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## **Dutch Drama and the Company's Orient**

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## INTRODUCTION

Dutch drama, it appeared had ushered the world onto its stage. While a slave girl of Angolan extraction was cast as a character in Gerbrandt Adriaensz Bredero's early seventeenth-century drama, *Moortje* (1615), P.C. Hooft's *Granida* (1605) told of love between a Persian princess and shepherd, and Nicolaas Simon van Winter's 1774 play *Monzongo of de koningklyke slaaf* was set in the Spanish Americas. Dutch playwrights in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had taken to heart Vondel's verses: "*The world is a stage,/ Each plays his role and receives his share.*"<sup>1</sup>

Variety it so happens was not the only interesting feature of Dutch drama in the period. Three playwrights in the Republic—Joost van den Vondel, Frans van Steenwyk and Onno Zwier van Haren—ensured that their dramas gave cause for greater bewilderment. They dramatized historical events in Asia which were either contemporaneous or within a century of their own lifetimes. Joost van den Vondel took up the Manchu conquest of Ming China in 1644 as the subject for *Zungchin, of ondergang der Sineesche heerschappye* (1667), Frans van Steenwyk's *Thamas Koelikan of de verovering van het Mogolsche Rijk* (1745) rehearsed Nadir Shah's invasion of India in 1739, and Onno Zwier van Haren drew the attention of his readers and spectators to the Dutch conquest of Banten in 1682 in his 1769 play titled *Agon, Sulthan van Bantam*.<sup>2</sup> In these dramas, the playwrights cited names and recalled events with such precision that contemporaries who watched or read these literary pieces could easily have believed that these dramatists had witnessed the episodes that they wrote about firsthand. In truth however, whether these playwrights had ever so much as ventured beyond the precincts of the Dutch Republic let alone that of Europe is suspect. Their modest travel experiences notwithstanding, the historical events they sought to dramatize took place in China, India and Java, all which were a part of the Company's Orient—that expanse of Asia “from the Cape of Good Hope to Deshima” which was opened up to Dutch cultural mentalité by the Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie, or the Dutch East India Company in their

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<sup>1</sup>“De werelt is een speeltooneel, Elk speelt zijn rol en krijgt zijn deel.” Olfert Dapper, *Historische beschrijving der stad Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1663), 442.

<sup>2</sup>Joost van den Vondel, *Zungchin, of ondergang der Sineesche heerschappye* (Amsterdam: Abraham de Wees, 1667); Frans van Steenwyk, *Thamas Koelikan, of de verovering van het Mogolsche rijk* (Amsterdam: Izaak Duim, 1745); Onno Zwier van Haren, *Agon, Sulthan van Bantam, Treurspel in vijf bedrijven* (Leeuwarden: Abraham Ferwerda, 1769).

mercantile pursuits in these waters from 1602 to 1796.<sup>3</sup> The playwrights were inhabitants of a historical setting where the necessity to travel eastwards in the quest for information about the Orient had become redundant. This was an age when news about Asia came knocking on their doors in the Republic instead. These playwrights were beneficiaries and their plays examples of the “global traffic” of information facilitated by the Dutch East India Company in the period.<sup>4</sup>

It is these three dramas written by “stay-at-home” playwrights, enamoured by historical events in Asia, that *Dutch Drama and the Company’s Orient* takes up for examination. It investigates the nature of the representation of the Orient in these plays and the manner in which the characterization of this spatial and cultural entity called the Orient in these texts was influenced by the channels that these dramatists relied on to gather information for their works. Owing to the palpable linkages with the Dutch East India Company that these plays exhibit, this work examines the role of the enterprise in this dissemination of information, the production of Orientalist imagery, and the formulation of Dutch Orientalism. Metaphorically put, the study envisages the Dutch East India Company as an umbilical cord relaying information about the Orient from Asia through its membranous interior before it found expression in the Dutch Republic in the medium of drama. It thereby peruses the multiple mediations that this travelling information experienced in the hands of the agents involved at various points in the process of transfer, and the transformations it underwent owing to the influence of the literary genres, which clothed and conveyed this information.

Seldom are the keywords that this work is built around — namely drama, representation, information brokerage and the institution, the Dutch East India Company — invoked in the same context. Although the disciplines of literary studies and history are known to engage with two or even three of these elements, drama and representation generally belong in the toolbox of literary critics while the latter concepts are decidedly familiar terrain for historians of early modern Asia. Literary scholars have increasingly come to study representation in literary works armed with the understanding that they constitute “records of cross-cultural encounter,” but their academic pursuits in this direction have invited

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<sup>3</sup>Bert Paasman, “De geschiedschrijving van de Indische-Nederlandse literatuur uit de Compagniestijd: taak en problemen,” in *Europa buitengaats: Koloniale en postkoloniale literaturen in Europese talen, Deel 1* ed. Theo D’haen (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2002), 35.

