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Chapter 4. Edgar Allan Poe's Oriental America

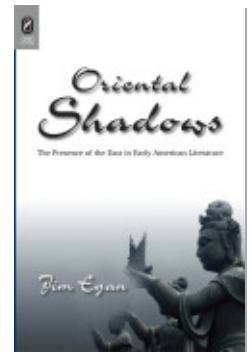
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Edgar Allan Poe's Oriental America

had seized control of the United States' still embryonic literary culture. Groups such as the "Frogpondians", whom we now know as the Transcendentalists, were simply "word compounders and quibble concoctors" who hid their attempts to destroy the careers of many a writer in America behind a "Cloud Land of Metaphysics."¹ Emerson reciprocated his literary colleague's disdain by referring to Poe as "that jingle man."² While they loathed one another's literary productions and the aesthetic theories on which those productions relied, they found common cause when it came to the figure of the Arab. For instance, Emerson's intellectual and conceptual ties to what he considered an Oriental approach to the world were so deep that they led him in one journal entry to say of himself, "I am an Arabian within."³ Poe's own conceptual affiliations with what he imagined to be Oriental ideas led him not only to title his first collection of stories *Tales of the Arabian Nights* but also to include within it, "Lionel Lincoln," a "significant allusion or imagery drawn" from what Poe would have considered the Arab world in "nearly every one of the stories in that collection."

More specifically, Poe and Emerson agreed on the place of one Oriental tale in the canon of world literature: *The Arabian Nights*, or what we now refer to as *The Book of One-Thousand-and-One Nights*. Emerson and Poe

each considered it to be not only a work of great quality but also required reading for all who aspired to be civilized, cultivated, and tasteful. Emerson lists the work among those few “world-books” to stand as “the true recorder & embodiment” of its time; indeed, he calls it one of the “best books” of its kind.⁵ He goes so far as to say that he hopes one of his own proposed works will be read as a “supplement” to the work of his “Arabian friend” who composed the *Nights*.⁶ Poe offers less frequent praise, but those comments he does make leave little doubt about his admiration for the work.⁷ In *Pinakidia* 27, for instance, Poe uses the consensus among American literati of the literary quality of the *Nights* in one of his assaults on a rival American critic. In this case, Poe responds to the question “Who does not turn with absolute contempt from the rings and gems, and filters, and caves and genii of Eastern Tales as from the trinkets of a toyshop, and the trumpery of a raree-show?” posed by James Montgomery in his *Lectures on Literature*, by simply saying: “What man of genius but must answer ‘Not I.’”⁸ As if to drive the point home that Montgomery lacks the taste to distinguish true literature, Poe adds a parenthetical exclamation mark after the word “literature” when citing the title of the work from which the passage is taken.⁹

Much has changed, of course, in the symbolic spatial economy from the appearance of Bradstreet’s poems in the seventeenth century to the battles over America’s literary future waged by writers such as Emerson and Poe prior to the Civil War. While Bradstreet composed her poetry before Orientalism, Emerson and Poe wrote in what some consider one of its most virulent phases. When Bradstreet turned her gaze to the East, she saw countries that dominated the world economy and at least one religion, Islam, at war with the faith to which she had devoted her life. By the time Poe and Emerson turned to Arabia for their model of literary achievement, Europe had reached, at least in its own and America’s view of the world, the pinnacle of world power economically, politically, militarily, spiritually, and culturally. It had changed so much, in fact, that John Pickering could use the occasion of his address to the initial meeting of the American Oriental Society in 1843 to imply that America might be wise to adopt some of Europe’s Eastern imperial ambitions.¹⁰ The Eastern imaginary operating during the years Poe and Emerson were alive would also have led them to differentiate more precisely the people and places that made up the region. Antebellum America “distinguished the image of the Arab from the image of the Turk or the Persian and from the conglomerate image of the Islamic oriental,” as Jacob Rama Berman has written, in ways that would have been inconceivable to Bradstreet.¹¹

In spite of the vast differences in the way Arabia would have signified in the symbolic spatial economies of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries,

the Eastern imaginary remained for Poe and Emerson, as it did for Bradstreet, a place that absorbed vast regions of the globe into a single category whose cultures and communities were thought similar enough to be grouped together. Indeed, the East had in some ways expanded by the time Poe and Emerson entered the scene. Pickering, for instance, includes not only the entire "Eastern continent," including Arabia, Egypt, and India, in his definition of what constitutes the Oriental but also "the region of the globe which has been called Polynesia."¹² What strikes me as particularly remarkable, though, when we look back to Bradstreet as we move into the nineteenth century is the fact that authors at the epicenter of America's literary history continue to turn, in spite of the many differences that have emerged in the place the East occupies in the symbolic spatial economy, to the East as a way to demonstrate America's civilized status.

I want to use the agreement, then, on the value of *The Arabian Nights* by two prominent American writers at the very period when a nationalist literary movement gained unprecedented support as a way of drawing our attention to the work of at least one canonical nineteenth-century American writer who used what he called "Eastern tales" to establish the United States' status as a civilized nation.¹³ Both sides in the rhetorical wars waged over literary nationalism operate on the assumption that America's literary prowess would demonstrate America's place in the pantheon of civilized culture. Debates over how best to enable the production of "great" literature in America in this period were ultimately debates about how to prove—to Europeans and to Americans themselves—that American culture was as civilized as any European or ancient culture. Poe's "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" intervenes in these debates by asking its readers to side with a theory of aesthetics directly at odds with the aesthetic theories of those critics who advocate a "nationalist" literature.

