ENDURING STEREOTYPES AND AUTHORIAL SELF-SUBVERSION: INVESTIGATING THE TOURISTIC TREATMENT OF THE ORIENTAL IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S MARCO MILLIONS AND HENRY DAVID HWANG'S M. BUTTERFLY

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Abstract: My paper investigates the continuing and globally relevant challenges posed to the audience by two American plays from the first and the second half of the twentieth century, in which the authorial intention for a more profound and historically accurate portrayal of the Asian characters and culture is self-subverted by the quintessential melodramatic nature of the dramatic text. Even if the two plays are quite wide-apart chronologically speaking, their common Oriental topic makes for an interesting parallel, in which the political purposes of their authors hold a central place.

Keywords: stereotype, orientalism, globalization, marginality, representation.

Motto: "Dovunque al mondo lo Yankee vagabondo
si gode e traffica, sprezzando rischi.
Affonda l'áncora alla ventura..."[1]

In his spectacular dramatic chronicle, Eugene O'Neill proposes an Oriental idealistic alternative to the Western materialistic view of life, with the Marco Polo character presented as the selfish and self-sufficient American businessman, blind to the selfless devotion and pure love of Chinese princess Kukachin. Back in 1928, the American playwright was thus seeking to counteract the modernist existantial despair pervading his troubled times with Taoist words of wisdom that may sound rather hollow nowadays but which nevertheless expressed his sincere aspiration to a superior, spiritual basis for existence. However, certain critics argue, the political problem of the play is that he achieved his aim while totally ignoring the problematics of race relations in the United States. Almost sixty years later, Henry David Hwang still choses to avoid direct confrontation of the Asian-American issues, by placing the action of his drama in France and China and aiming to deconstruct the Oriental female stereotype of passivity, submission and vulnerability by replacing it with a rather thwarted and ambiguous transvestite alternative, whose appearance of domination in the end of the play appears as a rather limp trick of authorial design. In my paper I propose to analyze and compare the two dramatic discourses and test their resistance against accusations of "Orientalism" made by James Moy, a critic who discusses both plays quite disparagingly on behalf of the marginalized Asian American community.

In his foreword to *Marco Millions*, O'Neill declares ironically that he engaged on a crusade "to whitewash the good soul of that maligned Venetian" (1988: 380), while in fact he aims to disparage the businessman class with which he had taken issue from very early on in his playwrighting career. His heroine, the delicate princess Kukachin, dies of unrequited love for the Western hero who is presented as a gross caricature of the entrepreneur. Similarly, in Puccini's opera, it is Cio-cio-san's sense of honor that marks her final triumph in death and

[1] "Pinkerton *[frankly]* The whole world over, on business and pleasure, the Yankee travels all danger scorning. His anchor boldly he casts at random..." (Libretto to *Madama Butterfly*, 1907)

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surrounds her with a heroic aura, while the American sailor Pinkerton appears ridiculous and profane. In both versions of this Orientalist drama, the heroines are in fact victims of the brutishness and opacity of the men they fall in love with and who do not see them for what they really are: sensitive human beings yearning for love and trusting their loved-ones with their souls. In the same way, the clash between Eastern and Western cultural visions and the political exchanges have produced situations in which, along the centuries, the Asians have been disadvantaged. Yet, with the advent of globalization, the marginal discourse has moved into the center of attention and the theory of Orientalism has exposed the insidious mechanism by which the West is manipulating the Easterner's image and making Asians submit and conform to the stereotypes created about them.

According to Edward Said, the responsibility of the intellectual in relation to the limits of "imaginative geography" is that of trying to define and change the context of perception that has muted the Orient, turning it into an object that is the "ante-type of Europe" (Said 94). Since the Westerners do not have too many reference points regarding the East, their readings of it are prone to misinterpretation and to generating an abuse of power. From this viewpoint, Orientalism is a practice similar to male gender dominance and a deconstruction of one could very likely entail a deconstruction of the other (which is what Hwang's play is attempting). Throughout the paper, I will be using the term "Oriental" in the sense of the Orientalist doctrine discussed by Edward Said - that is as a term designating Eastern realities perceived from a Western viewpoint or, as Hwang declared in the afterword to his play, "specifically to denote an exotic and imperialist view of the East" (Hwang 95). Besides being discriminatory, such an attitude may even lead to gross mistakes in political vision, such as the misperception of a nation's cooperation - as in the case of the United States' war in Vietnam, a political issue that Hwang incorporates into his play as an instance of mistranslation caused by Orientalism.

