



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Dutch Drama and the Company's Orient

Kuruppath, M.

Citation

Kuruppath, M. (2014, November 4). *Dutch Drama and the Company's Orient*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29589>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29589>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/29589> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Kuruppath, Manjusha

Title: Dutch drama and the company's Orient : a study of representation and its information circuits, c. 1650-1780

Issue Date: 2014-11-04

Summary

This work examines three Dutch plays written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries namely Joost van den Vondel's *Zungchin, of ondergang der Sineesche heerschappye* (1667), Frans van Steenwyk's *Thamas Koelikan of de verovering van het Mogolsche Rijk* (1745) and Onno Zwier van Haren's *Agon, Sulthan van Bantam* (1769). These plays written by “stay-at-home” playwrights dramatized historical events in Asia which were either contemporaneous with or not far removed from their playwrights' times. 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 Mughal 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*. These playwrights were beneficiaries and their plays examples of the “global traffic” of information facilitated by the Dutch East India Company in the period.

This study investigates the nature of the representation of the Orient in these plays and evaluates how this characterization was influenced by the channels that these dramatists relied on to gather information for their works. It recapitulates the history of information travel about three historical events in seventeenth-century China, India and Java from the time of their occurrence until their recruitment by three Dutch playwrights in works of drama. It analyses the discourses about the East that were created as a consequence. The study 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. This is done to the eventual end of sketching the relationship between the Dutch Republic and the Company's Orient in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As the dramas under study exhibit linkages with the Dutch East India Company, this work examines the role of the enterprise in this dissemination of information, the production of Orientalist imagery, and the formulation of Dutch Orientalism. In engaging these four topics—drama, representation, information brokerage and the Dutch East India Company—within the margins of a single study, *Dutch Drama and the Company's Orient* aims to redress the disconnect between two fields of enquiry: history and literary studies. This study is undertaken against the theoretical

backdrop of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and subsequent postulations which evaluate the nature of Europe's encounter with the Orient based on representation.

This study argues that the three plays—*Zungchin*, *Thamas Koelikan* and *Agon*—revolved around the idea of transfer. The manner in which these dramas brought to life the political crises in Ming China, Mughal India and Banten depended on an inter-continental transport of narratives about these events. This was often a three stage process. 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 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 the outcome of complex systems of information procurement and brokerage employed by the VOC in China, India and Java and it involved the participation of native, Dutch and other European informants. In conceptualizing the character of these historical events, the servants of the Company drew their own estimations. They displayed a proclivity to employ standard stereotypes in their understandings of Asian polities which were replicated and reinforced with time. Their representative strategies, as a result generated a discourse about the Orient. This discourse was a chronicle of encounter and the relationship of the enterprise with each of these polities significantly influenced the perceptions they developed. The discourse was also testimony of the fact that Dutch East India Company pursued a policy of mercantile expansionism in early modern Asia where its trading objectives were vigorously pursued with or without the use of arms where returns came in the form of trading concessions or territorial acquisitions.

The second category of literature which documented these historical processes was the published account. Although these works reveal varying levels of indebtedness to the Company archive for information, they displayed differences to Company documentation in their perceptions of the Orient. Published accounts accentuated images of difference between the Orient and the West. This tendency is attributed to the fact that these works, meant for the general public in the Republic and beyond, contended with a tyranny of representation where

there was a pressure to reproduce the already prevailing ideological constructions of the Orient in Europe. If the transport of the tales into print literature marked a transformation in the nature of information and imagery conveyed, the migration of this content from these accounts into works of drama had similar consequences. But unlike the printed account which mostly registered changes in the domain of the representation of the Orient, in the case of drama, the plot too was exposed to alteration. While authorial discretion was mostly responsible for this change, a host of other factors such as personal agendas and the necessity to adhere to the rules of the stage also influenced the playwrights' decision to reimagine the events they wrote about.

On the question of the extent to which *Zungchin*, *Thamas Koelikan*, and *Agon* can be used to gauge the changing conceptions of the Orient in the Republic, the study argues that with time, the Republic familiarized itself with the Orient. However, this rising acquaintance did not translate into a simultaneous surge of identification but instead led to a growing comprehension of difference between the East and West. Reflecting on the applicability of the term "Dutch Orientalism" to comprehend this phenomenon of writing about and comprehending the Orient, one has good reason to argue that the entire process ranging from the production of Oriental imagery to its dissemination was hardly contained within the contours of the Republic. It instead possessed a strong European character. On two counts we cannot disregard the applicability of the term Orientalism in the meaning that Said lends to the term. Firstly, the images of the Orient which were generated reveal a consistency which Said attributes to the phenomenon and secondly, these conceptions of the Orient which were created provided the ideological leverage necessary for subsequent imperialist endeavour.