In order to show how Poe makes the case for a civilized and civilizing aesthetics in "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," we first need to understand just what Poe and his readers thought of the tale he used as the basis for his Orientalizing of American literature. In order to understand just why Poe might have chosen this narrative rather than some other, as well as what his particular revisions of this particular narrative might mean, we need to understand both what people understood to be the basic elements of the plot of *The Arabian Nights* as well as the meanings and implications they attached to the story cycle. Thus, we begin our examination of the story with a brief history of the reception of this collection of tales in antebellum America. Our investigation of the life of *The Arabian Nights* reveals that, in addition to its being one of the most popular tales

in the new United States, reviewers considered its stories to be exemplary models of the very romance aesthetic Poe fiercely advocated in the pages of just about any American magazine that would have him. “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” aims to promote the romance aesthetic with which *The Arabian Nights* was associated so that American letters could be considered truly civilized. Poe clues us in to the real aims of the story in its first few paragraphs, where he links his discovery of the tale to people, issues, and books associated with the contemporaneous debate over the future of American letters. In the body of the narrative, Poe’s frequent deviations from the plot of standard translations of *The Arabian Nights* allow him to make the King to whom Scheherazade tells her stories the butt of an unrelenting satire aimed at the more “realist” aesthetic theories espoused by proponents of a national literature. In a bitter reversal of the story that readers would have found—and what one still finds today—in their own copies of *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade’s stories lead the King to kill rather than save her. In the process, Poe turns her into a figure for the modern author, an author put to death by a character who serves as a representative of the very people in America who claim they want to assist in the birth of a truly national literature. Poe thus transforms a specifically American scene of writing into an Eastern one, with a female as its representative storyteller.

In casting the King as the villain and killing off the character with whom we most sympathize in the story, Poe aims to manage both negative and positive images of the East in mid-nineteenth-century America. He tries, that is, to draw on Americans’ vision of Oriental monarchs as inevitably autocratic, despotic, and cruel in a story that uses an Eastern work that, by the time Poe wrote, had come to stand as the very model for the romance aesthetic in literature. By the middle of the nineteenth century, though, allegory isn’t enough, as it was for Franklin, to shield American readers from the threat of going native. Or at least it is not enough for Poe. To ward off the threat of a feminized, Orientalized America, the very vision Poe offers in the story as the solution to America’s literary problems, Poe stages the execution of Scheherazade. In this way, he encourages his reader to understand the specifically female, Oriental body she inhabits in the story as distinctly, definitively Other while retaining the reader’s commitment to a romance aesthetic.



BY THE TIME Poe published “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Schehe-

razade” in *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book* in February of 1845, readers on both sides of the Atlantic had demonstrated a seemingly inexhaustible interest in what was then known as *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*.¹⁴ The story of the work's reception by readers in Great Britain and the United States begins with the French Orientalist Antoine Galland's translation into French of stories in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish that he had come across in his travels in the East.¹⁵ The first volume of stories appeared in 1704 as *Mille et une nuit*, and volumes of new material continued to be issued until volume 11 in 1717, when Galland had been dead for two years. Galland appears to have thrown the edition together rather hastily and without much thought toward the commercial or scholarly potential of the work or, it seems, about whether the stories truly had their origins in the East. None of this seems to have had any bearing on the work's sales, though, for *Nights* became an instant bestseller throughout Europe. The fact that pirated editions appeared almost immediately after Galland's French version was issued indicates the enormity of its initial popularity. An English translation was produced in the first decade of the eighteenth century, though precisely when it appeared is an issue of some debate, but by 1715 a Grub Street edition of the *Nights* advertised itself as the “Third Edition” of the tales in English.¹⁶ The stories remained so popular in England throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that by 1793 at least eighteen different editions of the *Nights* in English had been issued in England alone, and, according to Peter Caracciolo, “the rate of publication (whether reprint or new translation) was to double” in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

As these publication figures imply, the popularity of the *Nights* only increased in nineteenth-century England; they increased to such an extent, in fact, that the book could be said to “penetrate every stratum of the reading public.”¹⁸ No hyperbole seemed too excessive to describe the appeal of the *Nights*. One reviewer, for instance, asks his readers, “Who is there that remembers not with delight the time when he first read the *Arabian Nights*?—who that recurs not occasionally to their pages with renewed pleasure?” In a review of six new editions of the tales in 1839, Leigh Hunt calls the *Nights* “the most popular book in the world.”¹⁹ The *Nights*' plots, characters, and settings seeped so thoroughly into English popular culture that authors who made reference to the text “felt,” according to Muhsin Jassim Ali, “sure that their readers were so familiar with the tales that they had no need to check a ‘scholarly companion’ to the *Arabian Nights*.”²⁰ Commentators cast a thorough understanding of the *Nights* as the sign of a cultivated literary taste and judgment. So it is that the editor of a nineteenth-century

English translation of the *Nights* contends that “Not to be acquainted with the ‘Arabian Nights,’ argues a literary apathy, the imputation of which no one, we think, would be willing to bear.”²¹ It should come as no surprise, then, that the list of English authors who made use of the tales in any number of ways constitutes a kind of Who’s Who in English letters of the period, regardless of genre or ideology. Samuel Coleridge, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and Lord Tennyson were among those English authors who made significant reference to or in some way incorporated aspects of the tales into their writings.²²

American readers were no different in their regard for the *Nights* from their counterparts across the Atlantic, indicating that members of America’s literary culture could at least agree on the value of a set of tales of distinctly foreign origin even if they fought about the nature and value of promoting a specifically national literature.²³ Interest in the *Nights* was part of a larger interest shown by nineteenth-century American readers in materials related to what we would call the Middle East.²⁴ Travel narratives, fictional tales, and a range of other writings gained wide readership in the United States, and they produced an especially keen interest among the small but growing members of America’s literary culture in the 1830s and 1840s—precisely the time Poe was writing. Of all the works related to the East that were published or read in the United States in the nineteenth century, *Nights* was without question the most widely discussed.²⁵ Speaking of what she calls the “virtually inexhaustible reservoir from which nineteenth-century writers in Europe and America drew their knowledge of the Near East,” Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein contends that all this writing “ranks second to the great classic of all times: *The Arabian Nights*.”²⁶ American readers possessed just as intimate a familiarity with the *Nights* as American writers did. Or at least writers for mid-century magazines thought so. Reviewing a new edition of the *Nights* in the December 1847 issue of *The American Review*, G. W. Peck cast the *Nights* in terms of sentimental relations when he says that he doesn’t need to restate the plots of the stories in detail because, after all, the tales were a “common friend” to all his readers.

