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# "To guard this Paradise from any second violation": Ysabinda and the Eastern female body as contested territory in Dryden's *Amboyna* (1673)

Mathilde Alazraki

1 In 1623, the Dutch *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) tortured and executed over twenty foreign traders, many of whom belonged to the British East India Company (EIC), on the ground that they were plotting an illegal takeover of the Dutch-controlled fort on the island of Amboyna, and the lucrative spice trade that came from it. This incident, better known as the Amboyna massacre, created outrage in Britain, where it became a symbol of the tense and bloody rivalry between the English and the Dutch trade companies around the Indian Ocean. The beginning of the Anglo-Dutch Wars thirty years later only fuelled English nationalist anger, and the Amboyna massacre soon became the centre of several pieces of anti-Dutch propaganda over several decades. One of these pieces is John Dryden's 1673 play *Amboyna, or the Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants*. Written during the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672-1674), this heroic tragedy takes on real life figures who died during the Amboyna massacre, such as the East India Company captain Gabriel Towerson, the main protagonist and heroic martyr of the play. However, the plot of Dryden's work does not focus on the island of Amboyna and its spice trade as much as it centres around the tragic love triangle between Ysabinda, a native woman of the Moluccas, her English fiancé Gabriel Towerson, and the cruel Harman Junior, son of the Dutch Governor of Amboyna. At the start of the play, Harman Junior tries to buy Ysabinda's hand from Towerson, who refuses firmly. Ysabinda comes to symbolically stand for the territory of Amboyna and its spices, at the centre of a power struggle between Britain and the Netherlands. The play goes on to present two conflicting visions of conquest for the Spice Islands' territories, each of them embodied by one of the male characters of this love triangle.

Towerson, and the East India Company he represents, favour peaceful cohabitation with the Dutch and, through his union with Ysabinda, he seeks to win over the support of the natives through diplomacy. Harman Junior, on the other hand, is defined by his greed and cruelty, and ultimately rapes Ysabinda, thus starting a chain of events that climaxes with the Amboyna massacre. A close study of Ysabinda's treatment in the play will thus help shed light on Britain's imperialist project around the Indian Ocean at the end of the seventeenth century, and on its representation as a legitimate and benevolent trade empire in the East, as opposed to the monopolistic and violent practices of the VOC. However, looking at the real-life figure behind Ysabinda's character, the Indo-Armenian Mariam Khan, can help us reconsider Dryden's literary endeavour.

## The Spice Islands: An Eastern theatre of European rivalry

2 The Spice Islands, or Moluccas, a string of islands in the East of Indonesia, have been a contested territory in European history ever since the first Spanish and Portuguese ships ventured into the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the world between the two Iberian empires, did not settle their struggle over the Moluccas. It was the 1529 Treaty of Saragossa which eventually secured the Portuguese claim over the Spice Islands and their lucrative trade of pepper, nutmeg, mace, clove and cinnamon (Raman 7-8). However, it is too often left unsaid that European trade flourished in the region because of a particular set of circumstances. The Indian subcontinent, ruled by the Central Asian Mughal dynasty, was led in the second half of the sixteenth century by the Emperor Akbar the Great (r. 1556-1605). Akbar was more tolerant of ethnic and religious minorities than his predecessors, as he relied on them to strengthen the authority of his centralized state (Aslanian 47). He was favourable to European merchants, particularly Portuguese traders, opening factories at strategic locations, such as the port of Surat, to benefit from the international trade they brought. While the EIC (founded in 1600) took an early interest in the Spice Islands, with the Company funding trips to the islands of Java, Sumatra and the Moluccas between 1601 and 1603, the Dutch VOC was the first real competitor to the Portuguese in the Spice Islands. Their ventures in the mainland were limited, and they focused their activities on the islands of Java and Ambon where they established trading posts in 1603 and 1610 respectively (Reid 290). Soon, the powerful Dutch navy overpowered the Portuguese, chasing them out of the Indian Ocean, which left the two Protestant forces to fight over the Moluccas. By the time the events at Amboyna started to unfold, an uneasy and unequal truce had been reached between the EIC and the Dutch VOC: the two powers had an equal share of the pepper trade, but Dutch merchants kept the upper-hand by controlling two-thirds of the other spices coming out of the region (Raman 197). It is in this tense context of Dutch superiority over English merchants that, in 1623, several English East India Company agents were tortured and killed by the Dutch Governor of Amboyna after being accused of plotting a rebellion with the help of Japanese soldiers, in order to steal control of the fort at Amboyna. Following this event, Britain had to withdraw from most of the Spice Islands while the VOC extended its monopoly, unchallenged. The initial response to the international incident at Amboyna was rather subdued. The historically close

