

Before Orientalism

London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626

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Prelude The cultural logistics of England's eastern initiative

At Sir Thomas Roe's landing on the beaches of Surat in 1615, the English fleet and royal emissary performed an "inaugural scene" that was hardly novel to its native spectators. Roe was the first fully credentialed ambassador from England to set foot in India; but this was no Columbian opportunity to write the subcontinent into European history with a formal speech-act on the shore. What Roe meant to possess in his monarch's name was not the land but the dignity of his office, and he was scarcely able to do that. Belatedness nagged the embassy. A latecomer to the continental Renaissance, England was also tardy about voyages of exploration, trade, and colonization. Across the Indian Ocean, trade had thrived for centuries, the last hundred years under Portuguese coercion of the sea-lanes.¹ More recently, several London Company merchants had presented themselves in India as royal ambassadors, degrading the title and, with that, England's reputation among Moghul officials. When government agents from Cambaya boarded the fleet's flagship and learned that, on another vessel, the English ambassador was about to land at Surat, "At this name of an Ambassador," wrote Roe, "they laughd one vpon another; it being become ridiculous, so many hauing assumed that title, and not performed the offices." The officials did not bother to visit him. For all they could tell, Roe added mordantly, "I might be an Imposture as well as the rest."²

Roe's embarrassment at arrival foregrounded both the belatedness and the theatricality of his errand. "A King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold," James advised his son Henry; and the function devolved upon his ambassadors.³ Speaking for monarchs, negotiating on behalf of subjects, ambassadors presumed to embody the dignity and power of the states they represented. If the King was the focal figure for the nation, the primary synecdoche of state, then the ambassador, as surrogate, personified the country at two removes. That these embodiments were theatrical as well as practical introduced questions of legitimacy that were often, appropriately, resolved theatrically: by public acts of regal self-presentation received as genuine and substantial by a sufficiency of relevant spectators. Ambassadors inherited the daunting task of performing to this effect abroad, before spectators often indifferent, if not hostile, to one's country. How

was Sir Thomas Roe to distinguish himself from his dubiously commissioned predecessors when his core assignment – to impress the Moghul court and monarch with England’s worth, to implant in India a desire for friendly relations with England – required rhetorical and theatrical persuasions, arts in which imposture thrives? To prove one’s authority, and to make the proving matter locally, was a slippery business.

Moreover, England’s construction of the assignment complicated Roe’s challenge. He was sent to India to secure for the London East India Company, which enjoyed a royal monopoly of the prospect, favorable terms for trade in Moghul dominions. The royal commission from King James endorsed the designs of the merchants who nominated, and remunerated, Roe. The Company, frustrated by the failure to win durable and productive favor from the “Great Mogor,” believed that England now required “a man of qualetye” (Foster, *Embassy*, 45), not another merchant, to advance their interests at the Moghul court. James’ commitment to the project, however, scarcely extended beyond his blessings and a letter to the Emperor. In both England and India, the question of Roe’s legitimacy was inescapable: what in fact did he represent? Was this embassy a royal initiative of national honor or a mercantile improvisation dressed in regal robes? That James supplied no gifts for Jahangir, and appointed no successor to Roe, suggests the latter. Roe’s intuition that his performance as the local epitome of English self-respect was a tactical fiction put unwelcome ironies to his self-presentation.

Roe’s embassy to India is a richly illuminating instance of early modern cross-cultural initiative in an area less studied by postmodern scholars than the New World. Precolonial Europe’s relations to Asian civilizations have received, until lately, far less attention than they did from the Europeans in question, who saw themselves deeply threatened by the Ottoman Empire and who craved direct access to the riches of Persia and India. Columbus, after all, was not looking for America. That America was enduringly colonized by Europeans has induced many scholars to make European mechanisms of mastery over alien civilizations the ruling theme of cross-cultural studies. Thus Stephen Greenblatt, examining the mentality of conquest, writes: “Europeans who ventured to the New World in the first decades after Columbus’s discovery shared a complex . . . mobile technology of power . . . their culture was characterized by immense confidence in its own centrality.”⁴ In a similar vein, Michel De Certeau describes Van der Straet’s engraving of Vespucci’s arrival in an America personated as a naked woman: “This is *writing that conquers*. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, ‘savage’ page on which Western desire will be written.”⁵ This is a compelling premise – but as a pattern of cross-cultural encounter it is deeply flawed. To suppose that the unexplored world was as supine as the empty page effaces alien agency and the mutuality of exchange.