Magazine editors considered material related to the *Nights* to be a potential boon to sales. American magazines of the period faced intense competition for readers in order to maintain their very livelihood. The competition proved so fierce and the market for such magazines so small that only the *North American Review* managed to survive—and it did so only barely—for any sustained period before 1833, and very few from 1833 to 1860. In this context, Charles Fenno Hoffman’s decisions as editor of the *Literary World*, the first important periodical in America devoted solely to a

discussion of current books, suggests that he, at least, considered the *Nights* to be of supreme interest to American readers. Hoffman commissioned a series on the origins of the tales and their importance to literature in general. The series ran for five issues in the spring of 1848, covering ten pages; the last segment examined *Nights*' "Influence on General Literature."²⁷ The importance attached to the *Nights* at least by America's self-proclaimed arbiters of literary taste can be gauged, I think, by the unprecedented focus—at least over the course of the magazine's five-year existence—over a series of issues on the history and significance of a single literary work.

American reviewers argued that the *Nights*' importance derived from its affecting portrayal of what they cast as a universal human condition.²⁸ For these reviewers, Scheherazade's stories not only reveal the peculiar features of Arabian society but also, and more importantly, use those peculiar features of a particular society to portray traits that readers in any civilized society will recognize as distinctly and definitively human.²⁹ More than one reviewer, in fact, compares the tales favorably to Shakespeare's plays by focusing precisely on the way these stories are said to succeed at demonstrating a kind of universal human nature. The stories depend for this effect, of course, on the ability and willingness of American readers to recognize themselves when they read tales set in the seemingly and unfailingly "un-American" settings of the Arab world. In this sense, at least, the stories ask readers to imagine themselves as Arabs as a way of imagining themselves as humans.³⁰

In casting the stories as repositories of fundamental truths about a human nature shared by those in Persia and Providence, reviewers cast the *Nights* as not merely a valuable work of literature but as an exemplary work able to serve as a model for what constitutes superior fiction in the first place. In praising Scheherazade's tales in this way, reviewers could then use the *Nights* in debates over the nature of what they considered—following writers in Germany and Great Britain—to be literature's most elemental forms. The figure of the "romance" and the quality of "fancy" figured most prominently and frequently in these debates, and it is no surprise that *Nights* is read in relation to theories of these two categories. One reviewer argues, for instance, that "all true lovers of romance must rejoice" in the publication of a new edition of the *Nights*. He contends that the stories' "greatest charm" is that they are "creations of the pure fancy," a fancy that, he says, "runs on and on at its own sweet will, precisely as it does in dreams."³¹ The stories of Sinbad serve as prime examples of this quality for they offer "the nearest approach to absolute dreaming" he has seen in literature as a whole.³²

The frequent invocations of “fancy” and “romance” in these reviews link the *Nights* to debates about the current state and potential future of American literature in particular.³³ Writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Gilmore Simms argued against those who claimed that American authors would produce literature of great quality only if they aimed to represent in what we would call a “realist” fashion the social, environmental, and political world peculiar to the United States. Simms and Hawthorne in particular wielded the figure of “romance” in opposition to such propositions. In his now famous “Preface” to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne distinguishes his “Romance” from the category of the “Novel” by claiming, first of all, that the “Romance” stands “as a work of art,” a status that obliges it to portray “the truth of the human heart” without the necessity, under which novels labor, of “a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary.”³⁴ Simms casts the difference between “romance” and “realism” in starkly moral terms when he has the narrator of “Grayling; or, ‘Murder Will Out’” open the tale with a meditation on storytelling in mid-nineteenth-century America. The narrator bemoans the “evil” effect that “modern reasoning” has had on those who tell “romantic” stories. The “materialists” who insist on the “monstrous matter-of-fact” in their fiction “have it all their own way” in America, the narrator contends. Simms’s narrator claims that this emphasis on science has produced a generation of “story-tellers” whose works “are so resolute to deal in the real, the actual only,” as opposed to the storytellers of “preceding ages” whose “love of the marvelous belongs . . . to all those who love and cultivate either of the fine arts.” The devaluation of the romantic in favor of the realist not only resulted in “derision” for literary classics such as *Faust* but, even more troubling, brought about the very loss “of those wholesome moral restraints which might have kept many of us virtuous, where the laws could not.”³⁵ Fiction in the form of romance, it would seem, helps regulate the behavior of those who read it.