relationship between the two Protestant powers led them to stay quiet on the matters, as neither was willing to risk an all-out war in Europe over an incident taking place so far away in the East (Raman 200). However, pamphlets and other references to the Amboyna massacre kept circulating in England in the following years. In 1624, the Dutch VOC commissioned a pamphlet published in London, in the English language, under the title *A remonstrance of the directors of the Netherlands East India Company* which in turn prompted several responses over the years from the English East India Company, including *Nevves out of East India of the cruell and bloody vsage of our English merchants and others at Amboyna* (1624) and A True Relation of the Late Uniust, Cruell, and Barbarous Proceedings against the English at Amboyna (1632). These pamphlets were directly used by Dryden as inspiration, almost fifty years later. Indeed, by the time Dryden's play was entered on the Stationers' Register on June 26, 1673, two Anglo-Dutch Wars had already unfolded since the events at Amboyna and another was underway. In these circumstances, English audiences were ready to revisit the traumatic events of Amboyna under a new nationalist and propagandist light.

3 Dryden's 1673 heroic tragedy *Amboyna, or the Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants* (which premiered at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane in May 1672) is, today, one of the lesser known plays of the poet laureate. It is often considered too simple and too overtly propagandist compared to his other works and Dryden himself admits in the play's dedication to Lord Thomas Clifford of Chudleigh that he wrote the story in less than a month (Dryden 5). In this story, the brave and dashing East India Company captain, Gabriel Towerson, and his tender-hearted native fiancée, Ysabinda, are prevented from wedding peacefully by Harman Junior, the son of the Dutch Governor of the island, who rapes Ysabinda off-stage. When Towerson avenges Ysabinda's honour and kills Harman Junior in a duel, the Dutch Fiscal and the Governor Harman Senior stage a conspiracy to arrest, torture and execute Towerson and his men, under the guise of stopping them from plotting a rebellion. From the very opening of the play, Dryden references clearly the tense *status quo* that preceded the events at Amboyna, such as when the Dutch merchant Van Herring informs the Governor Harman Senior that "the price of pepper, and other spices, was raised of late in Europe" (1.1.10-1), to which Harman Senior answers that these profits might be endangered by Britain's rival presence in the region. So, from the start, the Dutch's intentions are clear: to remove the English presence from the Spice Islands to secure their monopoly over the spice trade, at all costs. As England's first poet laureate from 1668 until his death in 1688, Dryden's support of the English Crown is made clear, especially at a time when the public opinion deemed the Anglo-Dutch conflict a "controversial war" (Hughes 91). A few years later, in 1678, Andrew Marvell's gave voice to the conflicted view on the costly Anglo-Dutch War in his essay *An Account on the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England*. In order to galvanize public support against the Dutch, Dryden took inspiration from the English pamphlets that came out after the incident, as well as from those that were being published during his time: *The Second Part of The Tragedy of Amboyna* in 1653 or *The Emblem of ingratitude; a true relation of the unjust, cruel, and barbarous proceedings against the English at Amboyna* in 1672, published the same year as Dryden's play was performed. The dates of publication of these pamphlets show that the Amboyna massacre was regularly brought up in times of conflict against the Netherlands and they highlight its lasting cultural impact in English minds. However, in spite of these numerous sources, Dryden took many creative liberties in his retelling of the events, and nowhere is it more apparent than in the character of Ysabinda. The

name itself was directly taken from the transcription of the name of a Japanese soldier (Tsabinda) arrested and tortured for his alleged role in the conspiracy to take the fort (Nocentelli 142). Though the real-life Towerson never married an Ambonese, he was married to an Armenian Christian, Mariam Khan, who was raised in the harem of Emperor Jahangir, Akbar's son, after her father's death. Mariam Khan was first married to the English East India Company captain William Hawkins, a marriage conceived as a sign of friendship by the Emperor Jahangir during Hawkins' stay at his court in Agra from 1609 to 1612 (Malieckal 98). Hawkins, a company agent, was originally tasked with delivering a letter from James I to the Mughal Emperor, asking for permission to build an English trading post in Surat. His good relationship with Jahangir attracted the jealousy of Jesuits and Portuguese merchants and Hawkins soon fell out of favour, having no choice but to leave the court of Agra in disgrace with his Armenian Indian wife. Hawkins died on the way back to England, and by the time Mariam Khan arrived in London in 1614, she was engaged to Captain Gabriel Towerson (110).