<sup>4</sup>I borrow the term “global traffic” from Richmond Barbour, *Before Orientalism: London’s Theatre of the East 1576-1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

criticism.<sup>5</sup> They have often been accused of reifying literary texts and representations contained therein at the expense of submerging the historical contexts of actual encounter and overlooking the actors who facilitated and partook in this process of interaction. Betty Joseph's observation of a marked lack of interest in "using the official documents of colonialism (such as the archives of the English East India Company) for cultural, literary and feminist studies" may be considered symptomatic of this disdain for the historical. But the strongest critique of this trend in literary studies emerges from the pen of the historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam.<sup>6</sup> Such scholarly endeavors, Subrahmanyam argues, in their undivided attention to the text and representation, cause "historical actors [to] disappear, as it were into a textual miasma."<sup>7</sup> When literary critics are criticized for evincing a peculiar insensitivity to the historical landscape, historians of early modern Asia and European expansion in the period may likewise, with a few exceptions, be blamed for displaying a lack of interest in turning to literature when exercising their craft. Historians may have ventured so far as to have employed genres such as the travelogue to inform their works, but for the most part poetry and drama have yet to be recruited into projects of historical writing on early modern Asia.

In engaging these three themes—drama, representation and information brokerage in relation to the Dutch East India Company—within the margins of a single study, *Dutch Drama and the Company's Orient* aims to redress this disconnect between the two fields of enquiry: history and literary studies. The primary object of my study is to sketch the relationship between the Dutch Republic and the Company's Orient in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. My study is steeped in the domain of literary studies in its interrogation of how the Orient came to be represented in three works of drama in the Dutch Republic and the discourses they generated in comprehending the Other. The strong historical dimension of my work draws from the fact that I evaluate how historical episodes that took place in Asia were conceptualized in these plays. Such an engagement allows me to stress the idea that information and images of the "Other" borne in these works of drama come with crucial prehistories. Here, I take a cue from the literary scholar Ros Ballaster's deceptively simple yet

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<sup>5</sup>M.G. Aune, "Review Article: Early Modern European Travel Writing after Orientalism," *The Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 5, 2 (2005), 121.

<sup>6</sup>Betty Joseph, *Reading the English East India Company, 1720-1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>7</sup>Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Frank Submissions: The Company and the Mughals between Sir Thomas Roe and Sir William Noris," in *The Worlds of the East India Company* eds. H.V. Bowen, Margarete Lincoln, Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 70.

heavily loaded phrase, “narrative moves.”<sup>8</sup> I subscribe to Ballaster’s proposition that stories possess an inherent propensity to travel. I argue that the plays that I study—*Zungchin*, *Thamas Koelikan* and *Agon*—which were authored by “stay-at-home” playwrights centrally revolved around the idea of transfer. The manner in which these dramas brought to life three historical events that occurred in seventeenth-century Asia, depended on and was significantly influenced by an inter-continental transport of narratives about these events. For information and imagery, these dramatists relied on first hand narratives and travel accounts about the Orient that were published in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These first-hand accounts were, in turn, often cumulative works which appealed to other sources, of which a chief source was often the official documentation of the principal go-between between the Dutch Republic and Asia in the period, the Dutch East India Company. The archives of the VOC at times constituted the mother narrative of these travelogues, pamphlets, and histories, which entered the Dutch print market and on other occasions, produced significant contemporary accounts about happenings in Asia. This corpus of information was informed by the Company’s encounter with the Asian polities that it interacted with and was the outcome of complex systems of information procurement and brokerage which involved the participation of multiple agents, both European employees of the Company and native informants. Because of their palpable Oriental content these dramas were, as a consequence, the products of processes of information transfer that originated in the Dutch East India Company’s engagement with Asia.

Plainly put thus, my study emphasizes the idea that as representations of the Orient these plays reveal well-worn trails of information and perspective transfer. It recapitulates the history of information travel about three historical events in seventeenth-century Asia from the time of their occurrence until their recruitment by three Dutch playwrights in works of drama and the discourses about the East that were created as a consequence. Emphasis is here laid on both the “software” of information travel in the nature of representation and perspectives of the Orient that they carried, and the “hardware” involved in the process in the form of its information networks and the historical actors who fed them. The novelty of my study stems from the fact that it straddles the disciplines of history and literary studies while still venturing into a realm that they both have left uncharted. It engages the literary genre of drama traditionally ignored by historians of early modern Asia and bypasses past literary studies by emphasizing the fact that a principal and undeniable determinant in the way Asia