In his study, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America,* James Moy openly accuses Anglo America of constructing Chinese-ness through the institutions of racial representation embodied in such vehicles as museum displays, cartoons, photography, plays and films, or pornography. The critic argues that the germ of truth purportedly contained by stereotypes is a construct that serves the socio-economic concerns of a sinophobic white America. Even if his analysis is sometimes superficial and his conclusions rather hurried, Moy has a point when arguing that sometimes, those who attempt to fight against entrenched viewpoints on minorities, may contribute in fact to promoting these views. That is why, in this paper, I will investigate to what extend the authorial intent of O'Neill and Hwang was subverted by the stereotypes incorporated into their plays.

In an interview taken by John Luis DiGaetani after the 1988 premiere of *M. Butterfly* on Broadway, H.D. Hwang insists that his drama reveals how the East and the West misperceive each other in a "dual form of cultural stereotyping" (DiGaetani 142) and talks about Puccini's opera as an illustration of Orientalism but also as its reversal – due to the fact that Cio-cio-san dies honorably while Pinkerton is presented as an insensitive man, lacking all scruple and morality. Similarly, through O'Neill's imaginative recreation of the character of Marco Polo, the Westerner is presented as "oafish and insensitive" (DiGaetani 143). As the motto of this paper also suggests, the exploratory instinct of the Westerner has a productive as well as a destructive component – "His anchor boldly he casts at random" meaning that he is both daring and insensitive, winning material advantages for himself and hurting the ones whom he encounters on his travels. Another similarity between Hwang and O'Neill's plays is the plot constructed upon the subtle nature of seduction: both dramas contain a tragic knot reflecting the "impossibility and inevitability of the situation" in which characters seduce themselves into loving an ideal image in their minds: both the Chinese princess Kukachin and the French diplomat Gallimard ignore reality for the sake of a dream and finally succumb to

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their fantasy of a perfect love just as Cio-cio-san loses everything due to her naïve belief in "the American god".

The central question about the two plays refers to the "smashing of stereotypes" that may have been intended by its authors. If Hwang really planned to attack the theatrical institutions working to subjugate the representations of the Orient, why is his subversive M. Butterfly found ultimately "lacking" by the main character as well as by the audience? As for O'Neill's dramatic discourse in *Marco Millions*, it is obviously cliché-ridden. In compensation, both authors present the Westerner's approach to the Oriental cultures as monolithic and superficial – in one word, "touristic". Both Gallimard and Marco Polo are interested in validating their preconceived ideas about the worlds they are entering, since they are not interested or are incapable to perceive the reality as well as the differences within Asian-ness. For instance, Hwang collapses in his play the distinctions between Chinese and Japanese cultures, since Song is a Chinese opera artist playing a Japanese character embodying the delicate "lotus blossom". Similarly, O'Neill's various Eastern dioramas, representing in turn the Muslim, Hindu and Tartar realities that the Polos encounter on their voyage to the Great Khan, are remarkably similar in display and cast of characters (not to mention that he designates all Eastern peoples in the play as "pagans"…).

When *Marco Millions* was first produced by the Guild Theater on Broadway, it opened O'Neill's way to fame and fortune just as *M. Butterfly* did for Chinese-American playwright David Hwang. The stage success of these plays featuring an Oriental subject matter shouldn't obliterate the fact that both authors were searching for means to challenge their audiences' entrenched mentality. While O'Neill did this by writing historical extravaganzas, some of which – in the true tradition of the Art Theater – were never produced because of their complexity, Hwang initially had in mind to write a musical on the topic of a deconstructivist *Madama Butterfly*. Since David Belasco, the renowned American producer, is said to have been interested in staging O'Neill's play himself (coincidentally, he had also staged *Madame Butterfly*[2]), it is clear that an Orientalist subject matter greatly appealed to the American audience, with its possibility of experiencing first hand what appeared as an exotic display of locales and characters (whose truthfulness was of secondary importance).

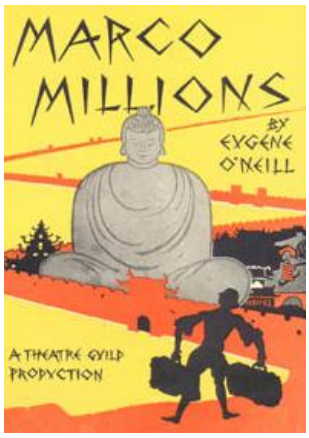


Fig. 1 The Guild Theater poster of O'Neill's play (Theater Guild, 1928)

Despite the touristic treatment of the topic (equally suggested by the production poster), in *Marco Millions*, O'Neill writes on a theological theme - the spiritual emptiness of material desires which was the overarching topic of his projected historical cycle, *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossesed* (gaining the world implies losing one's soul). An embodiment of this biblic principle, Marco Polo is revealed as an eager merchant who is also part tourist,

[2] It was this production that Giacomo Puccini saw in London in 1900 and that stimulated him to write the opera around which Hwang's plot revolves.