The legacy of imperialism has, for many postcolonial critics, obscured the insecurities that earlier Europeans took for granted. Proposing more modest assessments of European prowess, Jeffrey Knapp and Mary Fuller have argued that English emulation of the Spanish paradigm of New World conquest was a blundering business that generally salvaged spiritual or textual achievement from material failure.⁶ Once initiated, England's expansive efforts were imitative, fitful, uncertain, and not infrequently disastrous. Yet more clearly than revisionist accounts of New World engagements, the study of the "eastern theatre" points up the relative weaknesses, not the incipient global dominion, of early modern Europe. Thus Nabil Matar starkly contrasts New World from eastern encounters: "Whereas in the Americas the natives had been defeated by the European white man, in the dominion of Islam, Britons were humiliated . . . Muslims held power over European Christians." Such polarization exaggerates the point; but in Asia, as Antony Parr notes, European emissaries "often felt belittled" at the imperial courts they visited.⁷

To suggest that eastern engagements undid Eurocentric confidence cuts against the thesis of perhaps the most important work of cross-cultural study in a generation, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Analyzing a discursive system that invents, catalogs, and articulates the Orient, Said argues forcefully that orientalism accompanies and encourages western imperial power over the East. (I try to use "West" and "East" advisedly, the quotation marks of construction sometimes dropped, as repetition numbs.) The binarism of this analysis, Occident versus Orient, is problematic; and Said, moreover, studies the discourse of the age of high imperialism. To project his findings backward, to read precolonial ethnography as if its rhetoric bespoke European dominance of the world, or its defensive tropes necessarily foretold aggressive expansion, is anachronistic. To be sure, discourses composed during intervals of relative weakness were harnessed to imperial purposes later. But pre-Enlightenment "orientalisms" expressed material, political, and discursive relations profoundly different from those Said finds typical of modernity.

Said defines orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient"; he understands "Orientalism as an exercise of cultural strength."⁸ With an epigraph from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Said epitomizes the West's presumption to speak for the others it constructs: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (xiii, 21). The subject Asians in *Orientalism* are as mute as the Hispaniolans in Greenblatt's account of Columbus' landing. Said sees the disposition to substitute ethnocentric constructions for "accurate positive knowledge" (75) of the East as an imaginative failure that inscribes divisions that legitimate, and propel, imperial dominion. As he stipulates of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, orientalism is a textual discipline, and it produces intervention on eastern ground: "for

Napoleon Egypt was a project that acquired reality in his mind, and later in his preparations for its conquest, through experiences that belong to the realm of ideas and myths culled from texts, not empirical reality” (80).

Inflected by Ernest Renan’s study of ancient languages, orientalism developed a philological bent – a method of accumulation that made scattered, recalcitrant materials speak – that took on wordly application: “To reconstruct a dead or lost Oriental language meant ultimately to reconstruct a dead or neglected Orient” (123). The scholar’s manipulation of oriental enigmas became a figure for, and incitement to, imperial exertions. Signal “orientalist” attitudes include supposition that the “true” Orient was the ancient world from which contemporary Asia has degenerated; it falls to western scholars and agents to revive the former (85, 99, 233). Orientalist discourse presupposes abstraction: “the age-old distinction between . . . ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient’ herds beneath very wide labels every possible variety of human plurality” (155). Depraved “oriental” attributes include irrationality, duplicitous cunning, despotism, barbaric cruelty, effeminacy, dark, prolific eroticism and fecundity; eastern geography oscillates between vast void spaces and swarming, promiscuous cities. The latter images fuse in pre-Enlightenment visions of Asiatic armies advancing in earth-smothering hordes. As a world “defeated and distant,” yet also an “insinuating danger” (57), ever since Aeschylus the East inspires ambivalence, shivers of desire and revulsion; the Orient is at once supine and vigorous, inviting and menacing, vast, mysterious, yet classifiable, describable. “The East” is a great theatre disposed, even in its elusiveness, for western eyes (63). “The European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for . . . ‘bizarre *jouissance*’” (103). Said argues that such relations are unidirectional: what the Orientalist “says about the Orient is . . . description obtained in a one-way exchange: as *they* spoke and behaved, *he* observed and wrote down” (160).