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<sup>8</sup>Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orientals : Fictions of the East in England, 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7-8.

came to be represented in literary works in the Dutch Republic was the nature of the VOC's historical encounter with Asia. My study therefore makes sketching "genealogies of discourse" its principle agenda; an exercise that the historian Peter Rietbergen notes has not yet been attempted.<sup>9</sup> To this end, it engages a wide range of primary sources. Apart from the three works of Dutch drama which constitute the principal focus of my study, it relies on a healthy stock of print literature published in the Dutch Republic in the form of other works of drama, pamphlets, travelogues, first hand narratives, and histories, and it heavily exploits the archives of the Dutch East India Company.<sup>10</sup>

### **Representation and Information Transfer**

Studies of representation are not the barren wastelands they once were and the consuming interest for the concept today is to be ascribed to Edward Said's incredibly influential theory of Orientalism. First conceptualized in his book of the same title in 1978, Said's theory of Orientalism deploys the crucial interface between the Foucauldian equation of power and knowledge towards understanding the ideological basis of western imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Orientalism according to Said, is the textual conception of the Orient by Europe from the standpoint of relative superiority. The knowledge that this articulation engendered is perceived to have assumed the form of a discourse dictated by binarisms that were closely related to the power relations between the Occident and the Orient.<sup>12</sup> When texts to Said constitute a corpus in which the subordination of the Orient to Western domination is both conceived and reinforced, literature of European authorship have gained currency as testimonies of understandings of the (European) Self in relation to the (Oriental) Other based on their interactions with the latter.<sup>13</sup>

A compelling premise, Said's theory of Orientalism has left an indelible impression in the field of humanities. Early modern literary critics and historians have however responded to the theory in ways that makes it essential that we first discuss how Saidian Orientalism has been received by literary scholars before addressing the reception of the theory by historians of early modern Asia and, especially, the Dutch East India Company. Said's theory has

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<sup>9</sup>P.J.A.N. Rietbergen, "Varieties of Asia? European Perspectives, c.1600-1800," *Itinerario* 25, 3/4 (2001), 86-87.

<sup>10</sup> All VOC archives cited in this dissertation were consulted at the National Archives (henceforth referred to as NA) in The Hague.

<sup>11</sup>Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>12</sup>See Introduction. *Ibid.*, 1-28.

<sup>13</sup>Said defines Orientalism as "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological...texts." *Ibid.*, 12; Aune makes this inference in the context of travel literature, but this estimation, one argues, applies to written texts in general. Aune, "Review Article: Early Modern European Travel Writing after Orientalism," 121.

constituted an irreplaceable point of departure for critics delineating the character of the representation of the Other in early modern literary works but the relationship between Said's theory of Orientalism and early modernity has of late, turned sour.<sup>14</sup> Literary scholars in recent years have exhibited wariness towards embracing the theory in its entirety. The complete rejection of the theory in favour of more congenial post-colonial postulations such as Homi Bhabha's notion of alterity has signified a necessary theoretical move for Daniel Vitkus.<sup>15</sup> Nicolas Dew in his work on Orientalism in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century France on the other hand, does not deny the workings of paradigm in the context of his study, but only that, he argues, it existed in a different form. He goes on to note that "we still lack a model for thinking about the Orientalism of the pre-Enlightenment period."<sup>16</sup> This remark captures the quandary that early modern literary scholars experience in evaluating a period in time that, they reckon, constituted a distinct historical context with a wholly different set of power dynamics than what are found in the political configurations that took root in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Visibly different geopolitical conditions they argue, governed the playing field in a period when future imperialists such as Britain, in their seventeenth century avatar as the English East India Company only lurked in the margins of Asian power. Illustrative of this standpoint is Robert Markley's inference which emphasizes the peripheral character of Europe's position "in an Asian-dominated world" in the period.<sup>17</sup> Bereft of a colonial reality, Pompa Banerjee notes: "we need to scrutinize these early exchanges as being caught in asymmetrical, contingent, and shifting cultural formations."<sup>18</sup> It is precisely this evaluation of the character of early modern encounter in which both power balances and identities are regarded as having been far less delineated than in the modern world that has generated such attention for go-betweens – renegades, and the like – people who with their presumably cosmopolitan mobility trespass and subsequently call into question the boundries that Saidian dualisms carefully draw. The consequence of this revision of the character of early modern interaction has been looking beyond the theory of Orientalism which emphasizes on irreconcilable differences between East and West to adopt a theoretical understanding which embraces concepts such as "hybridity," "alterity," "traffic," and

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<sup>14</sup> I have been considerably informed in by M.G. Aune's article in the inferences I draw in this section. "Review Article: Early Modern European Travel Writing after Orientalism."