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part explorer, part inventor and part political ruler. The touristic aspect of his character is given by the emotional disengagement with Eastern characters: apart from fear and reverence, he seems unable to relate to the Khan or to his granddaughter in any other way; moreover, as his father and uncle read their notes about the habits of every region they pass through in their commercial trip to the East, Marco fails to relate to any of the characters that appear on stage as figures from a silent movie. The only foreigner with whom he converses is the prostitute – appearing as the same woman who changes her garb from culture to culture (but here the interest is sexual rather than cultural)[3]. In fact, O'Neill's main purpose in writing this play was that of mounting a severe critique of the greed and superficiality that he saw as a spiritual affliction of Western culture (referenced in the play as Marco Polo's "spiritual hump").

Nevertheless, in the chapter entitled "Desiring Marginality and the Dematerialization of the Orient" from Liu and Swortzell's critical anthology, *O'Neill in China* (1992), James Moy asserts that O'Neill purposely left China without a voice of its own and instead "inserted the viewer into the powerful position of the tourist" so as not to threaten "the cultural integrity of the West" (Liu and Swortzell 34). Further on, Moy notices that the various Oriental scenes and characters are articulated with "disturbing sameness", as "Marco and family move from one setting to another, suitcases in hand, without substantive interaction", with the result that "the audience comes away with nothing" while being displaced through several scenes populated by "spectacular mannequins" " (Liu and Swortzell 34). In this way, the "imaginary marginality" called China in the play "disintegrates into representation", with the essential historical and geographical differences between locales totally erased[4]. Due to this representation of China as an "infantilized and perfect locale", whose wisdom makes even the Chinese characters drowsy, Moy insists that there is "a forced closure at the site of representation" which "leaves open the potential for rupture" and finally subverts O'Neill's project of exalting Eastern "loveliness" over Western materialism (in Liu and Swortzell 35). That is what critics singled out as O'Neill's deep pessimism – that fact that, despite admiring its philosophy, he doesn't find consolation in the East and neither does he find a solution to the Western crisis: Princess Kukachin must die for the beauty of an impossible dream of love, while Marco Millions goes back to Venice to marry his bovine fiancé, Donata. Indeed, as James Robinson argues in *Eugene O'Neill and Oriental Thought: A Divided Vision* (1982), it seems that "the playwright cannot divorce himself from the dualistic Western world view, since it constitutes the essence of his dramatic, tragic vision." (117)

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Sixty years from the writing of *Marco Millions*, after another World War and a Cold War too, one could expect that the vision of interracial cultural, political and sentimental relations should have changed and humanity may have found the means to understand one another better so as to avoid the making of further victims through war casualties or unrequitted love, in clashes caused by the simplistic, stereotypical treatment of people and situations. Due to the overreaching impact of the mass media, cultural and political information should be expected to reach its recipients more accurately. Yet, not surprisingly, David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* expands on the incredible real case of French diplomat Bernard Bouriscot, who fell in love with the Chinese spy and opera star Shi Pei Pu. The latter lived with him disguised as a woman, in a relationship that lasted for twenty years without the Frenchman (allegedly) being aware of the sexual qui-pro-quo. Which proves that, in fact, things have not changed so much.

[3] Interestingly enough, in Hwang's play, Rene Gallimard is similary revealed as awkward in his relation to Chinese culture but for his intercourse with Song Liling.

[4] Reinforcing this opinion, a footnote to Moy's article quotes O'Neill's biographers, the Gelbs, who comment upon O'Neill's visit to the Orient in 1928: "despite his high hopes, O'Neill ultimately found no peace and satisfaction in the East", while a friend stated that "Gene and Carlotta traveled to the East *like a pair of tourists*" (The Glebs in Liu and Swortzell 36, emphasis mine).

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For Henry David Hwang, the relationship of the two main characters in his play is explainable in the following way: <I … asked myself, "What did Bouriscot think he was getting in this Chinese actress?" The answer came to me clearly: "He probably thought he had found Madame Butterfly."> (1988: 95) In drafting his drama, the playwright also relied on a quote from the French diplomat who accounted for the fact that he had never tried to see his girlfriend naked by saying "I thought she was very modest. I thought it was a Chinese custom." (qtd. in Hwang 1988: 94) For Hwang, the "impossible" story of the Frenchman duped by a Chinese man masquerading as a woman "always seemed perfectly explicable; given the degree of misunderstanding between men and women and also between East and West, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place." (1988: 98) Obviously, the brute facts of the story were rife with Orientalist implications that Hwang didn't fail to exploit.

