

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Richmond Barbour, *The Loss of the ‘Trades Increase’: An Early Modern Maritime Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). ix+310pp.
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The Loss of the ‘Trades Increase’: An Early Modern Maritime Catastrophe constitutes a tale of hubris — in the form of nautical gigantism — meeting nemesis. The East India Company launched the *Trades Increase* in 1609, a vessel displacing four times as much as the *Peppercorn*, a pinnace built to accompany it on the same voyage (pp. 42–43). The size of the *Trades Increase* imposed certain weaknesses, including an unsurprising tendency to run aground. The mainmast demanded emergency repairs in Morocco soon after the beginning of the East India Company’s sixth voyage, the first and last for the *Trades Increase*. It broke definitively in Java, when the crew attempted to ‘careen’ the ship, pulling it ashore and turning it on its side for maintenance of its leaky and worm-eaten hull, a process which would always be more difficult with a larger ship. The locals burned the beached hulk, to avoid the threat of it being converted into a permanent fort. Most of the ship’s complement, including its commander, Sir Henry Middleton, died of disease in Java around the time that it was beached and destroyed. Along the way to its seemingly inevitable destruction, the *Trades Increase* ran aground in Mocha, where its captain and principal officers were imprisoned for six months, in part because they failed to produce a proper license from the Ottoman court. The *Trades Increase* then evacuated the (failing) British trading factory at Suraj, in India, before Middleton sailed it back to Mocha, hell-bent on reparation for the suffering and insult of his previous visit. This was achieved, but at considerable cost to other company ships, to Indian merchants who were forced into unequal exchanges, and to any remaining doubts about the English reputation for piracy which had helped to get the sixth voyage into trouble. I read Barbour’s history between Patrick O’Brien novels, and the misadventures of *Trades Increase* seem like the voyage of an early and incompetent Jack Aubrey. The characters are not fictional, but one has a sense that

Barbour has come to know them by close reading of their surviving letters and accounts of the voyage. He is able to understand their actions not only in terms of their circumstances or their times, but also as products of their mutual antipathies and individual habits of mind. On the whole, however, none shows himself wholly sympathetic. The career of the *Trades Increase* comes across as a comedy of errors, best enjoyed from the safe distance of four hundred years.

In his acknowledgements, Barbour thanks Richard Strier ‘for encouraging me, a literary scholar, to write a generational study of the East India Company’ (p. 309). True to his original vocation, Barbour makes sometimes fascinating references to the Elizabethan stage throughout. He notes that Edward Alleyn invested £550 in the East India Company, becoming a ‘chief adventurer’ in the company, a position usually only held by noblemen (pp. 23–24). This shows the enormous respect that actors could enjoy and the lucrative potential of their profession, but also presents us with the spectacle of the actor who played Tamburlaine becoming an imperialist of a different and less exciting sort. The reader is seldom allowed to forget for long that the early voyages of the East India Company took place when the most famous works of English drama were being written and first performed.

Barbour may modestly decline the title of an historian, but he has nevertheless written a superb archival history, drawing on scattered accounts and journals, many unpublished. He lists these in a few pages near the beginning (pp. 56–60), also noting where the manuscripts were ignored or redacted in contemporary accounts published to promote the company, its achievements, its stock and (most importantly) its continued support by the government. Nineteenth-century historians also tended to emphasize its success, but as an anticipation of British imperialism. Barbour, however, is no more a nineteenth-century imperialist than he is a seventeenth-century stock promoter, and focuses on a complete failure. One might complain that the history he produces remains Eurocentric, though theoretically informed: Barbour’s descriptions of the countries visited and of their own political and trade interests are perfunctory. One ought not to expect him to complement his use of East India company archives with Ottoman archives (even assuming that they somewhere survive), but he generally fails to draw on non-western sources. Even Edward Said does not appear in the bibliography, though the word ‘Orientalism’ appears several times in the text. I do not wish, however, to impose a counsel of perfection. This book is an admirable work of scholarship as it stands; it is a measure of its strength that it calls for future work, from additional perspectives.