These reviews—and “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade”—appeared in print when debates over the nature and even the necessity for a distinctly “American” national literature reached, according to Benjamin Spencer, its “crest,” as well as over how specific categories such as “fancy” and “romance” would or should characterize that literature raged among the small circle of literati up and down the Atlantic seaboard.³⁶ Periodicals in Philadelphia, New York, and Richmond, to name only a few, hoped to generate sales with essays devoted to the issues surrounding the development—or lack thereof—of a uniquely American literature. They published articles defending copyright laws that allowed publishers the

opportunity to present their readership with the very best material from around the world without having to pay the high royalties fees to authors that would, or so the publishers claimed, result in the publication of “cheap” rather than “quality” works. Articles also appeared bemoaning the lack of an international copyright law, the absence of which, these authors contended, made it impossible for American authors to earn a living when forced to compete with pirated copies of works culled from the world over. The battle over international copyright grew so fierce that Cornelius Mathews would claim in a much-reprinted speech to the American authors club that “There is at this moment, waging in our midst, a great war between a foreign and a native literature.” Evert Duyckinck writes in his “Literary Prospects of 1845”—which appears in the very same month as “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade”—of the “*taboo* of the American author in the booksellers’ stores” (150).³⁷

Poe opposed the focus on a specifically American literature from the time he entered the American literary scene in the 1830s. In his “Exordium to Critical Notices,” first published in the January 1842 issue of *Graham's Magazine*, Poe contrasts his own view of literary nationalism with those of most literary critics in America in the early 1840s for whom, Poe writes, “the watchword now was, ‘a national literature.’”³⁸ Poe mocks his critical colleagues’ devotion to a strictly “national literature” by saying “as if any true literature could be national—as if the world at large were not the proper stage for the literary histrio.”³⁹ Poe contends that “our reviews urged the propriety—our booksellers the necessity, of strictly ‘American’ themes.”⁴⁰ He accuses reviewers of “liking, or pretending to like, a stupid book the better because (sure enough) its stupidity was of our own growth, and discussed our own affairs.”⁴¹ Poe uses “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” to satirize the American literary scene by calling attention to the drawbacks of a specific form of literary nationalism that trades specifically on fears of the “foreign.”⁴² To counter such fears of un-American things, Poe uses a unanimously praised collection of unambiguously “foreign” material and challenges the very goal of a distinctly *American* American literature whose distinctiveness emerges in relation to European literature.

Poe wastes no time linking this story of Arabian nights with American literary culture. Indeed, the very first paragraph locates the story specifically in American literary culture and, in the process, also identifies the narrator's national identity. He does this in the opening paragraph by, first, making sure we understand the “American” and “European” literary communities as two distinct entities. The narrator accomplishes this when he qualifies his claim that a work he has found during his “Oriental researches” is, first,

“scarcely known at all,” then, “is little known ‘EVEN’ in Europe,” and, finally, “has never been quoted, to my knowledge, by any American.”⁴³ The narrator’s sentence provides a telescoping of fields of knowledge: he begins by telling us what is known about the book by people anywhere, moves next to inform us of its status in Europe, then finishes by noting what is known about it in America. By ending with its status in American letters and, then, going on to comment on the one work of American writing that might, in fact, have cited the text, the narrator establishes his own position as an American critic as he separates himself—and the American literary scene in general—from European literary culture.

In the very process of insisting on the separation of American and European literary cultures, the narrator simultaneously presents these two worlds in a hierarchical relation to one another. In concluding with America, the narrator focuses our attention on the American literary scene in particular, but he focuses our attention on that scene *only* in relation to Europe and the world at large. Why even mention Europe if the story takes aim at the American literary scene? By making Europe the object of the comparison, the narrator grants Europe a privileged position within literary, and specifically Oriental, studies. With the simple use of the adverb “even,” then, Poe’s narrator casts Europe as the site of superior literary knowledge. We have a fictitious source found by an American that demonstrates the wrong-headedness of the literary establishment about a common and central feature of literary history. It is as if, in the stereotypical fashion of postcolonial writers, the narrator continues to evaluate his own community by the standards of those whose political authority, at least, was long ago rejected.

But Poe undercuts the privileged position in an imagined transatlantic cultural hierarchy his narrator affords Europe by collapsing the very distinction between these two worlds he has himself helped to establish. Both Europe and America, while they may have different acquaintances with the *Isitöornot*, have been operating under the very same misapprehension. Regardless of how much they knew about this obscure work, both literary communities have behaved as if they knew the full story of Scheherazade when, in fact, they did not. The narrative thus opens with the narrator exposing the pretensions of both literary worlds with regard to one of the most popular and well-known works of literature.

The first paragraph thus establishes a literary cultural hierarchy only to equalize both parties in that hierarchy by pointing out that a single American researcher alone knows the “true” story of one of the world’s most famous narratives. In beginning the story in this way, Poe substitutes

a fiercely individualistic American literary nationalism for the conventional understanding of the transatlantic literary establishment he has here exposed as a fraud. That is, the narrator neatly turns the slur on American literary culture against both European critics and the American literary establishment when he, an American, finds a book that completely alters our picture of what was regarded as one of the most impressive collections of Oriental tales.

In ridiculing the literary establishments of both Europe and America in this way, Poe calls attention to the oddities of such a way of organizing knowledge in the first place. His telescoping of knowledge—from anyone, to Europeans, to Americans—demonstrates the contradictions such a category of “national knowledge” produces. What, the paragraph implicitly asks, does “national knowledge” have to do with “literary knowledge” in the first place? We see this in the narrator’s characterization of the “originality” of the *Isitöornot*. It is simultaneously an original and a reprint; it manages at the same time to be both a new work and an old one. We have, then, a rather curious originality called to our attention whose structure calls to mind a similar structure in debates over an American national literature. For what does it mean for something to be valuable only because it has not been quoted by someone of a particular nationality? What, in other words, does the category of the national have to do with the category of knowledge in general? Doesn’t knowledge, at least as it is imagined in its ideal state, transcend national boundaries?