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination: 1600-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Pompa Banerjee, *Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

“exchange,” for vocabulary.<sup>19</sup> Richmond Barbour articulately lends support to this perspectival stance when he says “to efface hybridity, and reduce multiple alliances and antagonisms to an overriding dualism, is also to miss what is essential about precolonial engagements.”<sup>20</sup>

When Markley and Vitkus call for an estimation of the early modern period as a relatively alien realm as compared to the subsequent era of full-blown colonialism, they suggest that the impetus for European representations lay elsewhere. The English discourse, according to Markley, was constructed in a climate in which England possessed mercantile interests in the Orient and their disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the Asian polities it traded with resulted in the representation of the Orient as “a fantasy space for mercantile capitalism.”<sup>21</sup> Although these and other theoreticians distance themselves from Orientalism in their perspectives on representation, they by no means imply a radical break from the theory. They acknowledge that some early modern European estimations of the Orient were inherently false. Early modern discourse of the “Other” may not have been celebrations and justifications of conquest, but to the extent to which they were evocations of strength, they constituted “a discourse without colonialism” and “imperial rhetoric without territorial possession.”<sup>22</sup> Quite clearly, this early rhetoric laid the groundwork for later ideologies of empire and those traits that by the nineteenth century defined Asia in the European mind. Concepts of Oriental Despotism as a perceptibly Oriental form of government or effeminacy as a distinctly Oriental behavioural trait had their origins in this period. Recent readings of early modernity in the realms of both representation and encounter give the period a tangible connection with the subsequent era while still emphasizing its exceptionalism.<sup>23</sup>

I register my accord with this recent wave of opinion which marks out early modernity as a different era with its own dynamics of encounter with and representation of the Other. However, we must bear in mind that a majority of these theoretical postulations are formulated within the context of early modern English literature. They have been conceived principally to explain the English encounter with the East where they do rightly to emphasize the modest political stature of the English East India Company through the seventeenth century and even until the mid-eighteenth century following which there was a radical shake-up in their

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<sup>19</sup>Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Vitkus, *Turning Turk*; Ania Loomba, “Delicious Traffick: Alterity and Exchange on Early Modern Stages,” in *Shakespeare Survey 52: Shakespeare and the Globe*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup>Barbour, *Before Orientalism*, 5.

<sup>21</sup>Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination: 1600-1730*, 4.

<sup>22</sup>Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen*, 17; Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 6.

<sup>23</sup>Barbour’s notion of “proto-Orientalism” is an example of this tendency. Barbour, *Before Orientalism*, 99.

fortunes in the East. When the Dutch East India Company features in my study in many incarnations: as historical actor, chronicler and informant thereby rendering the mercantile organization the unmistakable protagonist of my story, it invariably calls for the deployment of a theoretical template which varies from the framework endorsed by the aforementioned scholars. This owes to the fact that the histories of the VOC and her English counterpart differ significantly. Daniel Vitkus is right in pointing out that any discussion of the British colonial empire in the seventeenth century is rendered obsolete by what he calls, its “material reality.”<sup>24</sup> The same however cannot be said about the VOC. The geographical expanse of the Company’s operations in Asia was such that no single label can convincingly capture the startling pluralism of the corporation’s extra-European interactions. The Dutch East India Company’s Asian encounter was an aggregate of differing experiences that were directly correlated to the measure of mercantile and imperial clout they possessed vis-à-vis the polities they interacted with.<sup>25</sup> The Company’s interests in Deshima in Japan where they were subject to stringent restrictions of trade, movement, and interaction with the Japanese constitutes one end of the spectrum, while her tenure in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) as an avowed imperialist during her five-decade presence on the island forms the other. It is the nature of the Dutch interaction with Formosa and parts of the East Indies, too, where she enjoyed all-but uncontested dominance that amplifies the differences between the EIC and the VOC in the period. The Dutch East India Company had had its first taste of imperialism as early as the 1620’s in the Banda Islands, and attained her prime in her wars against Macassar (1667), Mataram (1677) and Banten (1684). The success that the British endeavor at imperialism and conquest met with in the battles of Buxar and Plassey in the Indian subcontinent in the 1750’s and the 1760’s had thus been anticipated by the Dutch nearly a century before in the East Indies.<sup>26</sup>

It is the same notion of variety that comes to the fore when we consider the locations of the episodes that were subsequently dramatized—China, India, and Banten. The Dutch East India Company interacted with each of the three places to varying degrees. The kingdom of Banten on the island of Java transitioned from being a competitor to the Dutch for a great part

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<sup>24</sup>Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 5.

<sup>25</sup>Leonard Blussé, “De Chinese Nachmerrie: Een terugtocht en twee nederlagen,” in *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie: Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, eds. Gerrit Knaap and Ger Teitler (Leiden: KITLV, 2002), 12.

