“The White Man’s Justice”

A New Reading of Wulf Sachs’s Black Hamlet (1937)

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“ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE”1 – the world including the court room where barristers, evidently, act out their advocacy before an audience, with judge and jury. Courtroom speech and space are culturally scripted and directed by the judge residing behind the bench, perhaps the most essential element of the courtroom’s mis-en-scène. While lawyers are trained to act their part in court convincingly using dramatic techniques,2 literature has long discovered the courtroom as a setting that concentrates all actions and thereby turns the courtroom community into a miniaturized emblem of society. Besides, in his posthumously published article “Psychoanalytic Characters on the Stage,”3 Sigmund Freud contemplates the likeness between the psychoanalyst as dramatist and the patient as reader. He recalls Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, arguing that a neurotic audience would identify with psychopaths on stage, who are stirring their suppressed evil drives. Such performances of crimes on stage, some criminologists argue, may even have preventive effects.4

Given this discursive intersection of dramatic performance, psychoanalysis, and crime, it is no wonder that the British newspaper *The Guardian* asked a crime writer, the South African Margie Orford, to comment on the most spectacular trial of the last decade, the Oscar Pistorius case. Orford first duly recorded common interpretations of the trial as “a John Grisham-style courtroom drama”\(^5\) or tragic “Icarus-like fall of a crippled Olympian god,”\(^6\) but then also drew attention to a *third character* introduced by the Pistorius defence into “an all too familiar narrative of domestic violence. […] It is the threatening body, nameless and faceless, of an armed and dangerous black intruder.”\(^7\) Pistorius’ claim that he actually intended to shoot a vicious intruder who threatened to rob him and harm his girlfriend, lets Reeva Steenkamp appear an alleged victim of black-on-white violence, of “systemic reverse racism.”\(^8\) This paranoid fear of the ‘black peril’ or *swart gevaar* has been called a characteristic of the African settler psyche\(^9\) and was also at the heart of a trial eighty-one years before this pivotal one: the *Rex vs. Mbombela* case in 1933, which occupied the media for months.\(^10\) It is this trial and some of its repercussions – especially its relevance for Wulf Sachs’s celebrated psychoanalytic case study *Black Hamlet*, published in Johannesburg in 1937 – that concern me here, because their black-and-white dynamics raise the rather urgent question of not only what but whose justice has come to pass.

In both lawsuits, the Oscar Pistorius case of 2014 and the Mbombela case of 1933 (renamed Mdlawini by Wulf Sachs in the context of his book), the judge’s initial decision to acquit hinges on the *reasonability* of a spectral figure that both men have killed: Pistorius’ bogeyman in the bathroom corresponds to Mdlawini’s “ghost in the form of a man.”\(^11\) The Mbombela case has been fictionalized by Sachs, a pioneer of South African psychoanalysis.\(^12\) In an intriguing intersection of factual and fictitious accounts, Sachs fuses the genres of case

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\(^6\) Orford, “Oscar Pistorius Trial: The Imaginary Black Stranger at Heart of the Defence.”

\(^7\) “Oscar Pistorius Trial: The Imaginary Black Stranger at Heart of the Defence.”

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\(^12\) Sitze, “Treating Life Literally,” 6.