

Whose Shakespeare? Early African engagement with Shakespeare in S Africa

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Shakespeare has often been taken to embody the highest expression of English culture, its dissemination part and parcel of British cultural and imperial hegemony. But when African intellectuals first engaged with Shakespeare it was arguably as much on their own terms as those defined by their colonial masters - indeed 'appropriation' has become the dominant metaphor in a burgeoning international literature. In Southern Africa critics have looked particularly at the work of Sol T. Plaatje, whose enthusiasm for Shakespeare found expression in an ambitious project to translate a number of Shakespeare's plays into Setswana, his native tongue. The Robben Island Shakespeare, in which leading figures in the liberation struggle imprisoned on Robben Island chose and marked their favourite quotations, represents a symbolic endpoint to this process of appropriation.

The origins of this story of African engagement with Shakespeare can be traced back far earlier, however. This paper is concerned to explore the little known life and career of Gabriel David, an ordained Anglican clergyman of Barolong origin who translated (into Setswana) scenes from Shakespeare's plays and then performed them with his students at the St Patrick's mission school in Bloemfontein in the 1870s and 1880s – the earliest recorded instance of this anywhere in Africa. In seeking the origins of Gabriel David's attraction to Shakespeare I investigate the time he spent as a student at the so-called 'Kaffir Institution' (an Anglican training institution) in Grahamstown during the years 1868-1871. Here he was exposed – along with his fellow students both here and at a neighbouring mission - to the Shakespearean enthusiasms of two British born-clerics and leading figures in the life of this institution: Canon Robert Mullins, the Principal, and Archdeacon (later Bishop) of Grahamstown, Nathaniel Merriman.

I aim to situate this paper within the rapidly expanding field of the international dissemination and reception of Shakespeare but also to ask some more specific questions relating to the southern African context: why did some Africans respond with such enthusiasm to Shakespeare? What was it about the Anglican church that seemed to provide fertile ground? Can the episode be seen as a product of an assimilationist moment in South Africa's nineteenth-century history, or was it more a matter of individual enthusiasms surviving countervailing pressures? Were David's translations and performances isolated instances or part of a longer and broader tradition that has been lost?