News from Amboyna: Two East India Companies and two different stories

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In March 1623, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) executed for treason 10 Englishmen working for the English East India Company (EIC) at Amboyna in present-day Indonesia following years of tension. When word of the incident reached England in June 1624, it caused a public uproar. Both companies launched their own publicity campaigns in England, in which they defended or condemned the actions of the Dutch and attempted to make use of the delicate political situation to resolve the conflict to their own advantage (see Games 2020).

In this paper, I will investigate the discourse strategies employed by the English and Dutch East India Companies in their earliest printed accounts of the events as well as their responses to each other’s accounts. The analyzed texts were printed in English in the Netherlands and England between 1624 and 1632 (and reprinted long after) (STC 7450-55; 547). The English company’s accounts attempted to foment sympathy and outrage in the English public that would translate into government pressure in their favor and against the Dutch company. The pamphlets of the Dutch company emphasized the legality of the company’s actions, which in their view negated to need for any punishments or reparations. Both sides had to navigate carefully censorship, government restrictions, and changing political situations while arguing their cases and discrediting their opponents. The English East India Company’s publicity campaign was so successful that for decades – even centuries – onwards the incident that became known as the Amboyne Massacre became a symbol of Dutch cruelty and ingratitude. A comparison of the differing discourse strategies will show why the English account of the events became so enduring rather than the Dutch one.

Bibliography

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*A remonstrance of the directors of the Netherlands East India Company presented to the Lords States Generall of Vnited Provinces, in defence of the said companie, touching the bloudy proceedings against the English merchants executed at Amboyna : together with the acts of the processe against the sayd English, and the reply of the English East English Company to the said remonstrance and defence*. STC 7450. London: by Iohn Dawson for the East India Company, 1632.

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*A true relation of the vniust, cruell, and barbarous proceedings against the English at Amboyna in the East-Indies, by the Neatherlandish gouernour and councel there Also the copie of a pamphlet, set forth first in Dutch and then in English, by some Neatherlander; falsly entituled, A true declaration of the newes that came out of the East-Indies, with the pinace called the Hare, which arriued at Texel in Iune, 1624. Together with an answer to the same pamphlet.* By the English East-India companie. Published by authoritie. STC 7451 and 7452. London: Printed by H. Lownes for Nathanael Newberry, 1624.

*A true relation of the vniust, cruell, and barbarous proceedings against the English at Amboyna in the East-Indies, by the Netherlandish gouernour and councell there Also the copy of a pamphlet, set forth first in Dutch and then in English, by some Netherlander; falsly intituled, A true declaration of the newes that came out of the East-Indies with the pinace called the Hare, which arrived at Texel in Iune, 1624. Together with an answer to the same pamphlet.* By the English East-India Company. Published by authority. STC 7453. London: Printed by G. Purslowe for Nathaniel Newberry, 1632.

*Een waer verhael vande onlancksche ongerechte, wreede, ende onmenschelycke procedure teghen de Enghelsche tot Amboyna in Oost-Indien, door de Nederlanlanders [sic] aldaer ghemaeckt op een versierde pretentie van een conspiratie vande selue Enghelschen.* STC 7455. London: [J. Beale]], 1624.