<sup>26</sup> As H.V. Bowen notes, “the transformation of the Company from traders to sovereign is, of course, quite clearly discernible from even the most cursory examination of the military and political events that unfolded in India after 1740.”H.V. Bowen, “No longer mere Traders: Continuities and Change in the Metropolitan Development of the East India Company, 1600-1834,” in *The Worlds of the English East India Company*, ed. H.V. Bowen, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 19.

of the seventeenth century to virtually conquered territory in 1682. The Mughal Empire retained its position as a powerful trading partner of the Company before its gradual subjugation by the English East India Company towards the second half of the eighteenth century. China, in contrast to both Mughal India and Banten was the strong-headed dame who rejected the advances of the Dutch East India Company, who remained the persistent suitor. When the nature of Dutch relations with one Asian power was perceptively different from its interactions with another, conceptualizations such as “a discourse without colonialism” principally framed by academics to relate to the experiences of the English East India Company in Asia retain their explanatory value only with regard to certain manifestations of the Dutch encounter in Asia; in other contexts they are quite unhelpful.<sup>27</sup> They help us grasp the Company’s manifestation as a potential merchant in China and as a trader in the Mughal Empire but they fail to take into account the third avatar of the VOC as imperial actor in Banten. Recent histories on early modern Asia however provide us with a theoretical template that acknowledges the plurality of encounters that the VOC’s presence in Asia encapsulated.

Prior to broaching this subject however, we might take a small detour to briefly reflect on why Dutch literary studies fails to provide us with an explanatory apparatus to engage with the VOC’s two-century presence in Asia. The reason is that the engagement of scholars of early modern French and English literature with Saidian Orientalism has not been replicated in the Dutch case. With the exception of the works of Christine Dohmen on the subject of eighteenth-century print literature and Jan de Hond on nineteenth-century representations of the Orient, academic advances in this direction have been modest at best, and the most significant studies on literature pertaining to the Dutch East India Company such as Bert Paasman’s *De Indisch-Nederlandse literatuur uit de VOC tijd* and E.M. Beekman’s *Troubled Pleasures*, have chosen to remain aloof from Said’s theory of Orientalism.<sup>28</sup> The themes of representation and ideology find no mention whatsoever in Paasman’s work while Beekman adopts a strictly “aesthetic” approach in his study of the metamorphosis of Dutch literature from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and he makes explicit that an engagement with the

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<sup>27</sup>Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Both Dohmen and De Hond reject the application of Said’s theory in the themes they engage with. De Hond does not subscribe to Said’s theory as he considers it as being far too fraught with problems to incorporate in his study. Dohmen on the other hand emphasizes the fact that it was similarities with the East rather than irreconcilable difference that eighteenth century Dutch print literature sought to convey to its audiences. Jan de Hond, *Verlangen naar het Oosten: Orientalisme in de Nederlandse cultuur ca. 1800-1920* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2008); Paasman, “De geschiedschrijving van de Indische-Nederlandse literatuur uit de Compagniestijd”; E.M. Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies 1600-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); Christine Dohmen, *In de schaduw van Scheherazade: Oosterse vertellingen in achttiende-eeuws Nederland* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2000).

ideological content of the literary texts he studies does not feature on his agenda.<sup>29</sup> The other approach to Orientalism by Dutch literary academia has been one of criticism. Although Siegfried Huigen, who studies the situation of South Africa (which remains relevant in this context because the Cape was an important “watering station” for VOC ships travelling to or from the Orient) in the early modern Dutch imaginary, is open to applying the theory, he has expressed reservations about its applicability. Huigen’s scepticism towards embracing the theory springs from its complete rejection of the role of “empiricism” in the creation of perspectives of the Other and its extravagant emphasis on the “representer,” when attention as Huigen notes, is also due to the “recipient” of the manufactured information.<sup>30</sup> The study of early Dutch literature therefore has been rather unaffected by the wave of representational studies that has engaged the research of other European literatures. In consequence, ruminations on the character of the encounter of the VOC with Asia have been lacking.

