensure is all that is required to invite within her frontiers the class of settler most competent to advantage by the generous favours which climate, soil and geographical position confer.

(Miller 1907: 23)

Miller’s emphasis on the “proper settler” acts as a kind of mask to conceal imperialism and its rapacity under a different name; and presents a new beginning, this time ordered and civilised. Conrad had just written *Heart of Darkness*, John Buchan’s *Prester John* was to appear in 1910, and Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* had been published in 1885. All of these imperial romances, to varying degrees, had served to disseminate the values of empire though, to varying degrees, some had also contested them. As Graham Law writes,

the late Victorian Romance as a form serves both to articulate and to conceal the contradictory desire to escape from the industrial landscape of the metropolitan culture into an unspoiled region of the “natural”; this allows at least an implicit recognition of the alienation and reification of industrial capitalism, and, at the same time, through a constant shifting of the category of the “natural” towards the “other”... to reconfirm the threatened values of the metropolitan culture.

This contradiction corresponds to the major contradiction of the New Imperialism, which, with its massive territorial expansion and its political formalisation of the concept of Empire, represents both the culmination of earlier commercial practice, and the reaction against it, in the form of the occlusion of the dominant economic motivation of colonisation behind a nationalist and racialist myth of a civilising mission.

(Law 1993: 4-5)

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A version of what was to become Miller's novel, *Mamisa, the Swazi Warrior*, first made its appearance in *The Times of Swaziland* in February 1898 in serial form. In his introductory remarks Miller claims that the story is oral history: "We have been requested to publish a series of verbal communications which have been addressed to us by a prominent Swazi Chief which have been reduced to writing, and translated" (s.p.). In 1914 Miller submitted part of the manuscript to John Buchan at Thomas Nelson and Sons, who felt "it is the real thing, and I do not know any parallel to it in modern literature," though he goes on to say that the firm cannot publish it. Miller finally published three copies himself in 1933 under the title, "The Words of Mamisa," and following Miller's death in 1951 the well-known South African collector, Killie Campbell, obtained a copy from Miller's daughter, Mrs. Kiernan. Campbell was enthusiastic: in a letter dated 26 Oct. 1953 to Miller's daughter, she described it as "amazing":

I have never read anything so wonderful. Its [sic] an absolute classic. I am thrilled with it and it must be published and I have never read a book which gives such an impression of Native life as this has done Alan Paton's "Cry the Beloved Country" is not a patch on this ... it must be published for the sake of the knowledge it has given to us of Native life.

(Campbell 1953: s.p.)

And in February of the following year Campbell felt the book should evoke "the true atmosphere and colour of the native's way of living, and thus understanding their background better" (Campbell 1954: s.p.).

What is especially striking about these reactions is the willingness to accept the authenticity of the novel. Miller's original claim that it is a translation – continued in the blurb to the second edition, which declares, "Mamisa ... gave by word of lip to the author the material for this epic novel" – Campbell's description, and, earlier, Buchan's remark that "it is the real thing," each seeks to impose upon the novel an ethnographic immediacy of experience. Such responses, as well as Miller's own claims, encourage a fiction of authority, with Miller simply acting as a mediator, or translator. Such assumptions, however, participate in the reinforcement of a social Darwinism which, by the time of its publication, had been largely discredited. Miller dedicated his book to Robert Thorne Coryndon, "[a] wise and farseeing administrator who knew what was good for a backward people and had the courage of performance" (1955: s.p.), and in his Preface he describes a society terrorised by suspicion and witchcraft, and violence – an apt précis of the contents of *Mamisa* – and adds, "Then came the Whiteman, and with him law and order" (p. 9). This is the implicit motive for writing – or translating – the narrative, one which is simply a variation on Buchan's affirmation of

imperialism in *Prester John*, which begins, “I knew then the meaning of the white man’s duty” (1955: 23). Rather than a translation, another way we might want to think of Miller’s novel is as a quite remarkable act of sustained ventriloquism. But then we might want to ask the question, if Miller is the ventriloquist, who is the puppet?