4 Towerson, who had sailed with the Hawkinses from Bantam, helped Mariam Khan petition the East India Company Board of Directors in London in order to claim Hawkins' money for herself as his widow. Mariam Khan's quick engagement to Towerson might have been a result of necessity more than affection as she was stranded in a strange country without family or any means to support herself, and allying herself with another Company agent visibly helped her plead her case: "The company be charitably affected towards the widow that is a stranger and to be married very shortly they thought it fit to give her some token of their love" (IOR B/5, 38, February 21, 1613/1614). However, the Company was acting less out of charity than interest, and the court minutes of the meeting make clear the fact that they expected something in exchange for this "token of their love" worth 200 gold sovereigns: "it may be for the honour of the company if she [Mariam] shall signify their bounty and kind resort towards her, unto her friends in those parts [India]." The company was no doubt aware of the influence of Armenian traders, who were used to acting as intermediaries between European merchants and local rulers in the East. Therefore, it is possible that they saw in Towerson's bride a possible ally in promoting the Company's interests in the region, thanks to the connections of the Armenian minority in India to (Fischer 29). This theory is supported by Thomas Roe, the first official English ambassador to Mughal India, who wrote in his diary of the sway Jahangir's wife, the Empress Nour Jahan, held over the court, and Mariam Khan's possible assistance in winning her favours: "his [Towerson's] wife may assist me to Normahall better than all this court" (Roe 393). Thus, because of her ties to an economically successful ethnic and religious minority in India, as well as her close connection to the inner workings of the palace, Mariam Khan was seen as a strategic actor who could help further both the diplomatic ambitions of Roe at the Mughal court and the corporate ambitions of the EIC, at a specific time when European competition was fierce in the Indian subcontinent. However, Mariam Khan, unlike her fictional counterpart Ysabinda, was far from the tender-hearted ideal of a native woman submitting herself unconditionally to foreign colonizers. In his diary, Roe relates the discrepancy between Towerson's expectations and the reality he found in Agra in 1617: "Her [Mariam's] frends are Poore and mean and weary of them. Hee came with hopes of great Diamonds and they looke for guifts of him. I am sorie for him and his little vanetie" (Roe 448). While Towerson had hoped to profit financially and most probably professionally from his union with Mariam Khan, once she was back in her own country, the power dynamics between the English

captain and his bride were reversed. Consequently, the couple separated in 1618, Towerson leaving his wife behind in the capital, but this would not be the last that the Company heard of Mariam Khan. By 1619, she had accumulated such debts that she regularly petitioned the company's agents for money, to the point that William Biddulph, head factor in India, entreated the Company to resolve the couple's conflict, lest it started affecting their business in the Agra: "Soe yf the next yeare hir husband come not nor send hir meanes, shee will breed much trouble to your [the EIC's] factors at Agra and the court with theire exclamations" (Foster 169). This letter can help us shed light on the obstacles and resistance that the EIC met in India, as well as the surprising agency displayed by an Eastern woman like Mariam Khan, who was very much aware of the potential sway she could hold over the Company's reputation. However, after the gruesome events at Amboyna and Towerson's subsequent death, the Company directors cut all ties with Mariam Khan, and this time, they dismissed her rights as a widow and instead sent the reparation money to Towerson's brother back in England (Fischer 28). Looking at the real-life figure behind Ysabinda's character puts into perspective the different strategies the EIC had to deploy to grow roots in the competitive arena that the Indian subcontinent was, especially at a time when Britain did not have the upper-hand in the East and had to rely on minorities and marginal actors to further its ambitions. In her 2019 article on Dryden's play, Amrita Sen aptly points out the fact that among the creative liberties taken by the playwright in his depiction of Towerson's wife, Dryden did not make Ysabinda a widow already linked to English interests, like Mariam Khan, but a virgin (3). By erasing the traces of Britain's previous (and unsuccessful) foray at the Mughal court, which ended with Hawkins leaving in disgrace, and replacing it with a native woman strongly symbolized as a virgin territory, Dryden presents Amboyna as *tabula rasa* onto which an idealized England and demonized Holland can project two very different visions of conquest, unencumbered by previous failures.

## The female body as contested territory

5 The colonial practices of the two competing nations in the play are defined along perfectly symmetrical opposites: the civility and legitimacy of English presence, versus the brutality and illegality of Dutch hegemony. These two models are visible from the very beginning of the play and the introduction of the two main male characters. Towerson enters the stage having just saved Harman Junior from pirates. As Harman Junior thanks him, Towerson displays his civility and explains what is presented by Dryden as the alleged basis for Britain's colonial model: reciprocity among equals, and more precisely among fellow Europeans in foreign lands. In opposition to the violent practices of the Dutch merchants, Towerson readily admits that "[t]his Ile yields Spice enough for both [countries]; and Europe, Ports, and Chapmen, where to vend them" (1.1.215-7). The supposed greed of the VOC is here set against the free and generous spirit of the English naval empire, which had already been famously promoted by Richard Hakluyt in his collection of travel accounts defending the "righte of navigation in the sea, & the right of traffique" of all "princes and estates" (from a note written by Hakluyt in 1598, quoted in Taylor 424). Unlike the gallant Towerson, Harman Junior shows the supposed *ethos* of the Dutch: the superiority of greed over loyalty to a kingdom with which they have shared historically strong ties. As soon as the Governor's son sees Ysabinda, all promises of friendship to the English captain

disappear and he reverts to a commercial rhetoric of trade by offering to buy the Englishman's fiancée. Towerson, however, remains steadfastly loyal and morally uncompromising, citing his duty to his fiancée and to the legal contract that binds them, saying: "Hold, you mistake me Harman, I never gave you just occasion to think I wou'd make Merchandise of Love; Ysabinda you know is mine, contracted to me e're I went for England, and must be so till death" (2.1.81-4). This scene and its insistence on the temporal precedence of Towerson and Ysabinda's engagement – which happened before the story unfolds – brings to the fore the central question of who has the more legitimate claim over the Moluccas.