For effectiveness, the playwright incorporates an abridged informal version of the operatic plot into the opening of his play, in which the French diplomat (named Rene Gallimard[5]) impersonates Pinkerton. As is well known, the American sailor is portrayed in the opera as nothing more than a mercantile, immoral fellow that may easily recall O'Neill's Marco Millions.In order to give his maybe uniformed public an idea of the prototype of the world-wandering, "womanizing cad", Hwang makes Gallimard deliver a tongue-in-cheek rough translation of the opening aria sung by Pinkerton: "The whole world over, the Yankee travels, casting his anchor wherever he wants. Life's not worth living unless he can win the hearts of the fairest maidens, then hotfoot it off the premises ASAP." (Hwang 1988: 7) As a foreigner in Beijing, it seems plausible that Gallimard may not be aware of the "old" tradition of the Chinese opera that performers playing women's roles are men (the Dan actors). However, this ignorance attracts a punishment for his disregard and mockery of the old Chinese culture which he considers "senile and arrogant"[6]. On the night of his first encounter with Song Lilling at the embassy, where the latter plays the death scene from *Madame Butterfly* so truthfully that the French diplomat feels he "sees" the beauty of the story…for the first time", the actor is ironic towards Gallimard's Western misconception: "It's one of your favorite fantasies, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man." (Hwang 1988: 17) and takes a perverse pleasure in reversing the story – maybe hoping to open the foreigner's mind to the cruel sting of stereotypes[7].

The "perfect woman" that the French diplomat believes to have met is an embodiment of the Orientalist stereotype of submissiveness, passivity and beauty – for Gallimard it is very important that she is beautiful, because in his youth he had been rejected by most girls he liked and he feels equally repulsed by Western femininity's aggressiveness (embodied in his passing relation with the foul-mouthed student Renee). Therefore, he interprets Song's teasing behaviour through the prism of his touristic stereotype: "In my heart, I know she has...an interest in me. I suspect this is her way. She is outwardly bold and outspoken, yet her heart is shy and afraid. It is the Orietnal in her at war with her Western education." (Hwang 1988: 27) What is more, after starting his relationship with Song, Gallimard becomes assured that what

[5] To be noted is the irony implicit in the French diplomat's name: "Rene" - from Rene Descartes - and "Gallimard" - from the famous French publishing company, suggesting "the epitome of Western philosophy and French high culture" (DeLauretis 324) that come under attack in this play.

[6] In their discussion, Gallimard and his wife Helga cannot see the political implications of the opera and wonder naively, or maybe hypocritically, in connection to the Chinese hate of the Japanese cultural products: "Why can't they just hear it as a piece of beautiful music?" (Hwang 1988: 19)

[7] "Consider it this way: what would you say if a blond homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now I believe you should consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner–ah!–you find it beautiful." (Hwang 1988: 17)

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he thinks he is experiencing in his personal life – the feeling of awe and control that he believes he is inspiring to Song – may be translated and used in the diplomatic and political relations: his opinion is that "Orientals will always submit to a greater force". This misreading, applied in the case of the war in Vietnam, translates as "If the Americans demonstrate the will to win, the Vietnamese will welcome them into a mutually beneficial union." (Hwang 1988: 46) As Song explains to the French judge twenty years later in Paris, "the West has a sort of international rape mentality towards the East" which impies that "her mouth says no, but her eyes say yes....The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated – because a woman can't think for herself" (Hwang 1988: 83). When this vision of the East collapses with Song's exposure as a man and a spy, Gallimard reproaches his former lover with the final revelation of his being "just a man": "You showed me your true self when all I loved was the lie." (Hwang 1988: 89) and expresses his resolution: "Tonight, I've finally learned to tell fantasy from reality. And, knowing the difference, I choose fantasy." (Hwang 1988: 89)Ultimately,Gallimard's private fantasy becomes a public fantasy insidiously carried further by the actors' gifted interpretation in the movie and by the very fascination with opera and its characters: "I have a vision. Of the Orient. That, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth." (Hwang 1988: 92)



Fig. 2 Poster of the movie version of *M. Butterfly* (David Cronenberg, 1993)

In the interview with David Savran, Hwang explains that in *M. Butterfly* he combined Western and Asian theater forms in order to make a political statement about the integration of the Asian-Americans. Hwang employs a Brechtian approach to performance, "creating a type of aesthetics in which meaning and the play's political concerns and aims are embedded in form and stage pictures" (Gomez 5). In this way, he hopes to evoke a "political response" in his audience by "bringing conclusions together in the mind of the viewer" (qtd. in Savran 121). One of his main grudges against American civilization is it orientation towards the present, an excessive focus on materialism (in this sense his stance comes surprisingly close to O'Neill's theme of "possessors self-dispossessed"): "there is a certain *spiritual bankruptcy* in this country, which comes from an unwillingness to recognize the past…In this country, in this age, the way to create spiritually in the theater is to forge a link to something further back…to fight *the religion of the present* in America" (qtd. in Savran 126, emphasis mine).