We are nevertheless adequately compensated by the nuanced evaluations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made by historians of early modern Asia. Studies grappling with the issue of Europe’s encounter with Asia in the early modern period have come a long way since K.M. Panikkar crafted the idea of “the Vasco da Gama Epoch,” which underlined the destructive potential that the European presence in Asia possessed and put to use and Holden Furber’s counter-proposition of the notion of the “Age of Partnership,” which, suggested a sort of idyllic, friction-free interaction between the East and West. Scholars have of late, reached a middle ground in their estimations of this cross-cultural encounter, as seen in Subrahmanyam’s concept of “contained conflict” and C.A. Bayly’s notion of “conflict-ridden symbiosis,” both of which envisage the relationship between the Companies and early modern Asia as having been one of “violence”—one that was persistently fraught with tensions, though of often manageable proportions.<sup>31</sup> In their views on Orientalism, these scholars have tended to keep the theory at arm’s length or to broach it, to their minds, with necessary circumspection. Rietbergen has done little to conceal his distaste for the theory.<sup>32</sup> Also evincing his suspicions for the potency of the theory is Marcus Vink, who states that “many contacts...occurred on a level plain and were not forged in a context of unequal power

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<sup>29</sup>Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures*, 5-6; Paasman, “De geschiedschrijving van de Indische-Nederlandse literatuur uit de Compagniestijd.”

<sup>30</sup>Siegfried Huigen, *De weg naar Monomotapa: Nederlandstalige representaties van geografische, historische en sociale werkelijkheden in Zuid-Afrika* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 58.

<sup>31</sup>I base my evaluation of these theoretical trends on Marcus Vink, ed. *Mission to Madurai: Dutch Embassies to the Nayaka Court of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 4, *Dutch Sources on South Asia c.1600-1825* (Delhi: Manohar, 2012), 44.

<sup>32</sup>P.J.A.N. Rietbergen, “Orientalisme: een theorie van ficties - de fictie van een theorie? Een poging tot contextualisering en herinterpretatie,” *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 111(1998).

and subordination. Moreover, non-Europeans were not passively produced by hegemonic projects, but were active agents themselves whose choices and discourses were of fundamental importance in shaping the encounter.”<sup>33</sup> If it is the presumably faulty conjectures that Saidian Orientalism makes regarding the character of the actual early modern encounter that turns Vink into a critic, Subramanyam evinces a much warranted concern for the dangers that “the literary turn” (of which the theory of Orientalism is an example) poses to the study of the past. According to him, a blatant manifestation of this is, as previously noted, its gross neglect of historical actors.<sup>34</sup>

Early modern historians have primarily looked askance at the theory of Orientalism but Subrahmanyam’s and Vink’s cultural histories of early modern Asia have still courted the theme of representation. We encounter, in the work of the former, a theoretical model that helps us evaluate the representations of Asia that emanated from the Dutch encounter with the continent. Subrahmanyam argues that early modern Companies “as political actor(s)...produced political discourse(s).”<sup>35</sup> He demonstrates that the resulting discourses sought recourse to categories (and here he finds common ground with early modern literary critics) such as effeminacy and Oriental despotism in conjuring up conceptions of Asia.<sup>36</sup> The images, Subrahmanyam notes, were born and informed in their standpoints by the character of the interaction of the early companies with Asia which in the period was characterized by “contained conflict.”<sup>37</sup> Drawing on Subrahmanyam’s proposition, I contend that the Dutch East India Company during its tenure generated an institutional discourse that was influenced by an encounter with Asia which was in effect an admixture of trade, diplomacy, belligerence, and aspirations of commerce and conquest. A plethora of voices, I concede, surface in the records of the VOC and appraisals of the polities that they interacted with contained in this archive admittedly range from the sympathetic to dispassionate to denunciatory. I nevertheless argue that Company rhetoric still attained the quality of a discourse owing to the preponderant reliance of this corpus of knowledge on recurrent perceptions and familiar

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<sup>33</sup>Vink, *Mission to Madurai*, 37.

<sup>34</sup>“Subrahmanyam, “Frank Submissions,” 70. The theorizations of Subramanyam which I refer to in this section draw principally from two articles by the author: “Frank Submissions” and “Forcing the doors of Heathendom” of which the first concerns the English East India Company’s experiences at the Mughal court and the second, the VOC’s interaction with Asia. The articles suggest that Subramanyam applies one model to comprehend the relations of the two companies in the Orient. “Forcing the Doors of Heathendom: Ethnography, Violence and the Dutch East India Company,” *The Wertheim Lecture 2002* (2003).

<sup>35</sup>Although construed in the context to grapple with the English experiences at the Mughal court, his estimations evidently framed to make sense of the Dutch East India Company encounter with Asia establish a pivotal connection between Company and discourse.

<sup>36</sup>Subrahmanyam, “Frank Submissions,” 75, 95; “Forcing the Doors of Heathendom,” 8.

<sup>37</sup> “Even before the age of high imperialism, other more subtle forms of conflict and violence shaped the relationships and the consequent representations that emerged.” “Forcing the Doors of Heathendom,” 23.

understandings of Asia. These stereotypes, which tended to deprecate, I argue, often took the form of Orientalist binaries.