6 This question of legitimacy is at the centre of the play and, while historically the Iberian powers were the first Europeans in the region in the early sixteenth century, Dryden insists on Britain's anterior – and thus superior – claim: in the opening lines of the play, the Dutch Fiscal, treasurer and advisor to the Governor, speaks with Van Herring and tells him they need to remove the English presence from the region so they can be the sole European power in the Spice Islands. Van Herring hesitates and reminds him that the English "were first discoverers of this Isle, first Traded hither, and show'd us the way" (1.1.60-1). The matter of who came first is of great importance in the play since Amboyna is a strategic island of enormous wealth, described by Towerson as "o'erflowing" with "Luxuries", "bounties", "Spices", "Gums" and "Gems of richest value" (1.1.224-7). From the start, Dryden's piece of nationalist propaganda states that, because the English were first in Amboyna, they deserve to profit from its riches more than the Dutch, who only came second. The precedence of Britain's claim over Amboyna is doubled in the person of Ysabinda who is described, just like her island, as "beauteous" and "rich" (1.1.124), and her union with Towerson becomes a symbol of the flourishing trade between Britain and Amboyna. Moreover, Dryden stresses the inhumane and monopolistic practices of the Dutch from the very start of the play, when the Fiscal reveals that he's plotting to "cut all [the Englishmen's] throats and seize all their effects within this island" (1.1.43-4), as opposed to Towerson who will happily share the island's bounty so that all can equally profit from the wealth of the East. What transpires in Towerson and Van Herring's words is that even though the English had the only legal claim to a monopoly over the Spice Islands, their morally superior *ethos* commanded them to share it with all, while the Dutch, who arrived second, unlawfully took over the region and selfishly kept it for themselves. Thus, the body of the native woman, set between the two European men battling for her, becomes a contested territory upon which Dryden rewrites history in order to make explicit the moral and legal superiority of the English claim over the Moluccas.

7 Throughout the play, Dryden superimposes on the local plot of the marital contract between Ysabinda and Towerson the global geopolitical struggle of European colonial projects. Thus, marital bliss between Ysabinda and her English fiancé metonymically comes to stand for the willing surrender of the Spice Island territories to English control by the native population. Nowhere is this clearer than when Ysabinda calls herself English, signifying to all the voluntary assimilation of the Moluccas into the English realm. In act III, scene 3, an English woman, rescued from a shipwreck, accuses Dutch pirates of having pillaged her husband's ship and killed the crew. While the Governor's men vehemently deny those allegations, Ysabinda immediately sides with the Englishmen and trusts that the woman is saying the truth. While the men keep arguing, Ysabinda surrenders once more her island and her possessions to an English-

born, this time a female stranger: "Come, countrywoman,—I must call you so, since he who owns my heart is English born, [...] my house is yours, my clothes shall habit you, even these I wear, rather than see you thus" (3.3.152-5). Ysabinda's words here make clear the shift that is made by the playwright from the personal relationship between Ysabinda and Towerson to the international scale of the absorption of the periphery by a colonial centre. More interestingly, this fantasy of the Moluccas willingly surrendering themselves over to English control, repeatedly sustained by Ysabinda's indefectible loyalty to her fiancé's country, seems to rest on shaky foundations, since the play indicates that Ysabinda's engagement was contracted "much against the will of all her friends" (1.1.122). Anxieties over the absence of reciprocity at the heart of the colonial project are thus not absent from the play, no matter how many times Ysabinda calls herself an English woman. It is significant here to focus on the way the macrocosm of the imperial venture is superimposed on the microcosm of the household, and specifically on a marriage between individuals as metonymically standing for a contract between an Eastern territory and a joint-stock company like the EIC – which the real-life Towerson represented. While in the play this metonymical relationship is presented as the utopian promise of a harmonious submission of the East to the British crown, in real life, the outcome could not have been more different. The marriage contract between Towerson and Mariam Khan (as well as the money invested by the Board of Directors into this contract) resulted in complete failure when they overestimated Mariam Khan's wealth and willingness to help further English interests, while underestimating the trouble she could cause them. This failed cross-cultural venture, which might not have been made public enough for Dryden to be aware of, can still help us shed light on the change of paradigm that unfolded during the seventeenth century. While at the beginning of the period the EIC heavily relied on all sorts of native mediators to take root in the Indian subcontinent, by the time of the play's writing, the Company looked far less favourably on cross-cultural unions which had been deemed a threat to the integrity of the British identity (Nocentelli 139).

