Les voyages de Jean Struys

Les voyages de Jean Struys, en Moscovie, en Tartarie, en Perse, aux Indes, & en plusieurs autres pays étrangers : accompagnés de remarques particulières sur la qualité, la religion, le gouvernement, les coutumes & le négoc des lieux qu'il a vus ; avec quantité de figures en taille douce dessinés par lui-même ; & deux lettres [sic] qui traitent à fond des malheurs d'Astracan. A quoi l'on a ajouté ... la relation d'un naufrage ...

Amsterdam : chés la veuve de Jacob van Meurs, 1681.

Item held in the Overstone Library (24F/14), University of Reading Special Collections Services.

Les voyages de Jean Struys was published in Amsterdam in 1681. As the protagonist's name suggests, the text is a translation of a Dutch text, entitled Drie aanmerkelijke en seer rampspeedige Reysen, published in 1676 in Amsterdam by Jacob van Meurs and Johannes van Someren. After its original printing in Dutch, Reysen was distributed throughout Europe, as both authorised and unauthorised foreign translations were published as far and wide as London and Moscow. The French edition was translated by...
M. Glanius and published by the same publishers responsible for the Dutch original. The English translation, *The perillous and most unhappy voyages of John Struys*, was first published in 1683 by Samuel Smith and sold at the Princes Arms in St Paul's Churchyard. Samuel Smith was a freeman of the Stationers Company, and from March 1682 a freeman of the City of London, and had extensive contacts in the European book trade, which is suggested by a “large proportion” of the three thousand titles in his 1695 catalogue being of foreign origin as well as the “fluency and ease” with which he spoke French and Latin. The title-page and preface for *Les voyages de Jean Struys* claim that it was a work of original authorship written solely by Struys. However, large sections of the text are neither original nor were they written by Struys: some sections were plagiarised and Struys was almost certainly illiterate.

Overwhelming evidence suggests that a widely published Amsterdam native called Olfert Dapper, a physician by profession, performed the task of composing and ghostwriting *Reysen*. Dapper had long been established as an author of travel literature. His earlier publications applied the same methods of composition that he would use to create *Reysen*, drawing upon a large number of sources, some cited, some not, to compile composite texts that displayed his scholarly ability in the research undertaken to produce them. Based on the success of Dapper’s earlier publications and his method of composition it would appear that *Reysen*’s publishers saw Dapper as an ideal compiler and ghostwriter for Struys’ narrative. Throughout *Les voyages*, the narrative is supplemented by descriptions that have been proved not

*Detail from a map of the Caspian Sea and surrounding territories in Les voyages de Jean Struys*
to have derived from Struys, but draw instead upon an array of sources and authors rather than a single author. Nonetheless, the importance of Struys to the text's composition remains great, which is suggested by the fact that publication was delayed until Struys returned to Amsterdam from Muscovy in 1676.

Much of the biographical information available about Struys, the narrator-protagonist of *Les voyages*, derives from what can be extracted from the text. In 1628/9, Struys was born a short distance from Amsterdam in the village of Wormer. At a young age he became an apprentice sailmaker under the guidance of his father, whose harsh treatment was cited as the reason for Struys to flee and seek employment at sea aged seventeen on 26 December 1647. Based on dates listed in the text, the three voyages undertaken by Struys span a period of some twenty-five years, more than ten of which were spent at sea. The first voyage occurred between December 1647 and September 1651; the second between December 1655 and July 1657; and the third between September 1667 and October 1673.

Illustration showing a massacre in Siam by order of the king against his subjects and members of the nobility

Apart from telling us that Struys resided close to Amsterdam in a town called Durgerdam between the first and second voyages and that his second marriage
occurred shortly after his return from the second voyage, there is little biographical information about Struys in the text itself. All other information about Struys derives from the few historical records and references to him in secondary sources that exist. Events of great significance to Struys are not mentioned in *Les voyages* such as his first marriage in 1658 and the deaths of his children and first wife in 1666. Possibly because of financial concerns, Struys once again went to sea after the publication of *Reysen*, this time under the employment of the Danish court from 1678-1679. Upon his return from Denmark, Struys retired to Friedrichstadt in Schleswig-Holstein, a town founded by Dutch settlers and notable for the religious toleration afforded to its population. This is where Struys died in 1694, a man of relative wealth and celebrity.

The first section of the book sees the seventeen year old Struys depart from the Dutch Republic in a desperate attempt to escape his father’s ill treatment and it is here that we gain insight to the reality of life at sea for the seventeenth-century sailor. Although in paid employment and desired by Struys to gain freedom, his first experience at sea instead resembles captivity, a theme that remains prominent throughout. Struys is treated as a commodity as he “nor any else that went before the mast, knew whither, or upon what design” the voyage was intended. By way of
Gibraltar and Genoa, the ship reaches the Cape Verde Islands, from which they sail for Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Indonesia, Siam, Formosa and finally Japan, before returning to the Dutch Republic. The section on Siam heavily outweighs descriptions of other places visited in the first voyage. Initial descriptions of Siam invoke a utopian landscape as the narrator adopts a highly poetic and stylised tone quite distinct from writing found elsewhere in the text. Siam is explicitly conveyed as superior to European nations but, culminating in the Siamese king’s tyrannous violence against his people, European dominance and superiority is implicitly regained as Siam descends into a hellish dystopian nightmare. The illustrations from *Les voyages* shown above depict a massacre in Siam by order of the king against his subjects and members of the nobility.

