

Manjusha Kuruppath, *Staging Asia. The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre, 1650-1780* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016, 282 pp., ISBN 9789087282578).

Imagine a late seventeenth-century audience in Amsterdam witnessing a play about the collapse of the Ming dynasty. The sources of the information that Joost van den Vondel collected for his *Zungchin* would not have been obvious to his contemporaries but we now know that he did his research carefully. The VOC meticulously recorded as much information as they could get about the dynasty, the suicide of the emperor, the prowess of the Tartars; the bizarre and captivating details of a people whom the Dutch wanted to cultivate in order to grow rich in the process. Vondel had those reports and he also had access to the information being conveyed by the Jesuits on whom the Dutch relied.

Empire makes for strange bed fellows. The Jesuits were particularly detailed in the information they supplied about the Chinese, spies both male and female were key players in Banten and Dutch opium dealers grew rich while supplying useful information. A Muslim cleric also added to its Bantenese gatherings. The playwrights picked what they wanted out of these written accounts that were sent back to Amsterdam. The volume of such reports is daunting and they remain a major repository of information about Batavia, Formosa, Surat, etc. We are told that the “Orientalist” imaginings of the Company [the VOC] discourse were thereby carried over in their unadulterated form into the play’ (157). In the analysis of the three plays under discussion the Saidian construct of orientalism appears with numbing regularity. Manjusha Kuruppath would have us believe that brutality belonged overwhelmingly to the Europeans. Despite the straight jacket of ‘discourse’ which constrained the Dutch, the author does have to admit that sometimes a playwright like Frans van Steenwyk (in *Thamas Koelikan*) or Van Haren could escape the Eurocentric rhetoric of the VOC as it was also inculcated by published works. Occasionally it is even admitted that religious prejudice operated on both sides, particularly with the Islamic Bantenese (221).

It is not always clear that the plays chosen merit the degree of attention given them. *Thamas Koelikan* was performed about four times and has received little, if any critical attention. *Zungchin* is seldom noticed among the many and more remarkable plays that Vondel wrote. Indeed the author acknowledges that these were unsuccessful plays. Yet each author escaped the trap of ‘discourse’ by putting a spin on their stories that was geared to the moment of composition and performance. In 1769 Zwiervan Haren’s *Agon, Sultan van*

*Bantam* cast the VOC as the villain and the play is hostile to the entire enterprise of empires and colonies.

Rightly, Manjusha Kuruppath searches for explanations for the individuality displayed by the authors. Given Vondel's own stubborn pursuit of religious freedom and toleration, and his unpopular conversion to Catholicism, we can only wonder about how uncritical he could have been with his sources. Clearly, he thought for himself. In the case of Van Haren's *Agon*, Kuruppath relates the play to the general turn against empire found in the writings of later eighteenth-century philosophers like Raynal and Herder. She also notes that Van Haren's Frisian family accused him of incest with his daughter, a charge that haunted him until his death in 1779. His bitterness may have had other sources as well. His brother Willem, also a well-known poet, was an Orangist (and a freemason). Either loyalty might have predisposed him – and possibly by extension Onno – in a reformist direction. By the 1760s the belief was widespread that decline and corruption could be traced to the urban, anti-Orangist oligarchs who dominated the Republic. They were the primary beneficiaries of the colonies.

This is a thoughtful monograph that could have used a stronger editor at the press to smooth out its use of English. Sentences like the following should be avoided: 'Engaging in uninhibited speculation, one also wonders whether the Dutch had conducted itself any better than was expected of a trading post in an empire as they contemplated a force that had virtually destroyed the entity they had been haggling with for power, privileges and the lot' (144). Yet we are in the author's debt for bringing into the discussion of early modern Dutch intellectual life a new way of reading how contemporaries could have grasped the imperial experience. We can urge her to think beyond the orientalism paradigm and to investigate the multiplicity of Dutch responses to one of the first European empires. Many more such studies are needed.

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