SHAKESPEARE AND THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER IN INDIA IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES


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This dissertation examines intersections between Shakespeare and the British Empire in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, using as case studies four interpretive situations: the transmission of Shakespeare books in India in the eighteenth century, the editing of the plays for use in colonial classrooms in the early nineteenth century, the emergence of Shakespeare as an academic subject in Britain with the introduction of English language and literature in the Indian Civil Service Examination in 1855, and uses of Shakespeare in family readings in middle-class Bengali homes in the late nineteenth century. Departing from the existing scholarship on Shakespeare in India that typically treats the subject as a single linear process, I approach the engagement of the colonizer and the colonized with Shakespeare in the context of empire, stressing the importance of the interactive dimensions of the colonial encounter, between the so-called periphery and the metropole and between the colonizer and the colonized. The dissertation locates Shakespeare in a view of empire that emphasizes cross-current circulation of knowledge, culture and commodities produced in the colonial encounter. It is interested in the ways in which knowledge of Shakespeare was produced, transmitted and received in the context of empire through material practices of reading, ownership and editing and institutional practices of curricula, examination and pedagogy. It follows the travels of Shakespeare books across India, traverses the professional realm of competitive examinations in Britain, the pedagogical realm of curriculum and textbook production in India, male public spaces of the colonial classroom and feminized, private domestic spaces within homes. With its sustained focus on the imperial constitution of Shakespeare as an icon of Britishness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the dissertation goes beyond a narrow Eurocentric frame of reference prevalent in Shakespeare scholarship. It explores the production of Shakespeare as a British exemplar created as a result of the colonial encounter. At the same time, it explores the intersections between Shakespeare and colonial modernity and nationhood. In doing this, it modifies a weighty post-colonial critical framework that views Shakespeare in India as a unilateral hegemonic imposition. Emphasizing a model of co-optation, collaboration and contest, my dissertation draws attention to the internal hierarchies of class, gender and status within the analytic categories of the colonizer and the colonized, ultimately illuminating the multiple axes of colonial knowledge production.

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