The second voyage is the shortest section of the text and occurs under an entirely different set of circumstances from the first, as Struys gains employment aboard a ship leaving the Dutch Republic only out of financial necessity. Once in Italy, he works in the Venetian navy and soon finds himself involved in the Cretan War against the Ottoman armada.

*Map of the Caspian Sea and surrounding territories from Les voyages de Jean Struys*
The narrator’s description of the ensuing conflict suggests that the confrontation was conducted purely on religious grounds. The narrator implies that Struys lent himself to a far greater cause than the reality of self-profiteering, as he evokes crusade and biblical tales alike, such as a skirmish in which Struys’ party of twenty-seven men improbably overcomes two hundred Ottomans, with its possible echoes of David and Goliath.

By the third voyage, Struys’ identity as a Christian hero is reinforced in response to his presence in a Muslim land. The chapters of the book consistently resemble biblical stories as, in addition to many other examples of religious references and imagery, Struys ascends Mount Ararat and departs with remnants of the Lost Ark; numerous natural disasters occur, and ominous celestial events shower the Earth with fire and brimstone. While Struys’ conduct and decisions are not dictated by religious belief, the narrator suggests that his travels possess a religious subtext - problematically so, because in the text we encounter an increasingly secularised world where trade and self-profit replace allegiance to nation, religion or creed in importance.

Illustration depicting Stenka Razin, leader of the Cossack rebels, throwing a Persian Princess into the Volga River as an offering to the river
The third and final voyage of the text is largely land-based. Once again, Struys' departure from his homeland is financially motivated as he and his fellow Dutchmen are lured to Muscovy by the Tsar's offer of handsome salaries. Struys' course through Muscovy is presented to the reader as the most dangerous of the text, largely due to lawlessness created by civil disorder. Indeed, Astrakhan, the city in which Struys spent most of his time while in Muscovy, becomes the epicentre of internal division between pro and anti-Tsarist forces which dictate the movements of Struys and his fellow crew in and around the Caspian Sea.

Detail of illustration depicting Stenka Razin, leader of the Cossack rebels, throwing a Persian Princess into the Volga River as an offering to the river

A prominent feature of the third voyage is Struys' encounters (many of which see him robbed by highwaymen or enslaved) with the inhabitants of foreign lands he travels through, including Tartars (now known as Tatars) [see images shown below].
Illustration of Tatar men on horseback with a Tatar woman and child alongside.

Detail of illustration shown above - Tatar man on horseback
The narrator’s observations and remarks serve to reinforce long-standing stereotypes, especially of Muslims. For instance, the attempted conversion of Struys by one Muslim captor closely resemble earlier conversion scenes acted out in London theatres, which imagined Christians resisting the sexual advances of Muslim women. *Les voyages*’ narrator has more stereotypical offerings for the contemporary reader in his description of the cruel lust of the Shah’s order for five hundred women and girls aged two to seventeen to be delivered to him for his own purposes [see image below].

![Illustration showing the transportation of young women and girls by camel to the Persian Shah to be used as concubines](image)

While Struys can be scathing and dismissive of the people he meets, he can also be extremely complimentary, perhaps most surprisingly for a contemporary reader, towards his Muslim master who Struys holds in the highest esteem, a man who he has so much “love and honour” for that Struys announces: “I could have been more content to serve him all my life as a slave, than to have the liberty which I have before and since enjoyed.” Attitudes towards those of foreign origin, like attitudes towards issues in the text that might have appealed to and concerned contemporary
readers, are by no means fixed; instead they reinforce, while also challenging expectations and beliefs, due in large part to Dapper’s method of composition and the presence of multiple authorial voices.

Please note that all quotes have been taken from the English translation.

References


*Detail of illustration showing the transportation of young women and girls by camel to the Persian Shah to be used as concubines*
Les voyages de Jean Struys is one of a number of rare book items on display at the University of Reading Library as part of the University of Reading Conference in Early Modern Studies. From 18-20 July 2011, the Early Modern Research Centre at Reading will be hosting its annual Conference in Early Modern Studies with the theme of ‘Communication & Exchange’. The Association for Low Countries Studies (ALCS) has generously agreed to sponsor the Dutch presence at this conference, which has been growing steadily over the past few years. This year, the conference will be accompanied by an exhibition of rare books from the University of Reading’s Special Collections, which contain a wealth of material from the Low Countries, as well as texts relating to these parts.

The exhibition will be on display at the University Library from 5 July – 26 September 2011.