CHAPTER 1

Parsi Shakespeare: The Precursor to “Bollywood Shakespeare”

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There is but one country in the world, to the best of my knowledge, except possibly Germany, where the plays of Shakespeare have of recent times formed the safest and surest attraction to the indiscriminate masses who attend popular theaters, where the proprietor of a theater could count on a profit on a Shakespeare production. That country is India, and the theaters in question are a group of theaters in the city of Bombay, clustered together in the heart of a poor Indian population.

—C. J. Sisson, Shakespeare in India: Popular Adaptations on the Bombay Stage.

*Shakespeare, Parsi Theater, and Bollywood*

Shakespeare shares a long history of engagement with India, probably the longest outside his own country. Although his plays have been performed on the Indian stage for two hundred years or so and on the Indian screen for a century, it is a fairly recent phenomenon to include Shakespeare reception and production in India in the domain of Shakespeare studies. With the advent of postcolonial theory, which has made significant contributions and even changed the critical paradigms in understanding Shakespeare’s text, it has become possible for the erstwhile colonies to bring forth various responses evoked by the native productions of Shakespeare. Another important reason
for this newfound interest in “Indian Shakespeare” is twofold: recognizing Shakespeare’s influence on Bollywood, and the acceptance of Bollywood as a global phenomenon. Although Shakespeare has always “inspired” Bollywood films, unconsciously in many cases, it is because of the post–Vishal Bharadwaj phenomenon that “Bollywood Shakespeare” is now considered an important and serious area of study. “Bollywood Shakespeare,” as defined by Paromita Chakravorty in her essay “Interrogating ‘Bollywood Shakespeare’: Reading Rituparno Ghosh’s The Last Lear,” refers to and reflects the growing interest in Shakespearean themes within the mainstream Bombay (now Mumbai) based film industry of India which typically makes popular Hindi movies with melodramatic plots, non-naturalistic narration, stock characters, music and dancing.” Going by this definition, it is not difficult to suggest that Hindi cinema right from its inception has been dominated by “Bollywood Shakespeare.” Shakespeare may have become more visible in Indian cinema with Bharadwaj’s Maqbool (2004) and Omkara (2006) but there is a huge corpus of Bollywood films revolving around Shakespearean themes like star-crossed lovers, feuding families, familial infidelity and ambition overpowering duty, since the 1920s. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, a film scholar, gives Sohrab Modi the credit for bringing Shakespeare to the Indian Screen (1999). One of the earliest Bollywood talkies to be based on a Shakespeare play was Modi’s Khoon ka Khoon (Hamlet) in 1935, which was followed by Said-e-Havas (King John) in 1936. Both the films were in fact recorded versions of his plays. Rajadhyaksha, however, misses a 1927 silent film titled Dil Farosh (Merchant of Hearts) directed by M. Udvadia and produced by Excelsior Film Company featuring Udvadia, Nargis, and Syed Umar among others. The film was based on Agha Hashr Kashmiri’s play with the same name written in 1900, which in turn was an adaptation of The Merchant of Venice. There was yet another film by the same name that was released in 1937 and directed by N. Madhok and featured Ishwarlal. Thus, the early Hindi cinema in general and “Shakespeare-inspired” films in particular were greatly influenced by Parsi theater. In fact, Sohrab Modi had already earned a reputation as a great Shakespeare actor in Parsi theater and it was his desire to film his plays that led him to produce and act in films. Many others, including actors, playwrights, singers, and managers of Parsi theaters joined the Bombay film industry. Thus it is no surprise that Shakespeare’s plays, which had already been “appropriated” freely in Parsi theater, would prove to be a source of “inspiration” for the early Bollywood films.

It has often been argued that Parsi theater and the subsequent Hindi cinema are essentially “hybrid,” since both developed in close conjunction with Western forms of theater and cinema. Mukul Kesavan in “Attitude Bollytude” criticizes such an approach to Bollywood and argues that the emphasis on