

of the way in which the unnatural nature of the rebellion was presented to the readers and listeners. Duffy's assertion that the concentration on the murder of women and children seems to suggest to him that it was a modern concern perhaps needs revisiting: concerns for the death of those considered innocents or "weaker vessels" are very much grounded in seventeenth-century world views, rather than in ours.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012. xvi + 312 pp. \$29.95. Review by TILLMAN W. NECHTMAN, SKIDMORE COLLEGE.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam is well known and widely regarded for his connected histories and for the global breath of his scholarly investigations. In *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia*, Subrahmanyam offers a valuable addition to his own oeuvre as well as to the field of early modern global history more broadly.

As much a series of micro historical investigations into cross-cultural courtly encounters as it is a theoretical guidebook for those interested in making sense of such interactions, *Courtly Encounters* began its life as a series of lectures Subrahmanyam delivered at Bryn Mawr College in the autumn of 2009. Those lectures now constitute the three main chapters of the volume, bookended by an introduction and conclusion.

Each of the book's three chapters confronts a distinct mode of intercultural encounter. Chapter one looks closely at the world of courtly diplomacy and of a language of insults that could run through a diplomatic conversation. Chapter two centers on cultures of violence and war, looking particularly at the intercultural meaning of martyrdom. And, chapter three devotes itself to questions of visual culture and courtly imagery as a means of intercultural understanding.

In each chapter, Subrahmanyam weaves a micro historical narrative with all of the grace, style, and literary talent that we have come to expect of his work. Taken individually, the case studies are rich both for their detail and their contextual specificity. Subrahmanyam's close

reading of Manoel Godinho de Erédia's *História de serviços com martírio de Luís Monteiro Coutinho* (1615) in chapter two, for instance, takes the reader deep into the world of a Christian in the courtly world of early modern Aceh, in contemporary Indonesia. How, Subrahmanyam asks, are we to understand Coutinho's refusal to convert and his willing submission to a brutal martyrdom by cannon?

In answering this question (and the many others that he asks of his case studies), Subrahmanyam deftly draws in examples and connections from around the early modern world, weaving lines of connection as well as boundaries of discontinuity. Coutinho's fate, for instance, was a necessary indicator that martyrdom was as much a reality for the seventeenth-century Portuguese as it was for early Christians. As Subrahmanyam notes, Erédia was a *mestiço*, and his determined telling of Coutinho's death marked out clear lines of cultural distinctiveness—perhaps even of cultural incommensurability—at a time when the boundaries between the Christian and Muslim worlds in Southeast Asia were more indistinct than might have felt comfortable.

As is the case with his analysis of Coutinho's martyrdom, most of Subrahmanyam's studies in *Courtly Encounters* are small. Many focus on individuals who have never before made an appearance in histories of the early modern world, and, if they have, most of the characters here have played only minor parts. But, in Subrahmanyam's world, there are no small roles. Here, each of these actors is busy in the project of creating a culture of commensurability across boundaries, or at least of engaging that process, even if only to resist it.

And, it is here that this book is bigger than the sum of its parts, for Subrahmanyam is not content to offer us a collection of closely read and well-argued case studies. Rather, he leaves us here with a bold new way of thinking about early modern cultural exchange. So often bounded by arguments of commensurability or incommensurability, the history of early modern cultural exchange has tended towards a bipolar model in which historical encounters highlight either understanding or a failure to understand.

Subrahmanyam offers a new path. What if, he asks, the ability to understand (or not to understand, for that matter) was a process? What if commensurability had to be constructed?

Investigated with these questions in mind, early modern cultural encounters cannot be reduced to meetings in a state of nature. Rather, they become moments fabricated by the human agency of the singular individuals involved. These moments are not, Subrahmanyam notes, the work of entire cultures but of the few whose specific and contextual encounters brought the relationship into being. To speak merely of commensurability or incommensurability is, then, to reduce the diversity and richness of early modern cultural exchange and to obscure a day-to-day human process with what Subrahmanyam sets aside as “sociological abstractions and idealizations” (219).

In the early modern world that Subrahmanyam paints for us here, insults, humor, art, and religion all function as communicative tools that helped individual people articulate their state or empire to others. These tools were hardly perfect cultural arbiters, to be sure. But, neither did they fail completely in their attempts to communicate across cultural boundaries, for, as Subrahmanyam notes, “what usually happened was approximation, improvisation, and eventually a shift in the relative position of all concerned” (29).

The court is the center of Subrahmanyam’s study here because, as he indicates in several places, courts have left historians with some of the best records. And, in Subrahmanyam’s adept hands, we have ample proof that court records can still produce exciting, fresh, and stimulating new scholarship. But, at a less contextual level, Subrahmanyam’s analysis here allows us to imagine new readings of all sorts of archival materials. Though he eschews the shorelined frontiers of the eighteenth-century Pacific, for instance, one wonders what Subrahmanyam (or those who follow in the wake of this book) might now make of other moments of historical contact.

Courtly Encounters, therefore, offers a great deal, not merely to students of the early modern world or of Eurasian history in particular, though scholars in those fields will learn a great deal and find much to like in these case studies. Rather, *Courtly Encounters* is a book for any scholar interested in what have elsewhere been called contact zones, beach crossings, or frontiers, for it is a book that forces us to ask questions about intercultural exchange that reimagine that exchange as a real human process, a history that always involved “learning by doing, even if not a perfect ‘reciprocity of understanding’ in the manner of Diderot” (30).