On the off chance his readers have failed to pick up on this structural parallel, Poe refers in this paragraph to a recent, well-known work that calls forth precisely the same problems as the *Isitöornot*, Rufus Griswold’s “Curiosities of American Literature.” Griswold’s volume, the narrator tells us, may be the only other book printed in America that makes reference to the *Isitöornot*. “Curiosities of American Literature” was first published in 1844 as an appendix to an American edition of Isaac Disraeli’s enormously popular *Curiosities of Literature*. The *Curiosities* was a series of miscellaneous brief essays and anecdotes on world literature that were “published in countless editions, authorized and pirated throughout the English-speaking world.”⁴⁴ Disraeli’s *Curiosities* aims to “stimulate the literary curiosity” of those who simply lack the time or the training to learn the most important facts about literary history that would allow them to understand the “great works” of literature of any period. Griswold’s introduction to his appendix invokes precisely the same cultural hierarchy as the narrator of “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” to authorize his addition of specifically American national curiosities to Disraeli’s explicitly nonnational collection

of anecdotes. “In this country,” Griswold writes, “the materials for such a work [as Disraeli’s *Curiosities*] are not abundant, and the reader will not expect to find in the following pages articles intrinsically as interesting as those given by an author unequalled in this department, whose field was the world.” Griswold begins, in other words, by apologizing for the inferiority of American literature when compared with the literature produced by the rest of the world. He offers no defense of America’s literary products, but, instead, he contends that the value of the “new” materials he has added comes from the distinctive perspective they offer: “an American impression.” “Impressions,” of course, reward a particular point of view for its point of view regardless of its intrinsic value.

The effort to “Americanize” a work that offers no single national impression dramatizes the American literary scene of Poe’s time. Griswold’s supplication at the very opening of his appendix to the gods of other national literatures only makes explicit what the very appearance of yet another edition of Disraeli’s book in and of itself already concedes: American readers look to traditions outside America to satisfy their literary desires. An edition that includes curiosities of admittedly “lesser” American literature not only fails to address issues of quality but also, and perhaps more intriguingly, seems designed more to find yet another way to profit from the pirating of foreign literary goods rather than helping create a market for American writers regardless of their subject matter. Even those positively disposed toward Griswold’s appendix acknowledged this. As the anonymous reviewer of this edition of the *Curiosities* points out in the May 1844 issue of *Knickerbocker, or New York Monthly Magazine*, Griswold’s addition of a specifically American set of anecdotes will make his edition “the only one for the future in the American market” (490). The reviewer goes on to note that American literature “is now grafted on a work which will secure its life” (492). Opponents of such piracy who argued that it worked against the production of a native American literature noticed the irony as well. As Joel T. Headley would point out in “The Prose Writers of America,” the same man “who denounces . . . our Congress for not protecting the works of authors, has himself taken D’Israeli’s [*sic*] *Curiosities of Literature*, and tacking on a few ‘American Curiosities,’ so as to usurp the English edition in the American market, issued it with his name on the title page.”⁴⁵

Poe produced a remarkably similar set of anecdotes and brief essays that stand in stark contrast to Griswold’s “Curiosities of American Literature” and tell us something about the critique he makes here of Griswold’s “Curiosities.” The difference between the two suggests that Poe’s reference

to the “Curiosities” is designed to call attention to the problems for those interested in producing literature in the United States—if not precisely “American” literature—of approaches such as Griswold’s. When he was running—if not, in name, at least in practice—the *Southern Literary Messenger* in the 1830s, Poe, too, produced a series of anecdotes modeled on Disraeli’s *Curiosities*. He did so again in the 1840s when he published his “Marginalia,” very short pieces that purported to be his marginal comments in books he was then reading. Unlike Griswold’s work, however, Poe’s anecdotes cover more than simply the American literary scene. These anecdotes work to train readers in how to value literature as a category seemingly divorced from political categories rather than to promote American literature specifically. In so doing, the pieces worked to produce—in not so subtle a fashion—a literary culture in America whose standards would be Poe’s standards. Poe’s own work, then, stands in contrast to the “Curiosities” to which he refers in the opening paragraph of “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade.”

It’s not simply that the very reference to Griswold’s “Curiosities” in “The Thousand-and-Second Story of Scheherazade” mocks the peculiarly national nature of Griswold’s volume. The reference to “Curiosities” also makes absolutely no sense in context—and its absurdity would have been quite clear to readers of *Godey’s* magazine. In suggesting that perhaps only the author of the “Curiosities” might have quoted from the *Isitöornot*, the narrator suggests the impossible. Griswold’s “Curiosities” are “gleaned from many rare and curious old books relating to our country or written by our countrymen”—they are, in other words, interesting and/or otherwise important stories told about America or by Americans. In this sense, a story from the *Arabian Nights Entertainments* would have no place in “Curiosities of American Literature.” What seems like supplication to the comprehensiveness and coverage of Griswold’s “Curiosities” amounts, instead, to a critique of it for its sole focus on national matters—and matters that are hardly “ancient” as the “Curiosities” suggests about the roots of American literature. The joke here seems to be that attempts to promote a national literature risk blinding us to the stories right before us that might be non-national in character.⁴⁶

Once the opening paragraphs have established the nation’s literary scene as the real source of the satire, Poe turns our attention toward the problem of aesthetic theory that, as we mentioned earlier in our discussion of Hawthorne and Simms, took center stage in mid-nineteenth-century debates over the nature and form of American literature. Given Poe’s ties to the gothic and romance traditions, we should hardly be surprised that he

uses the story to mock those who stand for what Simms would have classified as a more “realistic” literature as America’s defining style. To get his reader to take his side on such aesthetic matters, Poe must first deflate his readers’ sense that the modern world is superior to all previous ages, ages that are associated by Poe’s readers with the romantic vision of art that Poe advocates.