## The commodification and violation of the female body

8 It is interesting to reconsider Dryden's dramatization of Ysabinda – as the embodiment of her island – willingly choosing to marry an Englishman while refusing the advances of a Dutchman when considering the fact that the Dutch VOC controlled the island of Amboyna in real life as in the play. In spite of the beginning of the play emphasizing the supposed stronger English claims to the Spice Islands, Harman Junior paints a very different picture when he warns Towerson that "you know you are not strongest in these parts, and 'twill be ill contesting with your Masters" (2.1.85-6). As opposed to Towerson's vision of all European powers being equals in the virgin territory of the island, the Dutch have their own hierarchy, in which they are the "Masters" of English and Ambonese alike. Towerson recognizes his own powerlessness against the Dutch mastery when he resorts to appealing to Harman Junior's gallantry to stop his offer to buy Ysabinda: "I will not stay to take [your provocations]: Only this before I go, if you are truly Gallant, insult not where you have power, but keep your Quarrel secret, [...] meanwhile, I go to Marry Ysabinda" (2.1.121-4). It is in this scene that Ysabinda's strategic role can be most plainly seen. The Dutch have the military advantage thanks to the Portuguese fort that they control in Amboyna, and Ysabinda herself recognizes that Harman Junior's "Countrymen have the advantage" (2.1.25-6). But unlike the

Dutch hegemony based on strength, the English offer a different model of governance over the island, one purportedly based on reciprocity and the acceptation of the European presence by the natives. It is here that Ysabinda acts as a tie-breaker between the Dutch, who are stronger, and the English, who supposedly were there first, by clearly stating that her choice is not "to [the Dutch's] advantage" (2.1.20). However, by putting Ysabinda at the centre of these two conflicting visions of conquest, one based on one-sided military might and the other on a harmonious and supposedly reciprocal relationship with the natives, Dryden sets the stage for Ysabinda to be another victim of the brutal Dutch way of doing business. Indeed, while Towerson was naïve enough to believe that Harman Junior could be gallant, the audience is reminded by the Fiscal of the true face of the Dutch, "a race that are born rebels, and live every where on rapine" (4.2.63). From there, the tragedy appears inevitable, when the *ethos* of the Dutch is to take by force what English "Noblemen" (2.1.392) won over with their gallantry and civility.

9 The criticism of Dutch greed and their violent colonial practices reaches a climax in act IV, scene 3, when Harman Junior tries to convince Ysabinda to be unfaithful to her new husband right before their wedding night. At first, he attempts to entice her, but when his efforts are unsuccessful, he accuses her of doing wrong by not sharing her affections: "You are a Woman; have enough of Love for him and me; I know the plenteous Harvest all is his: he has so much of joy, that he must labor under it. In charity you may allow some gleanings to a Friend" (4.3.30-3). It is interesting to see the parallel between the way Ysabinda's love is described as a "plenteous harvest" and as "gleanings", and the fertility of the island that was previously painted as giving enough bounties for all Europeans to share. This description of Ysabinda's "harvest" being scrupulously guarded is in direct opposition to the description of Julia, the wife of the Spanish captain Perez, who happily shares her "gleanings" with both the Dutch Fiscal and the English merchant Beamont. Here, it is worth comparing the dynamics between the main love triangle (Towerson/Ysabinda/Harman Junior) and the "quartet" formed by Perez, Julia, the Fiscal and Beamont. Carmen Nocentelli has pointed out that "[i]n many ways, Julia is the sheer antithesis of Ysabinda: she is as voracious as the latter is chaste, and as complicit in the Dutch plot as the latter is its innocent victim. At the same time, [...] both are made to stand as personifications of the East Indies" (146). This statement appears especially true when the rhetoric of the unbalanced distribution of the spice trade between Britain and the Netherlands at the beginning of the period is directly appropriated by Julia's suitors. In a moment of ironic self-depreciation, Beamont comments on the similarly unequal distribution of Julia's affections: "Now Mr Fiscall [...] you've the Indie's in your Arms, yet I hope a poor English Man may come in for a third part of the Merchandise" (2.1.282-4). The commodification of the female body throughout the play is replicated onto both Ysabinda and Julia's relationships with the European men around them. However, the fact that Julia, by her Hispanic-sounding name and her Spanish husband Perez, is still associated with an Iberian power, instead of being portrayed as a native like Ysabinda, should make us consider the different symbols these two women stand for. I propose here that Julia and Ysabinda, much like Harman Junior and Towerson, represent two different visions of imperial governance. Julia, in her willingness to be shared between Spain (her husband Perez), Holland (the Fiscal) and Britain (Beamont), stands for the historical past of the Spice Islands, when they passed from Iberian hands who were unable to defend them to the shared control of the Dutch and English trade companies. However, the sharing of