Mamisa, then, with its claim to historical fact, falls within the genre of imperial romance, but claims a good part of its validity through being a “translation”, through its use of ethnographic detail, and the play between fact and fiction operates on a number of different levels. The narrator, a Swazi named Mamisa Zwane, tells the story of his growth and development up to the present, where he has established himself as the most powerful leader of one of the King’s regiments. The translation mimics the oral nature of story and provides an abundance of local colour. As with other settler literature, there is also an inordinate fascination with witchcraft. Miller’s presence can be felt throughout, not least in his adaptation of European romance conventions to those common to orature. In her book on orality and African literature, Eileen Julien summarises Mohamadou Kane’s compilation of traits common to oral tales. Among other characteristics, she notes, “a single dominant character who often serves as a pretext for (the narrator’s or author’s) observations and commentary, the motif of the journey (frequently in three stages: home, away from home, home once again), and the inclusion of several genres (proverb, riddle, tale) within a text” (Julien 1992: 31).

Interestingly, these features hold much in common with Frye’s definition of romance, as summarised by Jeffrey Richards:

it avoids the ambiguities of ordinary life in which everything is a mixture of good and bad, it presents us with a hierarchical social order, is informed by a conservative, mystical strain of social and religious acceptance and it involves questions of identity and disguise, patterns of aristocratic courage and courtesy. The classic structure of romance is one of descent and ascent, descent from an idyllic world ... to what Frye calls a “night world” of exciting adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation and pain before a final return to the idyllic world, often after the discovery of true identity and marriage.

(Richards 1989: 75)

Mamisa’s encounter with witches, his violent struggles against elements vying for the king’s favour, his self-exile to the borders of the kingdom, his triumphant return, and more, all imprint upon this “traditional” oral narrative a format that arises out of the Western adventure romance. And, at the same time, the oral features of the narrative circulate as exotic addendums which, though seemingly operating in the foreground, are governed by established European conventions. The result of this construction of a savage heroic

figure within the genre of romance is a dual awareness of the primitive and of the potential for development beyond savagery. By inserting his African hero into the narrative of romance, Miller signals that Mamisa, and Swazis like him, if properly nurtured and instructed, can move beyond their “backwardness”. Julien notes:

Viewed through the prism of evolutionist theories, the oral traditions were considered primitive, and British folklorists, for example, studied the oral songs and poetry of contemporary British society as “survivals” of an earlier cultural stage, indices of the distance from which high culture had come.

(Julien 1992: 11)

A further feature of the oral tale which Miller uses sparingly but consistently throughout *Mamisa* is the direct address. Early in the novel Mamisa says, “I was but a child, ye children of white-man” (Miller 1955: 27), and a little later he exclaims, “Ah! White-man, those were the times” (p. 34), or refers to the readers/listeners as “my chiefs” (p. 114). While this lends an air of authenticity and immediacy to the narrative, it also situates the fictional character as an informant. As a result, while the episodic narrative drives forward from one adventure or intrigue to the next, the ethnographic detail that appears – most notably, perhaps, with the extended description of a “smelling out” (a practice used to uncover witches) – seems to validate the fiction. In an article on novels of empire, Brian Street describes how these writers “draw on the writings of anthropologists for their underlying theory and concepts and they claimed a ‘seriousness’ and accuracy that was designed to transcend their status as fiction using, for instance the device of footnotes ...” (p. 105).

Miller, too, makes use of footnotes in *Mamisa* to authenticate his narrative and reinforce its own fiction that the novel is a translation. But the “fluent strategy” that Miller adopts is unmasked in a number of ways, all of which attest to the authority of the writer. Throughout the novel Miller translates SiSwati words and phrases, placing them in footnotes. His favourite explanatory notes, though, are reserved for flora and fauna. For instance, Mamisa describes his arms “as branches of the mthombothi tree” which Miller footnotes with “species of hardwood tree, *Spiristachys africanus* with sweet smelling bark and used for unguents” (Miller 1955: 200). The movement of voice from the Swazi warrior to the expert naturalist, and to the ethnographer explaining traditional herbal practice familiarises the narrative and displaces the literary function of simile, replacing it with the objectivity of science. Another example which again deflects the unfamiliar through the prism of science is more complex. In a chapter entitled “The Chase and the Capture” Mamisa single-handedly pursues the Msuthu, a foreign witchdoctor who had