According to James Moy, however, the playwright manages to neutralize or deflect this explicit attack upon Anglo-American sensitivity, as his characters and action seem to subvert his stated intentions (1992: 84). One of the main accusations the critic makes is that Hwang displaces the action from America to France, thereby totally sidetracking the Asian-American issues and that his presentation of Oriental cultures is leveling, creating a "representational rupture" similar to the effect obtained by O'Neill's touristic displacement of his audience through various but strangely similar Asian locales. In terms of theatrical form, Gomez confirms that the play borrows elements from the Japanese Kabuki theater and the

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Chinese Beijing Opera "as if they were part of one monolithic culture" (3) and it seems that David Cronenberg's movie adaptation further increases the confusion between Japanese and Chinese cultural elements by juxtaposition. Besides, the character of Comrade Chin appears to Moy as "perhaps even more stereotypical and cartoonish than the worst of the 19th century stereotypes", while Song Lilling is dismissed as "yet another disfigured stereotype" and "a vehicle of massive self doubt", resulting from "a collapse of racial and sexual confusion" and a demeaning version of the 'dragon lady' prostitute stereotype: "a disfigured transvestite version…who appears embarrassed when his Armani slacks are tossed offstage" (1992: 85).Moy therefore accuses Hwang of "a nefarious complicity with Anglo-American desire in its constitution of Otherness, both sexual and racial" (1992: 85) and of "exploiting a jarringly contemporary Orient in a manner quite common in the fashion industry" (1992: 86). If such are the accusations, could anything be said in the playwright's defense?

According to his own declarations, Hwang perceives the theatrical enterprise as acquisitive. Through his dramatic discourse he is claiming an audience as part of the attempt to negotiate an artistic identity for himself in a land of immigrants. Does this mean that he is seeking validation on the market place, as Moy suggests? I believe his goals to be broader. The hypnotic effect of Gallimard's self-delusion bespeaks the implications of Orientalism for the Western subconscious, an effect against which the play intends to act as a cure: "Yes – love. Why not admit it all? That was my undoing, wasn't it? Love warped my judgement, blinded my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face...until I could look in the mirror and see nothing but...a woman." (Hwang 1988: 92) And this woman is none other than "the perfect woman" for whose love and honor it is worth dying, the most enduring stereotype of all. Therefore, Gallimard must reject Song in the end for his being "just a man".

As a solution to this sentimental and political crisis, the playwright proposes to combat prejudice and stereotypes by the effort to know and accept the other as he /she really is. Hwang believes we have "to deal with each other just as humans if we're to reach any point of true understanding" (qtd. in DiGaetani 1989: 146). The fact that the French diplomat commits suicide only reveals his wounded arrogance, while his final retreat into "pure imagination" bespeaks his spiritual impotence and immaturity. Through this example, the West stands warned of the consequences of such options especially damaging in the era of globalization. Hwang's plea is ultimately for "truthful contact between nations and lovers" which, in this age of myths that "saturate our consciousness" may come as "only the result of heroic effort" (1988: 100). *M. Butterfly* then reasserts the obvious facts of Orientalism, constituting itself into a richly ambiguous case of resistance to its politics, of the kind Edward Said was referring to in his article "Orientalism Reconsidered" (1985)[8].

To conclude, this paper has tried to reveal the link between theater aesthetics and social performatives, subscribing to a view of the theater as a catalyst for change. The works of both O'Neill and Hwang discussed above reflect the "need for greater crossing of boundaries, for greater interventionism in cross-disciplinary activity" as well as an increased "awareness of the situation in which intellectual and cultural work is carried out" (Said 107). If the order imposed by the politics of Orientalism is damaging to human interactions, these theater discourses more than half a century apart propose a type of deconstructive order that may still work towards elaborating metanarratives of hope.

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[8] "Since it seems to me patently impossible to dismiss the truth of Orientalism's political origin and its continual political actuality, we are obliged on intellectual, as well as political grounds, to investigate the resistance to the politics of Orientalism, a resistance which is richly symptomatic of precisely what is denied." (Said 91)

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