As an ideal type, however, “one-way exchange” sounds oxymoronic. A major problem of the book, Said admits, is its confinement to a discursive system itself critiqued for taking its own accounts of others as the accounts that matter. Insofar as eastern voices and images enter the frame, they are always already represented by Orientalists.⁹ To study the West’s constructions of the East, while ignoring reversals, hybrid permutations, and offsetting triangulations of that dynamic, maximizes any estimate of the power of “the West.” Lisa Lowe observes that, “to conform to binary difference [between Occident and Orient] is inevitably to corroborate the logic of domination,” and she insists that “Orientalism” be pluralized. Early “orientalist” tropes, in particular, are products of relative weakness before Asian powers: of engagement and recoil, not fluent imposition. Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton likewise contest “Said’s version of Western Europe’s construction of the Orient as an alien, displaced other, positioned in opposition to a confident, imperialist Eurocentrism.” The critical challenge is to

grasp, not only mechanisms of wilful dominion, but more broadly, the complex processes by which societies engaged, articulated, and shaped each other, in multiple and shifting alliances.¹⁰

To advance the spirit of Said's critique, then – to allow for the full, cultivated humanity of different peoples – it is vital to extend the analytic frame beyond the dominant ethnocentric usages he surveys. As he writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “to ignore or otherwise discount the overlapping experience of Westerners and Orientals, the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed . . . is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century” (xx). To efface hybridity, and reduce multiple alliances and antagonisms to an overriding dualism, is also to miss what is essential about precolonial engagements. Yet early orientalist discourse, by framing Islam as the demonic antagonist to a potentially united Christendom, often performs precisely that reduction. It is crucial, therefore, to distinguish early modern Europe's strategic and economic relations with, from its domestic constructions of, Asia. Agents committed to sustained negotiations in Asia typically learned more pliant, polyvalent attitudes toward various “others” – including those Europeans who “turned Turk” – than did the consumers of their adventures at home in England.

From the 1580s onward, the Levant Company cultivated relations of mutual respect and profit with Islam; yet their initiative had limited impact on domestic publications. In his encyclopedic survey of England's Islamic absorptions, Samuel Chew notes “few allusions to the Levantine merchants in Elizabethan literature.” Moreover, for both demographic and formal reasons, public theatres – novel, increasingly important institutions of popular fantasy – encouraged binaristic thinking. They exploited foreign stereotypes and nationalistic enthusiasms. Nabil Matar observes that, while numerous European “renegades” achieved status and power in Islamic society, “On stage, Islam had to be defeated, and those who converted to it had to be destroyed.”¹¹ Ethnocentrism galvanized polarities congenial to theatre: in the structural dialectics of secular drama, pivotal conflicts among ontologically equivalent persons produce action and change. Elizabethan dramatic plots – with opposing parties set off by two stage doors – gather into dualistic patterns. Economies of time (“these two short hours”) likewise simplify obscure or overdetermined processes.¹² On the London stage, Turks were represented as the demonic antagonists of Christians, and converts to Islam were ridiculed and punished; at the same time, the London merchants and Queen Elizabeth pursued alliances with Islam against Catholic and other European rivals. Queen and agents aimed to exploit triangulations of wealth and power within a comprehensive Mediterranean world rather than to enforce an ontological division between “East” and “West.”

If a domineering orientalism involved ambivalence and contradiction, the discursive complement to England's early Asian endeavors was volatilized by

Europe's relative weakness, and England's tentativeness, there. Jacobean may have been complacent about their place in the world, but their fictions lacked the material enforcements typical of orientalism. Early Stuart England possessed neither a working knowledge of nor a collective will for imperial sway in Asia. Ancient geographies and fantastic accounts, such as Mandeville's *Travels*, remained popular even as Richard Eden, Richard Hakluyt, and Samuel Purchas promoted visionary empiricism, publishing, with new maps, narratives of exploration, trade, and colonization. Despite such proselytizing, England's reading public did not keep step with its mariners: between 1603 and 1613, as John Parker observes, "English merchants and sailors discovered the true intricacies of the eastern trade, but publishers apparently saw little opportunity for profit in reporting the events of these voyages."¹³ "The idea of a maritime empire did not immediately seize the imagination of the English people, nor did it arise spontaneously," suggests Kenneth R. Andrews; "It had to be propagated." The cultural dynamics of this process were more diffuse, the onset of imperialism more gradual, than postcolonial studies have typically allowed. When John Speed produced his magnificent geographical history, *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (London, 1611), the imperial vision comprised "the Kingdoms of England, Scotland, Ireland, and the Isles adjoining." Empire meant "Great Britaine": an intact, globally serviced insularity.¹⁴ Assuredly, Tudor-Stuart constructions of "the East" came into wider service later; but the power they articulated at inception was, in global terms, local and self-congratulatory.

