



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

By 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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- Sales Rank: #7645957 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Oxford University Press, USA
- Published on: 2013-05-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 5.70" h x 1.00" w x 8.50" l, 1.17 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 304 pages

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Review

Alexander Riddiford's book ... is unique ... it shows us, in great detail and with great care and precision, the exact extent of Madhusudan's investment in the western classics and how they informed his thinking and his work. Rosinka Chaudhuri, The Book Review Madhusudan Datta is revealed in his work as a hybrid of cultural identity, as Riddiford skilfully brings home to the reader ... Madly after the Muses is definitely recommended for those who are interested in the history of colonialism, particularly British colonialism, but above all to those who are engaged in what is broadly understood as the Reception of Antiquity. Riddiford has succeeded superbly in doing justice to the approach to his work as proposed in the Introduction. Matylda Obryk, Bryn Mawr Classical Review

About the Author

Alexander Riddiford is Barrister of the Inner Temple, England. He studied Classics and Sanskrit at Magdalen College, Oxford. Having left academia in 2009 to qualify as a barrister, he was awarded Inner Temple's top scholarships two years in a row before being called to the Bar of England and Wales in 2011.

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