When discussing the character of the Dutch East India Company's interaction with early modern Asia, previous conceptualizations—whether of an “age of partnership” or “contained conflict”—fail to pay heed to the diversity of the Dutch Asian experience in the early modern period, thereby permitting its application in relation to China, Mughal India and Banten. The Company in its dealings pursued a policy of aggressive mercantilism.<sup>38</sup> Trade constituted the basis of the Company's relations with Asian polities, and aggression was deployed if needed, if the odds were in their favour and if the Dutch reckoned that the expenditure of gunpowder was worth the potential return. The settlement and colonization practices that the Dutch resorted to in places such as Formosa and Java were consequences of the successful pursuit of their policy of aggressive mercantilism and their exclusion from trade in the Chinese mainland represented the failure of their policy of aggression to yield returns. Dominance in early modern Asia was not the premeditated intent of the VOC, but it sometimes followed in their pursuit of trade. Such an evaluation liberates assessments of the Dutch-Asian encounter from persistent references to later histories of imperialism in the territories we engage with to evaluate this period. This, I believe is an object that recent literary studies still have to contend with owing to their continued usage of terminology such as “orientalism before empire,” which references the later imperial phase.<sup>39</sup>

With regard to the impact that this territorial plurality had on the Dutch discourse on the Orient, I argue that the Company, informed as it was by its various encounters with these polities, was capable of devising region-specific appraisals of China, Mughal India, and Banten. The VOC's emphasis on religious tensions and religious apostasy in their annals on Banten alone is a case in point. The Company, regardless of this plurality it permitted into its perspectival frame, could still subscribe to a standard vocabulary of representation in their assessments and appraisals of the three very different territories. Effeminacy, for instance, was a feature that the Company's archives frequently attributed to the royal courts of Ming China and Mughal India. Subramanyam also points out that change of perspective was an inherent feature of the discourses that were engendered.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the Dutch East India Company therefore, the temporal stretch of their presence in Asia which spanned over two

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<sup>38</sup>This idea is reminiscent of Marcus and Vink's “merchant-warrior” and Ashin Dasgupta's appraisal of the European-Asian interactions in the period, when he says, “the European used force to win privileges and exclude competition wherever he could.” Ashin Dasgupta, “Review of Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800*,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38, 2 (1979), 316.

<sup>39</sup>Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*, 6.

<sup>40</sup>Subrahmanyam, “Frank Submissions,” 70.

hundred years ensured that their perceptions of Asia did not constitute a series of static, unchanging images. Although the Company appraisals of the polities in which they interacted changed over time, I argue their evaluations of Asia could still remain derogatory and that transformations in perspective simply meant opting for one negative appraisal instead of another. The Company's conceptions of Oriental governmentality for instance shifted between an estimation of Asian states as tyrannical and autocratic and an appraisal of their potentates as weak with little or no authority over their subordinates. In general, I argue that the Company discourse was able to transcend the temporal and territorial constraints that the VOC's engagement with Asia brought with it.

The fundamentals of formulating a discourse derived from the process of information acquisition about various events in Asia by the Dutch East India Company. This practice of hoarding news for the sake of protecting one's interests in the region depended on the element of dialogue which invariably characterizes these encounters of information exchange. As Nicholas Dirks' study on the reports of Colin Mackenzie, an eighteenth-century colonial administrator in Southern India reveals, the onus in such transactions did not always lie with the European and native correspondents could sometimes exert a preponderant influence on the acquisition of information.<sup>41</sup> Parallel to the Dirks' summations are the findings of Eugene Irschick who in his study of information gathering in the colonial context of Southern India, argues that it is hard to discount the role of the British subjects in this undertaking.<sup>42</sup> While the imperial facet which features in Irschick's observation is to be contextually deployed, his reading is particularly relevant in this study because the VOC revealed a reliance on local informants in the acquisition of information. In underlining and illustrating this factor of dependency, the study rescues a set of historical actors from historical obscurity—the native informants, who together with lower level VOC employees constituted the grass-roots personnel involved in the Company's information gathering. With a reliance on native agents for the acquisition of information also came a dependence on pre-existing channels of information acquisition in China, India, and Java which procured information for the Company together with networks of their making. By demonstrating the processes of information gathering involved, the study sheds light on mechanisms that states and individuals in China, India, and Java employed to gather, dispense, and share information, and

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<sup>41</sup>Nicholas B. Dirks, "Colonial Histories and Native Informants : Biography of an Archive," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, eds. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 279-313.