Julia's body is not presented as problematic simply because it takes place outside of her marital union with Perez, but also because it contains the threat of disease and contagion. Indeed, Beamont remarks about Spanish men like Perez that "the whole Nation of them is generally so Pocky, that 'tis no longer a Disease, but a second nature in them" (2.1.294-5). This reference to syphilis ("pock") is a clear moral judgement from the playwright who associates the mismanagement of Julia's body with a venereal disease and its spreading through Europe (Nocentelli 147-8). The pure Ysabinda, unlike the possibly contaminated Julia, represents the future, or at least a future fantasized by Dryden, where English supremacy over the Spice Islands would be unchallenged and unsullied, once again legitimizing a bolder colonial venture presented as more stable and harmonious than the squabble over Julia's body.

10 Consequently, Towerson's argument at the beginning of the play that the island's bounty could and should easily be shared is actually undermined by the commodification of Julia's body by the old European powers, as opposed to Ysabinda's own virgin body presented as a new and untouched territory. Just as a virgin bride should save herself for her husband, the fantasized model of governance symbolised by Towerson and Ysabinda's marriage calls for the spice trade to be given exclusively to their legitimate, lawful and rightful owners – Britain and the EIC. Unlike the gallant Towerson, Harman Junior is unable to win Ysabinda's "free consent" (4.3.41), and because of the supposed nature of the Dutch to steal by force rather than to earn by right, the virginal Ysabinda is raped by the son of the Governor while her fiancé is away. But Ysabinda's rape takes place off-stage and is heard more than seen by the audience. After pursuing Ysabinda off-stage, Harman Junior tells her "Now you are mine; yield, or by force I'll take it" (4.3.71), to which Ysabinda exclaims "Succor, sweet Heaven, oh succor me!" in the final line of the scene (4.3.74). As Shankar Raman points out: "[a]s metaphor for colonial aggression, the import of Ysabinda's rape is double-edged, for ultimately the play emphasizes less the brutality of the rape itself than the question of its legality" (234-5). This is underlined by the play's direct association of Harman Junior to "Tarquin" (4.3.110), a classical figure of political tyranny and abusive power. This reference to Roman history serves the double purpose of familiarizing the alien union between Towerson and Ysabinda for an English audience, while at the same time reminding us that the true tragedy of the play is not so much Ysabinda's rape as what she represents to her English fiancé. Upon discovering the violation of his bride, Towerson swears to avenge her and the island she symbolically stands for: "Behold revenge for injured chastity. This sword heaven draws against thee, and here had placed me like a fiery cherub, to guard this paradise from any second violation" (4.3.124-8). The violation of the "paradise" that is Ysabinda's body appears thus more as a shocking development meant to spring Towerson into action than as the true climax of the play. In her essay "Rape, Voyeurism, and the Restoration Stage" Jean Marsden reminds us that "the proliferation of rape scenes coincides with the appearances of actresses upon the British stage" around 1660 (185). The popularity of the new genre of the "she-tragedy" (Howe 109) during the Restoration period could explain why Dryden chose Ysabinda's rape as a stepping stone toward the true climax of the play, Towerson's torture and subsequent death. By incorporating elements of the "she-tragedy" into his heroic drama, such as a rape scene and the physical suffering of a virtuous female character, Dryden most likely used the representation of Ysabinda – and the actress who played her – as an erotic object for promotional purposes, in order to draw his audience to the theatre.