Said's critique of orientalism recommends caution about *speaking for* Moghul India or the Ottoman Levant, and ignorance of Asian languages compounds my hesitation. Nevertheless, one may usefully examine English constructions of "the East," not as figures in a self-regulating cosmos of language, but as flexible elements of discursive networks that are recurrently crossed, challenged, and inflected by others. As products of global traffic and ethnocentric reaction, European texts about the Orient encode various ratios of power and alignments of interest; and their readings alter with location. Early modern constructions of Asia could come off confidently in London though fashioned under duress in "contact zones." Moghul India was as complexly literate as Tudor-Stuart England, and British agents there could not assume themselves possessed of unrivaled powers of representation.¹⁵ Emperor Jahangir's journal – consulted here in English translation – marks telling counterpoints to Sir Thomas Roe's. Nor did English agents in Surat or Ajmer typically engage Moghul powers without mediation. The London merchants traded through brokers of various origin, and Roe's translators at the Moghul court included Jesuit fathers, spokesmen for England's primary European rival in India. Such pressures, multiple and inescapable, inscribed themselves in his journal and letters home.

Given these prolific local complexities, one of my aims – to take account of the disparities between domestic representations and foreign negotiations – is

to examine the “cultural logistics” of England’s eastern initiative. The phrase marks my effort to bring “cultural poetics,” with its textual emphases, closer to “cultural materialism,” which more rigorously postulates that material and discursive practices hold dialectical, and historically productive, relations. Attention to logistics foregrounds the task-specific and site-specific energies of cultural production. Inviting the study of situational initiative, cultural logistics injects into materialist history a sharpened alertness to the predicaments of agency: to the consciousness active in and about the machineries of production traditionally emphasized by Marxism. How is it that *work* gets done: that particular goods and services are produced, theatres built and shows mounted in London, China houses installed on the Strand, corporate profits secured in the East Indies? What social and personal motives conjoin in such projects, and what fantasies incite numbers of people to pursue them? Because work both maintains and transforms the social world, to analyze the constellations of resolve that inform work demands study not only of stable systems but also, in Raymond Williams’ terms, of dominant, residual, and emergent structures in historical process.¹⁶

Among the reasons I have looked “East” is that England’s Asian endeavors supply a rich focus for cultural logistics, demonstrating processes of calculation and consequence with unusual clarity, and engaging rhetorical and theatrical concerns with sufficient regularity to justify linkage to the shows of London. Direct Anglo-Indian relations commenced when London merchants, keeping careful records, *projected* their designs and bullion abroad. An emergent capitalist institution that fostered social change in England and enlarged Britain’s relations with the world, the joint-stock East India Company played out dialectical relations between material and discursive processes at home, at sea, and on the ground abroad. To set London’s deliberations and directives next to accounts from the field measures assumptions against events, designs against outcomes. Across a wide range of venues, the Company put practical consequences to its members’ absorption in London’s economic, political, literary, and theatrical environments. Their endeavor – to secure corporate profits, repeatedly, by long-range maritime traffic – was a logistical challenge of the highest order. Long voyages and foreign residence tested domestic expectations, setting them in bizarre relief, taxing and bewildering resolve. The records are abundant not simply because foreign experiences provoke narrative more dependably than do familiar surroundings. To sustain profits, the London Company required corporate knowledge of the worlds its agents entered, and governing “adventurers” – investors – therefore insisted that principals on voyages maintain detailed journals to be surrendered on return. Agents posted abroad for longer periods reported their activities, and quarreled at length with associates, in letters. Strategic and tactical debates, data of commerce, daily developments abroad, minutes of meetings at home, commissions to mariners, were copied and archived in

London. The East India Company managed a system of corporate discourse long before it ever thought to hold an empire, and it accumulated considerable acreage of text. At the British Library's India Office today, East India Company material occupies 9 miles of shelving.¹⁷