<sup>42</sup>Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-13.

it thereby contributes albeit modestly, to the growing body of literature on the subject. While the study emphasizes the role of native agents as co-participants in the process of information manufacture, it unearths other narratives on the same historical events that the Dutch chronicled but that were manufactured by Asian agents in the kingdoms of Mughal India and Banten, or those constructed by European actors outside of the Dutch East India Company such as the Jesuits in the case of China. Insights into these alternative stories and histories which one may arguably refer to as constituting “counter-discourses” to the Company’s manufactured version of events, provide a better perspective on the character of the information and the nature of representations that travelled through the Dutch East India Company circuit.

Deliberating on the impact of the VOC discourse on perspectives of Asia in the Dutch Republic, I argue that this bundle of perspectives, like raw information itself made an oceanic passage. It crossed the boundaries of company documentation to inform, mould and transform the Dutch Republic’s imagination of the Company’s Orient. The measure to which its influence was felt in Patria was relative and displays variations in each of the case studies engaged with. As is captured in Marshall McLuhan’s phrase, “the medium is the message,” a principal determinant in determining the extent of the impact of the discourse was the character of the genre through which this information was conveyed to the reading or play-going public in Europe.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the archives of the VOC, which were produced for a familiar and closed audience for the purpose of institutional upkeep and advancement, genres such as the travelogue were prepared for consumption by a general audience in the Dutch Republic. The audience to which these genres catered determined which strands of the Dutch-Asian encounter they chose to retain in their pages and which they sought to reject. Print literature on the Orient is generally known to have been capable of accentuating images of Asian otherness, but owing to its literary and performative aspects, drama was particularly influential in creating portrayals of encounter that hinged on the element of difference. Richmond Barbour for instance notes “public theatres—novel, increasingly important institutions of popular fantasy—encouraged binaristic thinking” and this, Mita Choudhury in her study on eighteenth century British theatre observes, owed to the organic relationship between the medium and “the notions of location, territory, space and the concomitant cultural dialectics of Self/Other...”<sup>44</sup> Drama in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was

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<sup>43</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London, 1966), 2nd edition, 7-21.

<sup>44</sup>Mita Choudhury, *Interculturalism and Resistance in the London Theater 1660-1800: Identity, Performance, Empire* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 21; Barbour, *Before Orientalism*, 5.

moreover a genre strictly governed by rules of plot, characterization and portrayal. This played a key role in regulating the content of plays and thus in determining which images of the Orient merited inclusion, rejection, or modification in these works. Genre apart, the playwrights and authors of travelogues and histories played onerous roles in determining the composition of their works and the notions of the Orient they embodied. The production of a Dutch discourse on the Orient in consequence, I argue, was a multi-dimensional process engaging several agents producing information (native informants, company officials, authors, playwrights), various genres packaging the information produced (Company reports, published accounts such as travelogues and histories, drama), and numerous audiences consuming this information (Company superiors, and the Dutch reading and theatre-going public).<sup>45</sup> It is this process that this study brings to centre-stage.

## **Organization**

The first chapter introduces the principal actors in the production: the Dutch East India Company as the chief courier involved in the production and/transfer of information and the *Amsterdamsche Schouwburg*, the Amsterdam playhouse which dictated the tone, form, and character the dramas came to assume and thereby dressed the information in ways distinct from how their predecessors would have imagined. Chapters two, three, and four are dedicated to studies of Joost van den Vondel's *Zungchin*, Frans van Steenwyk's *Thamas Koelikan* and Onno Zwier van Haren's *Agon, Sultan van Banten*, respectively. As the anatomy of information transfer and the resultant changes, mutations and transformations of this data constitutes the thrust of my thesis, it dictates the manner in which I conceive the writing of each of these chapters. The chapters follow a standard plot: a) they all begin with an analysis of the play as the final destination of the itinerant information; b) the works published in the Republic which effectively functioned as sources for the making of these dramas are subsequently studied; c) travelling backwards in time and through space, the interrogation then leaves the confines of the Republic and returns to the Orient where the information was originally assembled. Here, the historical forces that dictated the direction and outcome of the political revolutions are outlined; d) the Dutch East India Company archives which either informed these travel accounts or constituted contemporary depictions

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<sup>45</sup> I regard the category of published accounts as comprising of both histories and travelogues. It may be argued that this category does not constitute a literary genre in itself. I justify my inclusion of histories and travelogues in this category on the grounds that these works constituted a distinct stage in the transfer of information about the Orient to Europe. The audiences that they catered to and the representational tactics that they resorted to in characterizing the Orient were also similar.

of the episodes are then dealt with; e) lastly, I return to the dramas to consider those factors, political, economic, personal, and genre-related that determined the makeup of the plays. Wherever possible, I have attempted to shed light on native agents who were co-participants in the process of information manufacture, and to detect other narratives either manufactured by Asian agents or constructed by actors extraneous to the Dutch East India Company to provide better perspective on the character of the information and nature of representations that travelled through the Dutch East India Company circuit.