## The erasure of the Eastern presence

11 It is not a coincidence that Ysabinda's body and the island Amboyna are both described as a "paradise." By repeatedly marking Ysabinda as an Englishwoman by heart, if not by birth, and by presenting the island as *tabula rasa*, untouched before the arrival of Europeans, Dryden eases the possible anxieties produced by the Eastern background of the drama. In fact, this stage adaptation of the Spice Islands has more in common with the early modern European representations of the New World than with any territory in the Indian Ocean. After her rape, Ysabinda begs her fiancé to leave what was once a garden of Eden, only populated by innocent and noble savages who had never tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: "fly this detested isle, where horrid ills so black and fatal dwell as Indians could not guess, till Europe taught" (4.3.20-2). In his seminal article on "The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery", Louis Montrose points out how early modern European writers turned the body of the Native American Other into a blank page to represent contacts with the Americas "neither as a mere description nor as genuine encounter but rather as an act of symbolic violence, mastery and self-empowerment" (6). Presented as an untouched paradise, the island of Amboyna would have looked to an English audience more like the New World of the Americas, filled with unspoiled potential, rather than the old world of Muslim Asia, which had already been fantasized in European writing with literature on the Crusades. But by choosing this option, Dryden also erases the Spice Islands' historical place in the inter-Asian trade, which had been established long before the arrival of European powers. As Robert Markley puts it, erasing the presence of "East Indian sultans and traders" (160) from the play is necessary for the dichotomy between English and Dutch to appear clearly, as the formal presence of an Eastern Other would undermine the ideological divide that Dryden attempts to paint between two nations that have a similar history and religion. By turning Ysabinda's character into the classical innocent female protagonist of romance, the play undermines the existence and potential agency of Mariam Khan, who was neither threatened nor protected by European agents but rather tried to use them to further her own personal interests. Similarly, the adequation that is made between the island of Amboyna and an untouched garden of Eden completely erases the agency of Eastern powers in the region, which oversaw and controlled the inter-Asian spice trade, and without whose authority European traders could not operate. The real Mariam Khan, her close ties to the Mughal court, as well as the pivotal role her community played in the inter-Asian trade, were less useful to Dryden's propaganda, as opposed to her distorted representation in the character of the faithful and devoted Ysabinda, who asks nothing in exchange for the riches of her island. Moreover, by presenting Ysabinda as having "receiv'd Baptism for his [Towerson's] sake" (1.1.120-1), the play erases the religious and cultural diversity of the Indian subcontinent, something which the EIC was well aware of, as William Hawkins insisted on Mariam Khan being a white Armenian Christian born in Jahangir's harem to justify this unsanctioned cross-cultural union to his employers (Hawkins 14). Ysabinda and her island are thus turned into a pair of blank slates only here to be abused and avenged by the European men who discover them.

12 From there, it appears clearly that Ysabinda's rape is but another way for the playwright to visually signify the immorality of the Dutch, their trade company and the

country they represent. However, while the displacement of Dutch cruelty onto a defenceless woman is shocking and sure to fuel anti-Dutch sentiments, it is the consequences rather than the rape itself that are denounced as the true tragedy of the play. Because Towerson has been repeatedly defined by his gallantry and civility, he has no other choice but to avenge the honour of his fiancée by killing Harman Junior in a duel which will lead to his own torture and death at the hands of the barbarous VOC. But this fictional moral distinction between the gallant Englishman and the cruel Dutchmen soon appears to be the only difference between the characters and the countries they represent. While Towerson and Ysabinda's union is supposedly based on the harmonious reciprocity of marital commitment, it is never made explicitly clear how reciprocal the relationship would be. If Dryden's fantasy came true and Britain had the monopoly over the Spice Islands, it is not shown anywhere in the play how different it would be from the current Dutch hegemony. As opposed to Harman Junior or to the Fiscal, who are driven only by greed and envy, Towerson is said to be "apt to pitty the distress'd and liberal to relieve 'em" (1.1.130), but the truth is that "[n]either group could exist in the Spice Islands without the presence of the native populations to do their manual labour" (Thompson 113). The contradiction at the heart of *Amboyna* rests on the fact that its main hero is a commercial agent for the East India Company, and thus just as oriented toward commerce and the desire for monopoly as his Dutch counterparts are. More than representing England as a country, Towerson stands for his employer, the private board of the chartered company (Raman 218), and their desire not only to rival the VOC, but to replace them entirely. At the core of *Amboyna* lies an uncanny similarity between English and Dutch, rather than the moral chasm Dryden would want us to see. And this tension at the core of the play is best made visible through Towerson's attitude toward the other natives of the island.

13 Indeed, Ysabinda is the only native character with speaking lines in the play, most of those lines being dedicated to singing Towerson's praise and refusing herself to the Dutch Harman Junior. The other native characters are mere witnesses to the drama unfolding in their territories, even though at the end, they pay an even dearer price than the Englishmen who claim to defend them. First among them, of course, is Ysabinda, who is raped off-stage. Afterwards, when Towerson and his followers are accused of plotting to overthrow the Governor and take control of the fort, it is said, in a passing line by Towerson to Harman Senior: "[t]he natives, first, you tortured" (5.1.284), before immediately moving on to the on-stage and graphically detailed torture undergone by the English. As opposed to the invisible and silent suffering of the natives, the plight of Towerson and his men, who are waterboarded and burned with fire, is described at length, thus making it the focal point of the tragedy. The torment of the English Beamont, for instance, is not only explicitly shown but also commented on by Towerson, who says: "We have friends in England who wou'd weep to see this acted on a Theatre, which here you make your pastime" (5.1.408-9). In a metatheatrical move, Dryden does not simply predict but truly dictates the audience's appropriate response to this propagandist spectacle: weeping. Indeed, the playwright emphasizes what the truly unforgivable crime of the play is: the violation of the sanctity of the English male body. Rather than being the centre of the drama, Ysabinda's rape is only the starting point of a chain of events that climaxes with Towerson's death, presented as the true reason behind the Anglo-Dutch conflict in the Spice Islands. But by doing so, the playwright unwittingly undermines the supposed moral superiority of the English over the Dutch since, had the VOC been fairer toward English merchants from the start,