been enlisted by one of the king's wives to discredit his much admired youngest wife. The chase transports the reader into the realm of the supernatural, a darkly occult dimension where, we are told in a dead-pan, one-sentence paragraph, the Msuthu "was riding a hyena" (p. 94). Miller normalises this scene, which so effectively co-mingles the natural and the supernatural, by drawing on elements taken from the epic romance. For instance, his hero perseveres in the chase throughout the night with almost superhuman stamina, and when he does corner this otherworldly creature, he pauses to recite a catalogue of past heroic deeds. But, besides the epic features (one of the cover blurbs describes the novel as a "magnificent, turbulent, prose poem", another as "the stuff of Beowulf") which seem to legitimate the narrative by inserting it into a particular European literary tradition – but also reinforce its oral nature – the pursuit scene is further textured when a bush the Msuthu trips over as he attacks Mamisa ("a mountain of wickedness was in his eyes – they burned me") is given a gloss. The "small mfomfo bush", we are told, refers to "[t]he strawberry shrub growing between rocks, *Caphalanthus natalensis*" (p. 96). Mamisa's heroic battle with a figure from the occult world is naturalised through the Latinate term for the plant. The translated oral tale, with its factual delivery of the supernatural – "he was riding a hyena" – is transported into the realm of the real, allowing the early twentieth-century reader to participate with an atavistic pleasure which is mediated through scientific knowledge.

Mamisa includes a number of other features common to the adventure romance, including an atmospheric story within a story which is closely aligned to what Patrick Brantlinger calls the Imperial Gothic, and which makes use of Swazi tradition and the topography of Swaziland to tap the unconscious desires and fears of readers, but the result is much the same: to recognise how much Mamisa and his country need to progress.² And this recognition is acknowledged in the book's absence, where no white man appears in a narrative which, we are given to understand, is addressed in the present to white men like Lord Coryndon, who, as resident commissioner, oversaw the removal of Swazis to so-called "native areas", or to tenancy status on native farms, and who, as Miller says in his dedication, knew what was good for a backward people.

The impulse to situate Swaziland as a romantic landscape hinges upon a nostalgia for a pristine past unmarked by imperialist industrial progress. The foreword to a book-length account tracing the development of the Usutu forest plantation in Swaziland exemplifies this double vision. The authors claim that the shared powers of King Sobhuza and the Queen mother "provide a unique example of how modern progress and the tribal system go hand in hand", and parallel this fine balance with a link between industrialisation and

ecology: “we feel the best has been preserved and hope that the Swazilanders will go on to replant the indigenous trees and flowers, in waste ground, that were, of necessity, removed for timber and cultivation” (Filmer and Jameson 1960: s.p).

Of necessity. The political make-up of the country, as represented by the King, is reconfigured as the natural landscape is altered in the name of industry and progress – foreign trees which supplant indigenous ones are planted – yet the authors’ plea is for a return to the original landscape, or at least a preservation of that which remains.

Such an impulse was also expressed in the closing decade of the nineteenth century by H. Rider Haggard, who lamented, “Where ... will the romance writers of future generations find a safe and secret place, unknown to the pestilent accuracy of the geographer, in which to lay their plots” (Haggard quoted by Brantlinger 1988: 239). One such writer who believed he had indeed found Haggard’s secret place was Allister Miller. And the plot of his novel *Mamisa*, reveals an atavistic attraction to “primitive” Swaziland even as its translation of Swazi culture provides a rationale for an imperial presence, just as his other ventures – including map-making – and carried out with the “pestilent accuracy of a geographer”, can be viewed as plots to lure settlers and to exploit the country and its people.

Notes

1. An anthropologist whose works have been extremely influential in the study of Swazi culture and customs, Hilda Kuper, was actually introduced to Swaziland by Manlinowski, who accompanied her there when she began her fieldwork. The kind of functionalist approach that he practised, and which I am thinking of here, is aptly described by Grinker and Steiner: “Since all societies constituted total working systems, all societies, including so-called ‘primitive’ societies, had an understandable, rational, and valid reason for being” (1997: 3).
2. Brantlinger writes, “Imperial Gothic combines the seemingly scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult” (1988: 227).

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