We can begin to understand how Poe accomplishes this by examining one of the contrasts he draws between the stories told by his Scheherazade and her more famous predecessor. If the *Nights* contained stories with unexpected twists and turns of plot, the tales of Poe’s Scheherazade form predictable patterns that offer little in the way of surprise or suspense. She focuses in the *Isitöornot* on stories of Sinbad’s adventures that she had not already told. In each of these stories, most of which last no more than a paragraph or two, what Sinbad describes as magic turn out to be natural phenomena or common man-made, and self-consciously modern, items. So, Sinbad tells us about a series of voyages at sea on the back of a “vast monster” moving “with inconceivable swiftness.” A “vast number of animals” remarkably like men lived on the back of the “hideous’ monster.” After having been bound and taken prisoner, Sinbad consents to travel the world with the crew. On their travels, Sinbad visits an array of modern marvels unknown—or at least unmentioned—in ancient times. These include “an island . . . built in the middle of the sea by a colony of little things like caterpillars” (a coral reef built by worms); a land “where the forests were of solid stone” (a petrified forest); “a land in which the nature of things seemed reversed” (a South American lake where trees appeared to be growing underwater following an earthquake); the “native land” of the ship’s captain, inhabited by the “most powerful magicians,” whose magic included a “huge horse whose bones were iron and whose blood was boiling water” (a train operating in the United States) and a “mighty thing that was neither man nor beast” whose “fingers . . . it employed with such incredible speed and dexterity that it would have had no trouble in writing out twenty thousand copies of the Koran in an hour” (a printing press).

The implicit contrasts these descriptions establish between the modern and ancient worlds are part of an elaborate rhetorical ruse designed by Poe to undermine for careful readers the very distinction between ancient and modern perspectives. Before we see how Poe ultimately unravels the very contrasts between historical periods on which the story’s humor seems to depend, let me explain the historical comparison Sinbad’s descriptions seem to produce. First of all, if Poe hopes to elicit laughter with this story—and it appears quite clear that he does hope for just such a response—such

a reaction depends upon his readers drawing comparisons as they read between the original *Arabian Nights* and Poe's adaptation. We are supposed to laugh, at least in part, because of the discrepancy between the two. Given the extraordinary popularity of the *Nights* and its ubiquitous references in nineteenth-century American popular culture, one would think that Poe's readers could not help but compare the modern "wonders" Sinbad finds in "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" to the marvels he discovers in the old world of the infinitely more famous *Nights*. Poe's Sinbad fares quite badly in such a comparison. Indeed, he looks quite ridiculous, and so, too, then, does the ancient world he represents.

Second, the dramatic irony between the readers' and the characters' understanding of what Sinbad describes seems to mock the ancient world for its lack of simplicity as it trumpets the modern readers' greater sophistication. For the objects that Sinbad presents as fantastic, that the King and Scheherazade's sister take to be beyond the power of magic to produce, are, in fact, simply natural objects of the modern world. We laugh at their inferior knowledge because we understand the narrative in a way that they do not and, through this laughter, the modern reader—and modernity itself—demonstrates its superiority to the ancient world. Sinbad validates this chronological hierarchy when he labels as "magicians" people whom we know to be normal humans engaging in acts that are so commonplace in the modern world, so mundane and expected, that readers would hardly notice them in their day-to-day lives. Sinbad even fails to recognize the categorical distinction between human beings and those objects we have created and over which we have dominion when he mistakes modern technology for living creatures.

The simplistic, even primitive nature of Sinbad's character in Poe's story invites nineteenth-century American readers to make yet one more comparison between historical periods that seems to confirm modernity's sense of its superiority to all that came before. In mistaking commonplace objects of the modern world for magic, Sinbad takes on the role of the innocent and ignorant ancient dazzled by the remarkable achievements of modern society. In being blind to the categorical distinctions between the human and that which the human has created to serve his or her needs, Sinbad suggests the reader's superiority and, as representative of the world of a no-longer-present Arabia, the inferiority of the ancient in relation to the modern world. Sinbad's awe at what he sees, his amazement and wonder at the marvels of the modern, even lays the responsibility for his subservience to the modern world on his own shoulders. The simple primitive authorizes his own subjugation by recognizing that he and the world from which he

comes is, in his own judgment, not as worthy, not as accomplished, as the world he is only visiting.

In fact, our laughter when Sinbad mistakes the mundane for the magical merely diverts us from the real target at which the story takes aim. It gives the reader precisely what he wants to hear—that is, a story reminding the modern of its own superiority to all that came before—even as other elements of the story eliminate the very distinction between the modern and the ancient on which such laughter depends. We need look no further than the footnotes provided by Poe to see how he undermines key aspects of the distinctions—and the hierarchy that seems to go along with those distinctions—on which much of the story’s humor seems to depend. Far from providing a basis for distinguishing between Scheherazade’s primary narreee and the modern reader, the footnotes establish an equivalency between the King and the modern reader. Cast in the voice of the author “Poe” rather than the voice of any of the multiple narrators of “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade,” the notes decode Sinbad’s descriptions of what he sees on his adventures. They tell us what he really sees when he travels to the modern world rather than what he says he sees. The very need for such notes suggests that the modern reader might mistake these tales for fantasies, too, for it goes without saying that neither Sinbad, the King, the King’s sister, nor Scheherazade has access to Poe’s notes. I suppose one might say that access to the notes is yet one more distinction between the modern reader and the ancient characters about whom he is reading. Such a comparison hardly shows modernity in a positive light, though. Indeed, this distinction only subtly mocks the very magazine-reader who might arrogantly mistake his modern perspective as superior to those of the characters in the story, the King and Sinbad, at whom he is supposed to laugh. Were it not for the intervention of a third, more knowledgeable party, might not the reader be just as much the object of scorn as a King who puts a storyteller to death for no better reason than that she tells stories that seem untrue?