In the first part of this book I examine the economic pressures and cultural productions that informed Britain's sense of its place in the world and helped to shape the ambitions of travelers and London Company adventurers. Chapter 1 frames England's ambivalence about eastern powers by discussing Richard Knolles' great preorientalist study, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603). In chapters 2 and 3 I turn to London's public, courtly, and civic venues of exoticist production in plays, court spectacles, and urban pageantry. Because early modern England's imaginary "East" often confounded Asia and Africa, and Old World and New World "Indians," I include some extra-Asian representations; not to do so would suppress noteworthy inaccuracies in this exoticism. The crux of the second chapter is a reading of *Tamburlaine* that interrogates the play's construction of a vast, militarized East and demonstrates the Englishness of the hero's appetites and strategies. *Tamburlaine* is extravagantly amoral, and Marlowe alert to exotic geography, yet the play caricatures a distinctly Elizabethan reliance on spectacle to legitimate power. Marlowe's play matters not only for its eastern displacement of English politics, but also because *Tamburlaine* turns up repeatedly in the writings of Englishmen abroad, and the Moghul dynasty derived lineally from him. The play enables a clear juxtaposition of domestic, decentered English and alien accounts, and, with that, credible glimpses of an important fiction's historical participations. Chapter 3, analyzing class-based structures of desire and congratulation, examines various exoticist productions at court, in the City, and on the Thames. While Jacobean mercantile festivities linked geography and ethnicity sometimes more accurately than did the royal shows, both flattered England. Reviewing institutions and ceremonies that constituted London's formal theatrical culture, part 1 argues that, while variously attentive, complacent, or uneasy about "the East," London's exotic fictions were fundamentally self-regarding, and they fostered naïve fantasies of performing English mastery on foreign soil.

Thomas Platter observed, "for the most part the English . . . are content ever to learn of foreign matters at home, and ever to take their pastime" (Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, II: 366). While the pattern endured, travel to the Continent and beyond quickened under the Stuarts, and the domestic staging of eastern themes and properties leavened the expectations of Londoners who journeyed East. The balance of the book moves from London's constructions of the East to the testimony of early Englishmen on the ground in the Levant and in Moghul India. Thomas Coryate, England's first modern tourist and travel writer, distinguished himself by departing to frame distant curiosities for London's consumption. Chapter 4 analyzes his jaunty theatricalization of the world and sets

forth the pathos of his eastern journey, from which he never returned. Theatrical investments are likewise central to the final chapter on Sir Thomas Roe's Indian embassy, 1615–19. By significant serendipity, Coryate, who arrived by the old caravan route from Aleppo, and Roe, who sailed to Surat as an emissary of the new trade, met and lived together in Agra and Ajmer. Acquaintances in London, friends of Jonson and Donne, they performed two emergent motives for travel, incompatible tandem initiatives of London's theatrical cultures: tourism and the bid to assert England's dignity in the East.

Backed by resident powers of state, Jacobean royal ostentation, if always questionable, persuaded optimally in London. As cross-cultural courtiers, ambassadors were commissioned to occupy a distinguished place in foreign theatres of state and to convince dignitaries abroad to favor English purposes. A major irony I investigate rides in the domestic assumption that power validates itself in public display. For, whatever authority they presumed to carry, in Asia England's emissaries found themselves enmeshed in recognizably theatrical circumstances that were owned, produced, and consumed by others disinclined to ratify Eurocentric fictions. English agents who associated the show with the substance of power – who assumed that, by performing royal presence, they consolidated political gain – recognized the poverty of their tactics at imperial Asian courts.

Following Foucault's linkage of knowledge and power, many scholars have proposed theories of European material and representational dominance, arguing that early modern Europeans found ways to subjugate the peoples they encountered – technologically, politically, and culturally. To see and know others – to write about them, to stage them – was, sooner or later, to dominate them. Offered as a radical critique of omnivorous Eurocentric culture, the thesis ironically verifies the inflated self-estimates of the agents under review. For if fictive exercises of display and containment could bespeak cultural strength and justify state power, they also tended to be wishful. The shows of London quickened appetites for exotic exposures, and they probably sharpened personal and corporate resourcefulness. Yet the easeful reach of their geography also fostered premature confidence in England's adequacy to the great world.