there would have been no need to contest the Dutch hegemony over the region, and the natives would have still been abused, but this time in a lawful manner. This is confirmed by Towerson who reminds Harman Senior that they cannot treat English people the way they do the Ambonese: "that supremacy of power, you claim, extends but to the natives, not to us" (5.1.267-8). Thus, the play presents the suffering of the natives at the hands of the Europeans as an inevitable and accepted collateral damage in their colonial endeavour. The romance motif of the cross-cultural union between Ysabinda and Towerson is thus undermined by the play's ending, which strategically quells any anxiety the audience might have at the idea of Anglo-Indian mingling. Instead, Towerson and Ysabinda's marriage is forever made impossible by his death, so that the English captain's tragic romance reassures the audience that the natives will never be the equal of the Europeans in the Spice Islands. The unequal power dynamics and strict hierarchy at the heart of the imperial project are reinforced by the very character who was presented as a pillar of virtue and morality. Through the final act of the play, Dryden makes clear the fact that violence against those who grow and harvest the spices is legitimate and, more insidiously, unavoidable.

14 By displacing the diplomatic and military conflict over the Spice Islands onto the body of an Eastern woman, to be either won over by love or conquered by force, Dryden delivers a deeply political message aiming to fuel anti-Dutch sentiment. Indeed, the real question at the centre of *Amboyna* appears to be the question of legitimacy. Who has the most legitimate claim on the island, its trade, and its natives? The answer can be found in the hierarchy that Dryden presents to us, a hierarchy based on erasure: the erasure of the natives and their plight under European supremacy, and, even more importantly, the erasure of any previous trade taking place on the island before European arrival. By presenting the Moluccas as a previously untouched garden of Eden, a paradise, the playwright erases the influence of the Mughal empire, the leading Muslim power in the Indian subcontinent, whose authorization the Europeans had historically needed to open their factories. This allows Dryden to stage the Moluccas as an empty field where the Dutch and English can wrestle for the superior claim over the Spice islands on a supposedly moral basis. At the end of the play, Ysabinda's death, like her rape, is only hinted at, when she swears she will starve herself to avenge the death of her fiancé and, like the Roman Lucretia, to erase the immoral stain of the rape that endures in her body. This final erasure, of the native Eastern woman at the centre of the play, assuages any anxiety possibly felt by the audience at the sight of a cross-racial marriage between a native Ambonese and an English captain, especially at a time when Britain's colonial project was growing bolder and more aggressive in its Eastern ambitions. But by doing so, the play also erases the real-life cross-cultural unions that were sanctioned and even encouraged by the English East India Company at the beginning of the century, when Britain was only a very small player on the Eastern stage.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on John Dryden's 1673 play *Amboyna, or the Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants,* and more particularly on the figure of Ysabinda, and the island she represents, as contested territory. This article demonstrates that Ysabinda's relationship with her English fiancé Towerson comes to politically stand for the fantasized absorption of the Spice Islands into Britain's imperial project. Through a rhetoric of trade and ownership, Dryden stages Ysabinda's commodification and ultimate rape as a way to fuel anti-Dutch sentiment while at the same time justifying Britain's colonial practices. However, this literary endeavor is only sustainable through the erasure of the ruling power around the Indian Ocean at the time, the Mughal Empire, as well as through the distortion of the real-life figure behind Ysabinda's character: the Armenian Indian Mariam Khan.

Cet article se concentre sur la pièce de John Dryden, écrite en 1673, intitulée *Amboyna, or the Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants,* et plus particulièrement sur le personnage d'Ysabinda, ainsi que sur l'île qu'elle représente, comme territoire contesté. Cet article explique comment la relation entre Ysabinda et son fiancé anglais, Towerson, est amenée à symboliser un fantasme littéraire d'intégration des Moluques au sein du projet impérial anglais. À travers à une rhétorique mercantiliste, Dryden met en scène la réification et le viol d'Ysabinda afin d'encourager des sentiments anti-néerlandais chez son public, tout en justifiant les pratiques coloniales anglaises dans cette région. Néanmoins, ce tour de force littéraire n'est rendu possible que par l'effacement de l'empire moghol, qui règne autour de l'océan Indien à l'époque, ainsi que par la réécriture totale de la femme ayant inspiré le personnage d'Ysabinda : l'Indo-Arménienne Mariam Khan.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** John Dryden, Amboyna, Mariam Khan, les Moluques, impérialisme
**Keywords:** John Dryden, Amboyna, Mariam Khan, the Moluccas, imperialism

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