In linking the King and the modern reader through their ignorance, the footnotes redirect the source of the satire from the realism of the stories to the aesthetic theories by which those stories are judged. We will examine in more detail precisely what about Scheherazade’s stories leads the King to order her execution, but for the moment we need only acknowledge that the story leads us to laugh at his order because we know something he doesn’t: that the stories are, contrary to what the King asserts, true. We cannot say, though, that we would have spared Scheherazade because what she said was true, for this mocks the King for lacking the very information the story felt the modern reader needed as well. We, too, needed Scheherazade’s stories

to be verified. If the modern reader wants to retain some sense of distance between himself and a King who arbitrarily executes his subjects for no more than telling tall tales, that modern reader must imagine that he or she, in the same situation, would not have killed Scheherazade. We, the readers, know that she should not be killed, not only because the stories are, in fact, true but also and more importantly because it doesn't matter whether the stories are true or false. Since we know the stories are true, the footnotes put us in the position of saying we would spare Scheherazade even if the stories were not true. If we want to laugh at him for killing the storyteller, we are left with no other reason to laugh than that he places too much emphasis on the stories' historicity and overlooks their value as entertainment. In order for readers to laugh at the King they must establish a different value system—they must side with Scheherazade's aesthetic of storytelling over the King's.

Poe goes to great lengths preparing his reader to be ready to reject the King's aesthetic long before he invites us to laugh at that King when he kills Scheherazade for the simple sin of creativity at the story's conclusion. He creates a story-within-a-story that focuses our attention on the King's reaction to what he hears as he listens to Scheherazade by making the King's opinions on this matter an integral part of the narrative. The story-within-a-story of the King's response shows the monarch to be a very bad audience who, in kingly fashion, sees no need to temper his remarks with courtesy, respect, or politeness. The King's behavior, then, his responses to the stories offered him by a master of narrative, instructs us beyond a shadow of a doubt that we, in order to be good readers ourselves, must distance ourselves from the King's aesthetic at all costs. This story-within-a-story allows Poe to concentrate his readers' attention on the competing aesthetic theories that animate the King's reaction to what he hears even before the King uses those very theories as the basis for sentencing Scheherazade to death. While the King begins by noting his interest, virtually his entire dialogue consists of brief expressions of disapproval. He says, for instance, that he finds these "latter adventures of Sinbad" to be "exceedingly entertaining and strange" (M 1159). He says that he finds her story of the man-beast's travels over the ocean "very singular" and has "doubts" about whether, as Scheherazade asserts, the stories are "quite true" (M 1159). He begins to say "Hum" after each story or detail that he finds implausible, but Scheherazade explicitly ignores him. Indeed, the story describes her as "paying no attention to his remarks" (M 1160). He continues to signify his doubts by saying "Hum," then "Fiddle de dee," "Oh fy," "Pooh," until he exclaims, after hearing one of her tales, "That, now, I believe . . . because I have read something of the

kind before, in a book” (M 1165). He moves on to “Nonsense” (M 1165), “Fall al,” “Ridiculous” (M 1167), “Absurd” (M 1167), and, finally, before he orders her to stop, “Preposterous” (M 1169).

The story stages at least one point on which the reader, the King, and Scheherazade might agree, though. Poe has the reader, Scheherazade, and the King agree that women’s beauty serves as the foundation not only for aesthetic theory but also and more importantly as a way of demonstrating a culture’s taste and civilized status. In the “nation of necromancers” (M 1167) that concludes Scheherazade’s tale, Scheherazade claims that the “wives and daughters of these eminent conjurers represent everything that is accomplished and refined; and would be every thing that is interesting and beautiful” (M 1169)—would be, that is, were it not for an “evil genii” who “has put it into the heads of these accomplished ladies that the thing which we describe as personal beauty, consists altogether in the protuberance of the region which lies not very far below the small of the back” (M 1169). Scheherazade does not endorse the fashion. On the contrary, she explicitly mocks the fashion. Her critique of women’s fashion represents the first time in “The Thousand-and-Second Story of Scheherazade” that Poe has Scheherazade offer an opinion on any of the stories Sinbad has told. When Scheherazade says that “the days have long gone by since it was possible to distinguish a woman from a dromedary,” the King orders her to stop (M 1169). While it is surely the combined effect of his incredulity at the absurdity of the stories he has heard, he draws the line at this way of understanding women’s beauty. The presumption to pass off as true a story that claims a culture would define beauty in terms of the breakdown of the distinction between beautiful women and pack animals prompts the King to murder Scheherazade.

The King finds such transformations of women’s bodies necessarily to be a “lie”—implying, in so doing, that no nation would willingly allow women’s bodies to be so transformed as a sign of beauty that they would be indistinguishable from animals. In this sense, a notion of beauty that depends on women’s bodies provides the foundation for the King’s distinction between the “real” and the “romantic.” In this way, the “beauty” of women’s bodies—not the beauty of a specific woman but the beauty of women’s bodies as a categorical object—represents the foundation of what constitutes the “real” against which a story’s veracity can be judged. How does one know if a story is true or not? Look to what the story says about the way a nation understands the beauty of women.

