



Madly after the Muses: Bengali Poet Michael Madhusudan Datta and his Reception of the Graeco-Roman Classics (Classical Presences)

Alexander Riddiford

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Madly after the Muses examines the use of Graeco-Roman samplings in the Bengali works of Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873), the nineteenth-century poet and playwright. His oeuvre, which includes a Bengali play dramatizing a Hindu version of the Judgement of Paris, a retelling of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* using various Vergilian and Homeric tropes, a Hindu response to Ovid's *Heroides*, and a Bengali prose version of the first half of Homer's *Iliad*, utilize the Greek and Roman classics in a surprising and subversive way. Though steeped in contemporary British literary culture, Madhusudan's Bengali works bypassed the literary trends of his British contemporaries and, most strikingly, used the Western classics to defy the hegemonic elite culture of the Hindu pundits. He treated traditional Hindu material with innovations inspired by the literature of the Graeco-Roman world, and provided an Orientalist Indo-European reading of the ancient cultures of India and Europe. By subverting contemporary British constructions of what constituted 'classical', he also highlighted counter-currents within the Western classical discourse.

In this volume, Riddiford introduces new texts and contexts to the fields of classical reception and postcolonial scholarship, and includes appendices with translated excerpts from Bengali works not previously translated into English. He also examines the Bengali poet's classical education, drawing on new material from various archives to show that he was given a rigorous British-style classical education, offering a surprising early chapter in the story of the dissemination and reception of the Graeco-Roman classics in India.

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