I was particularly intrigued by references to Asians in English employ. The diminished crew of the *Trades Increase* hired Chinese labourers to help in their vain efforts to

repair the vessel in Java, for instance (p. 227). ‘By 1610’, Barbour notes, ‘East India Company crews were made up of Dutch, Portuguese, Javan, and Indian, as well as English and Scottish, personnel’ (p. 137). There are only occasional references — no doubt echoing the paucity of source material — to crew-members recruited in the east. The crew of a voyage to India in 1615 included ‘eleven Japanese and fourteen Indian sailors’ (p. 270), for instance; presumably, they arrived in England on an earlier voyage. Edmund Scott, a survivor of earlier voyages, is quoted remarking that the English had to ‘hire as many as we could get out of Gujarats and Chinese to help bring home our ships’ (p. 208). This was in 1605, and his account was published in 1606: one imagines Gujarati and Chinese being spoken on ships anchored on the Thames when *Antony and Cleopatra* was premiering at the Globe. Proto-imperialist it may have been, but East India Company could not afford to be racially exclusive in its staffing. Moreover, the actions of Turkish officials in Yemen, Mughal officials in India, and Javanese officials in Bantam all show that Middleton and his companions found themselves faced by sophisticated and powerful interlocutors. At this period, the East India Company had still to function in a multilateral world, in which it was among the least important of players.

While avoiding the triumphalism of earlier accounts of the sixth voyage, Barbour nevertheless reads its history in terms of our contemporary concerns, specifically with over-powerful corporations. This comparison is undermined, however, by his insistence on the East India Company’s weaknesses. Perhaps the most important was its lack of a true joint-stock structure, the defining attribute of a modern corporation. Instead, ‘Each voyage was a new — and, as its departure neared, hastily consummated — invention’ (p. 21). Specifically, each was financed separately and issued with its own orders. In the event, the commanders of these voyages often found their interests opposed to each other’s. The sixth voyage sucked the eighth voyage into its campaign for reparation in the Red Sea, and part of the reason that it had suffered so much in the first place was that the fourth voyage had already blackened the name of Englishmen. None of the English commanders enjoyed overarching authority on the spot: though Middleton, as a knight, outranked Captain John Saris, general of the eighth voyage, he did not automatically enjoy operational command. (In the event, Saris’s voyage succeeded, unlike Middleton’s). Governors of the factory in Bantam died with such alacrity that even in permanent trading establishments leadership was unstable (p. 205). The ship’s crews, for that matter, seem to have regarded themselves as freed from naval discipline when they left the ship (pp. 213–14). One is not left with an image of an overmighty corporation — Facebook influencing elections, or the later British East India Company running its own state — but of sometimes courageous gamblers playing well beyond their depths for mortal stakes.

The final chapter contrasts two contemporary accounts of the voyage. The first of these, later recanted under duress, was written by one Robert Kayll and met by a more-or-less official rebuttal by Sir Dudley Digges, the brother of a man who contributed eulogizing verses to Shakespeare's first folio. '[T]he two books', Barbour argues, 'by putting proto-environmentalist, insular populist, and global corporatist ideologies into vituperative exchange, ignited disputes that became inextinguishable as capitalism consolidated its grip on world economies' (p. 259). Kayll makes a strong point about the relative risk undertaken by sailors, who often died, and investors, who would only lose their stakes. Besides, successful voyages were so lucrative that investors could expect to recover even from a total loss by investing in several voyages (p. 249). Disturbingly, however, Kayll aligns this argument with a frankly racist one, against the introduction of 'Heathens', in the form of sailors recruited in Asia. In fact, Barbour notes that Kayll's image of English exceptionalism 'resonates in arguments over immigration and Brexit today' (p. 266). Barbour describes Kayll's criticism of deforesting England to build ships as proto-environmentalist, but Kayll complements it with an argument in favour of more intensive herring fishing, which would presumably be equally extractive (p. 251). The argument fails even to be convincingly nativist, as the English already imported wood from abroad (the Baltic especially; p. 34). Nicholas Downton, the lieutenant-general of the sixth voyage, managed to return in the *Peppercorn* and advise future investors to abandon distant voyages in favour of privateering. This does not strike me, at least, as any less destructive, though it would call for less organizational sophistication (p. 242). Barbour eloquently concludes with a pun on his title and the name of the ship on which he writes, declaring that 'it is time we lost trust in the trade's increase' (p. 273). We ought nevertheless to remain wary of whatever alternative faiths offer themselves in its place.