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Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626. By Richmond Barbour. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture. Cambridge University Press, 2003; pp. xii + 238, 21 illus. \$85 cloth.

Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624. By Jonathan Burton. Newark: University of Delaware Press (Cranbury, NJ: AUP), 2005; pp. 319, \$55 cloth.

"The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences," writes Edward Said in *Orientalism*, his seminal and devastating critique of the manner in which Western perceptions created and sustained an exoticized and ultimately pejorative image of an implicitly inferior Eastern culture (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978: 1). Said's analyses of the power dynamics at play in the complex relationship between "Occident" and "Orient" acknowledge that whereas Europe has succeeded in defining and subjugating Eastern cultures, "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of the Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture" (1–2). *Orientalism* continues to occupy a central position in postcolonial studies, but the degree to which Oriental culture can be shown to constitute an "integral part" of Europe's "*material* civilization" remains the subject of various scholarly inquiries. Richmond Barbour's *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East, 1576–1626* and Jonathan Burton's *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624*—two recently published books that examine Eastern influence on Western theatrical practices—employ *Orientalism* as a point of departure in attempts to expand upon and, in some cases, challenge many of the central theses expounded by Said.

Barbour's *Before Orientalism* aims to illuminate the crucial disparities dividing firsthand accounts of Eastern civilization by English travelers and diplomats from the representations of Eastern culture found in the London press and on the London stage. It also hopes to document how the inherent theatricality of civic presentations helped secure the legitimacy of English ambassadors in Asia, thus furthering England's political and commercial aspirations. At the center of Barbour's analysis are discussions of how England's multilayered, ambiguous understanding

of Eastern cultures did not necessarily relegate non-European traditions to subordinate status but, rather, profoundly affected the Eurocentric sensibility in tangible and often surprising ways. In order to achieve his rhetorical goals, Barbour argues that the primary assertions found in *Orientalism* become problematic when one attempts “to project [Said’s] findings backwards” (3)—that is to say, Said’s observations regarding the West’s aggressive expansionism and its attendant justifications in the age of high imperialism do not apply so neatly to the “pre-Enlightenment” epoch, which is the subject of Barbour’s study: “pre-Enlightenment ‘orientalisms,’” writes Barbour, “expressed material, political, and discursive relations profoundly different from those Said finds typical of modernity” (3).

Barbour describes a pre-Enlightenment Europe marred by deep insecurities, rather than brimming with self-confidence. He argues that a close examination of England’s precolonial encounters with the East “points up the relative weaknesses, not the incipient global dominion, of early modern Europe” (3). Barbour quotes Nabil Matar, who insists that “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” (3). Barbour assumes that this reorientation regarding England’s self-perceived status in relation to Islamic and Asiatic civilizations will expose fundamental flaws in assumptions concerning the nature of the West’s subsequent ascendancy and global dominance. However, he also wisely observes that his declared perspective might ultimately “advance the spirit of Said’s critique” (5) even while it challenges the “overriding dualism” (5) at the heart of *Orientalism*. To make the point, Barbour quotes a telling passage from Said’s *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” (5).

In his “Prelude” to *Before Orientalism*, Barbour describes as “crucial” the ability and willingness “to distinguish early modern Europe’s strategic and economic relations with, from its domestic constructions of, Asia” (5) in order to transcend the misleading binarism that governs the alleged reductivism of the “Occident versus Orient” model. London’s “strategic and economic relations” with Asia during the pre-Enlightenment period revolved around the East India Company, a complex endeavor that Barbour defines as “an emergent capitalist institution that fostered social change in England and enlarged Britain’s relations with the world,” and that played out the “dialectical relations between material and discursive processes at home, at sea, and on the ground abroad” (7). It is difficult to overemphasize the centrality of the East India Company’s interests in the establishment of cultural-economic relationships between East and West, and Barbour outlines the details of the company’s initial non-European contacts.

Barbour’s “theatre of the East” is both the dramatic portrayal of perceived Oriental characteristics on the London stage and England’s Asian scene of operations with respect to its commercial and political interests, complete with the kind of civic

pageantry designed to create and sustain a desired power dynamic. In the book's two parts, entitled "Staging 'the East' in England" and "Inaugural Scenes in the Eastern Theatre," respectively, Barbour provides ample evidence of an insecure England desperately trying—through theatrical means—to win political, cultural, and economic credibility in the eyes of both Englishmen and their foreign hosts.

The first part features three chapters describing representations of Eastern culture(s) in England. The first chapter, "The Glorious Empire of the Turks, the Present Terrour of the World," takes its title from the first sentence of Richard Knolles's monumental, but deeply flawed, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London, 1603), which, according to Barbour, "recommends the binarism that later comes to characterize 'orientalism'" (17). Barbour appropriates Knolles's history as emblematic of the contradictions that swirl about Western perceptions of the Ottoman Empire in particular and Islamic civilization in general—conceptions that are rooted in admiration and fear, reverence and hostility, and that incite a conflict that Barbour describes as "a contest between opposites at once alien and fraternal" (19). The second chapter, "Exotic Persuasions in the Playhouse," begins with a confusing introduction that cites sixteenth-century descriptions of the splendor of the London playhouse and the significance of London as a global force while simultaneously dismissing any notion of English self-esteem.

