

This is a post-print of the article 'Mostert T. (2018), Review of: Kuruppath M. (2017) *Staging Asia: The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre*, *Itinerario: International Journal on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction* 41(3): 631-632. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S016511531700078X>.' This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. © 2017 Research Institute for History, Leiden University

Manjusha Kuruppath. *Staging Asia: The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2017. 282 pp. ISBN: 9789087282578. \$ 55.00.

On 2 July 2017, Joost van den Vondel's 1667 tragedy *Zungchin*, set within the Chinese court as the fall of the Ming Dynasty unfolds, was staged for the first time—the performers, in any case, confidently claimed the premiere for lack of evidence of an earlier performance. This premiere took place in the somewhat unusual setting of the courtyard of the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, at an exhibition about the early modern interaction between China and the Netherlands. In the exhibition itself, amongst all the examples of such interaction in books, prints, maps, paintings and porcelain, a first-print of Vondel's *Zungchin* was also on display, as a lone representative of the performing arts.

This might be considered an apt metaphor for the present state of research into the cultural interaction with and representation of Asia in Europe. While such research is established and thriving in many fields (including art history and intellectual history), theatre, until recently, played little part in it, especially in the Netherlands. There has been, however, a budding interest in it, and Manjusha Kuruppath's *Staging Asia* puts it firmly in the limelight.

Working at the interface of history and literary studies, Kuruppath observes that the concept of representation as used in literary studies often shows a disconnect with the historical events and the sources of information that a representation is based on. She sets out to establish such connections by investigating three plays from the early modern period that have roughly contemporary events in Asia as their subject. She uses these plays as a springboard to trace the information the playwright used back to its original sources in Asia,

through all the various mediations and transfers it underwent along the way. While doing so, she continually engages with the notion of “Saidian” Orientalism, considering the validity and meaning of that term pre-19th century.

In an introductory chapter about the Dutch Republic, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Amsterdam theatre, Kuruppath devotes considerable attention to the VOC as a ‘merchant and manufacturer of information’ (33) but also shows its information pipeline was leaking both in Asia and the Republic. While some leaks were ‘sanctioned’, as they were considered harmless or were actively meant to play on public opinion, many of them were not, leading Kuruppath to observe that the VOC had some, albeit limited, power to arbitrate its own information. One way or the other, information from VOC documents regularly found its way into the public sphere.

The subsequent chapters each investigate one of the selected plays. When Vondel’s *Zungchin*, already mentioned above, was published in 1667, the dramatic collapse of the Ming dynasty was already a much-published event in the Netherlands. Vondel, himself a Catholic, based his play almost entirely on Jesuit rather than on VOC-related sources, most notably Martino Martini’s *Den Tartarischen Oorlog* (1654). In Kuruppath’s view, Vondel even followed Martini’s lead in instilling the play with the moral that the hand of Divine Providence guided events in China just as it did in Europe. More broadly, the Jesuits left a mark on many Dutch publications about China; although the VOC settlement on Formosa and two VOC tribute embassies to the Chinese court were important sources of information, Dutch authors invariably took their cue from the Jesuits in their jubilant descriptions of the Chinese state. Kuruppath does note that the Jesuit and VOC networks of information sometimes met and overlapped, as when Martini stayed in Batavia and the Dutch Republic

Next, comes Frans van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* (1745), whose title character is now better known as the Persian ruler Nadir Shah. Whereas in 19th-century literature Nadir

Shah, who invaded the Mughal Empire and bloodily sacked Delhi in 1739, would come to be characterized as the archetypical Oriental despot, Van Steenwyk instead casts him as a righteous, strong and even merciful ruler. In this, he departs even from his main source, the anonymously published *Verhaal wegens den Inval* (1740). Kuruppath traces this source back to correspondence from VOC officials in Bengal, who considered the Mughal Emperor Mohammed Shah weak and culpable for their declining trade. Wishing to serve a moral lesson to his Dutch republican audience, Van Steenwyk in his turn depicts the Mughal ruler as the haughty, disloyal and cowardly product of a decadent upbringing at court, and then pits him against Nadir Shah as a strong, virtuous and exemplary leader, sanitizing the latter's actions in the process. Thus, Nadir Shah becomes an unlikely, and republican, hero to a Dutch audience.

The final chapter looks at Otto Zwier van Haren's *Agon, Sulthan van Bantam*, written in 1769 and describing the VOC's conquest of Bantam slightly less than a century earlier. The play's rendering of the conflict differs radically from that of his main sources, the early 18th century books by François Valentijn, Nicolaus de Graaff, and Abraham Bogaert, all of whom had worked for the VOC. Whereas these works unanimously hailed the VOC's actions and described the Bantam Sultans as depraved and cruel, Van Haren turns Agon (Ageng Tirtayasa) and the members of his court into honourable heroes and casts the VOC and Haji, the pretender to the Bantamese throne backed by the VOC, as the villains. For this reason, it has been considered an early anticolonial text in an enlightened tradition, coming out at a time when Voltaire, who was a great inspiration to Van Haren, was also publishing anticolonial plays. Kuruppath, however, comes to a different assessment. Among other things, she notes that Van Haren had personal reasons to identify with Ageng's fate and that in other works, Van Haren is full of praise for the VOC. She believes the play just criticized the specific clique around governor-general Speelman within the faction-riven VOC, rather

than colonialism in general also noting that no-one found the play particularly anticolonial when it came out, and it was only considered so in the 19th century when it was taken off the stage for that reason.

Throughout the book, Kuruppath measures the plays and their ingredients with the yardsticks of representation and Orientalism. Although the VOC's varied experiences throughout Asia also found their way to European literature to present a varied picture of Asia, she does discern certain tropes in these plays and their sources that fed into the later Orientalist worldview, such as the characterization of the Chinese and Mughals as effeminate, or the descriptions of Mughal rule already containing some of the later notions of Oriental Despotism. Also, she discerns increasing binary thinking about Asia and Europe in the period. Where, in 1667, Vondel writes from a Chinese perspective, identifying not only with the Jesuits but also with the Chinese Emperor, by 1775, Joannes Nomsz' *Antonius Hambroeck* (which makes a surprise appearance in the conclusion) has the reader identify with its noble, Christian protagonists, as opposed to the strange and vile Chinese. The intervening century of interaction, it would seem, had only turned Asia into more of an 'Other'.

Staging Asia is a fascinating, vivaciously written and refreshing study of the role that theatre played in (re)shaping and transmitting images of Asia. While convincingly engaging with current theories and discourse, its feet are firmly planted in a wide and eclectic array of primary sources. Of course, the topic she engages is still far from exhausted. Kuruppath mainly uses the plays as a starting point for her analysis of textual sources, so that the plays themselves constitute only a relatively minor part of it. Also, her focus is on the plays as written works in conversation with other written works. The very brief allusions she makes to the performances of such plays, in which 'the Orient ... was featured in all her visual splendour' (56) to achieve an effect of maximum 'otherness', for instance, hold a promise of

fascinating follow-up research. Let's hope that Kuruppath's study will, indeed, inspire more research into the topic that she has so convincingly brought into the limelight.

Tristan Mostert, *Leiden University*