The point to which Barbour consistently returns is that England's Eastern adventures were the result of mere capital interests rather than a part of more overarching imperial designs—but he fails to explain adequately how the English stage (as metaphor for the world) either supports or undercuts that notion. The bulk of the chapter comprises analyses of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Those are obvious choices given the nature of this study, and Barbour's readings are, by turns, predictable and unconvincing. Comparing Tamburlaine's postponement of sexual gratification, for example, to "the deferral typical of capital accumulation, which returns profits to investment" (42) moves beyond speculative argument and into the realm of speciousness. While *Tamburlaine* is appropriated as evidence of English notions of Asiatic fierceness (with the titular hero rendered sympathetically because, presumably, he shares common enemies with his English-speaking audience), *Antony and Cleopatra* is subjected to a familiar treatment that outlines the play's construction of a neat dichotomy distinguishing East (Egypt: decadent, impetuous, effeminate) from West (Rome: disciplined, circumspect, masculine). Chapter 3 offers straightforward accounts of how civic spectacles like James Stuart's London entry in 1604 and mock sea battles on the Thames "expressed distinct dynamics of privilege" (69) and reinforced particular sociopolitical hierarchies—arguments indicative of those made by Roy Strong in both *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977) and *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), the latter of which is conspicuously absent from Barbour's bibliography.

The second part of *Before Orientalism* examines the efforts of English emissaries to

demonstrate the nation's power and prestige through theatrical means. As Barbour explains in the "Prelude," because many English merchants in India had presented themselves as ambassadors and subsequently "degraded the title and, with that, England's reputation among Moghul officials" (1), the actual ambassadors sanctioned by the monarch were forced to overcome Moghul skepticism by establishing their authority as both agents of the king and living embodiments of their nation as a whole: "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" (1). The second part features an interesting discussion of the embassy of Sir Thomas Roe (1615–19), which, according to Barbour, "constituted England's first attempt to assert its dignity as a country of consequence in India" (146). The inherent theatricality of Roe's contrived exercises in statesmanship on behalf of a burgeoning British Empire is both well-researched and entertainingly conveyed by Barbour. But nowhere in the book does he effectively break free of describing England's pre-Enlightenment posture as anything but "proto-Orientalist" and characterized by attitudes that, in the end, only serve to support Said's central contentions while undercutting Barbour's own declared thesis.

A more sophisticated analysis of the complex, reciprocal relationship between Eastern and Western thought and their respective perspectival constructs is found in Burton's *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579–1624*. Burton begins his study by placing himself alongside Barbour as a scholar interested in "rethinking" (12) *Orientalism*. Indeed, Burton's argument that "the numerous images of Islam and Muslim peoples produced by English authors of the early modern period ranged from the censorious to the laudatory, from others to brothers" (12), sounds remarkably similar to Barbour's "contest between opposites at once alien and fraternal." However Burton finds ways to move beyond what he sees as the tendency to "retain Said's sense of *discursive consistency* to describe English attempts to compensate for Eastern power" (12). Instead of simply cataloging examples of complexly rendered Islamic representations on the English stage, he documents a much more nuanced interchange between Eastern and Western thought that provides the foundation for that complexity. While discussions of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Tamburlaine* are to be found here—as well as analyses of *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Jew of Malta*—they serve as illustrations of what the book's dust jacket describes as "bilateral and reciprocal Anglo-Islamic relationships" rather than mere examples of a defensive England attempting to establish a cultural, economic, and political hegemony.

Burton marshals a remarkably disparate set of materials in detailing the layered and contrapuntal cultural exchanges that mark premodern East–West encounters. Central to his argument are the fascinating correspondences between Elizabethan rulers and their Ottoman counterparts. In a particularly illuminating examination of Elizabeth's letters to Murad (the Ottoman Sultan), Burton suggests that the "slippery rhetoric" employed by Elizabeth "illustrates the inadequacy of colonial

paradigms which imagine an 'Other' denied subjectivity. Not only do Elizabeth's letters acknowledge Turkish subjectivity, they treat Turks as respected equals whose acceptance and approval of the English are paramount" (58).

Burton also examines lesser-known plays like Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London* (1584), which, according to Burton, is "the earliest Elizabethan play to bring the figures of the Muslim and Jew into strategic conjunction" (219). Burton claims that the play illustrates the manner in which Christian suspicion of Islam was offset by a self-reaffirming demonization of the unscrupulous Jewish moneylender—it also animates the role and status of the "professional Jew" (219) in Levantine trade. The triangular relationship among Christian, Muslim, and Jew complicates the already intricate dynamic governing the delicate negotiation of cultures that are bound by a common interest in mercantilism.

In the end, *Traffic and Turning* succeeds beautifully in deepening and widening the context for the burgeoning orientalism Said so deftly explains. The simple dichotomies that are too often accepted as accurate depictions of cultural chasms are exposed as reductive and, therefore, misleading. The nuanced, textured reality Burton describes is not merely more useful to our understanding of the history of East–West relations, it is also far more interesting.