Poe’s nineteenth-century American reader knows that such a fashion

exists in the United States. Indeed, Poe believes knowledge of this style of dress would be so widespread that he offers no footnote to explain Scheherazade's story of a style that his remarks here and in other stories indicate he considered quite ridiculous. In knowing that such a fashion does exist in the United States, the reader knows, too, that the King is wrong—cultures do define women's beauty so that it is indistinguishable from that of pack animals. Readers can be expected to distance themselves through their laughter from any aesthetic theory so sure of itself that it requires the execution of those who violate its tenets. In having the King murder Scheherazade when we know that her stories do, in fact, follow the aesthetic theory the King uses to legitimate his murderous actions, Poe shows the theory to be fundamentally flawed by showing the King's aesthetic principles in action. Such a theory, the story shows by having the King order his wife's hanging because he mistakenly believes her story does not faithfully represent the world as it is, requires that readers know everything about the material world as it is at all times. Since omnipotent readers do not exist—and, indeed, the very idea borders on the blasphemous—such a theory cannot be trusted to guide our judgments on literary matters.

But the problems raised by the King's principles do not end here. For the King's aesthetic theory constitutes a subtle attack on aesthetic production itself by denying the very possibility that storytellers can produce beauty that does not yet exist in the world. In short, the theory completely ignores the imaginative power of the storyteller to offer us the "truth" beneath the surface that defines the world as we see it. The stories Scheherazade tells her husband here do just that and, thus, highlight this flaw in the King's aesthetic theory. The very footnotes that obliterate the distinction between modern and ancient audiences simultaneously elevate the imaginative power of the storyteller. The fact that Scheherazade's renderings of the mundane phenomena of modern life could be mistaken for fantasy suggests the power of the storyteller who can make even the world of nature and technology appear magical. For while Sinbad is said to witness the events Scheherazade narrates, modern audiences encounter the modern wonders-that-are-not-wonders through Scheherazade's descriptions of them. Sinbad fails to understand what he sees in front of him, the story suggests; modern readers might not recognize everyday objects that define their world when they encounter them through a narrator's description of them. They might mistake, that is, descriptions of perfectly natural phenomena for creations born out of the imagination of a master storyteller. The need for such notes testifies to Scheherazade's skills as a storyteller in that they acknowledge

her ability to transform the trivialities of the material world into a world of magic, wonder, and limitless possibility. She turns, in other words, realism into romance.

If Poe gets us to laugh at the King's execution of Scheherazade as a way of mocking the aesthetic theories that give rise to the murder, he uses our admiration of Scheherazade as a storyteller able to transform the real into the romantic in order to show us the virtues of the aesthetic principles with which the story associates her. In Poe's version of the story Scheherazade becomes the very embodiment of the aesthetic. She represents beauty in the community, and any threat to her life constitutes a threat to the aesthetic. We see this in the liberties Poe takes with his source material when Scheherazade tells us why she puts her life on the line by marrying a King who has had each of his previous wives executed. Scheherazade volunteers for such a dangerous match in order to "redeem the land from the depopulating tax upon its beauty" (M 1152). No such language exists in the frame story of the translation Poe most likely read, by Edward William Lane, nor can any language of a tax on beauty be found in *any* English translation of any period.⁴⁷ Each of the previous translations that Poe might have encountered focuses the readers' attention on the infidelity of women in general rather than on women's beauty in particular being taxed or reduced. Taxes, in fact, never come up. So, for instance, the most popular American edition of the *Nights* until the late 1840s, a translation by Jonathan Scott first published in the United States in Philadelphia in 1830, has the brothers agree that "there is no wickedness equal to that of women."⁴⁸ The sultan is convinced that "no woman was chaste."⁴⁹ Once convinced of this, he vows that "in order to prevent the disloyalty of such as he should afterwards marry" he plans "to wed one every night and have her strangled the next morning."⁵⁰ He is "sure" that his brother "will follow my example" when he returns to his home.⁵¹

To be sure, at some point during their narratives, each of the translations to which Poe had access associates women with the beautiful, and, in so doing, each links women in some way and at some point with aesthetics. But none of these translations at any point links the King's murder of women to aesthetic terms, and certainly no language casts these murders as a threat to the aesthetics of the community as a whole. In the case of Scheherazade, for instance, beauty becomes a supplemental quality. The bulk of the description of Scheherazade focuses on her accomplishments. She "possessed courage, wit, and penetration, infinitely above her sex. She had read much, and had so admirable a memory that she never forgot anything she had read. She had successfully applied herself to philosophy, medicine,

history, and the liberal arts; and her poetry excelled the compositions of the best writers of the time.”⁵² It is only as a final quality that beauty is mentioned—“Besides this, she was a perfect beauty, and all her accomplishments were crowned by solid virtue.”⁵³ Her physical features do play a role in her relation with the King, for when the sultan first sees her “he found her face so beautiful, that he was perfectly charmed.”⁵⁴ But when the narrative concludes, she does not mention, as Poe's Scheherazade does, that “this odious tax is so happily repealed” (M 1154).

Since Poe's Scheherazade stands as the very embodiment of the aesthetic in a story that, first of all, asks us to read it in relation to debates over the nation's literary culture and, second, provides us with a model to reject in the King, her character seems the most obvious place to look for just what principles Poe wants American literary culture to support. Scheherazade's aesthetic theory promotes, for lack of a better phrase, art for art's sake. We can see this most clearly when we compare her motives for telling the King stories in Poe's short story with those offered in the translations to which he had access. Stories are valued in “The Thousand-and-Second Story of Scheherazade” for, and only for, their aesthetic quality, whereas in the translations to which Poe had access, a story's aesthetic qualities are merely a means to perform social work. In contrast to Poe's focus on aesthetics, the translations available to Poe cast Scheherazade's storytelling as a way of restoring familial relations in the kingdom. Each of these translations without exception has Scheherazade cast her motives for putting her own life in jeopardy as a way to restore sympathetic familial relations within the nation. The unnamed narrator of Scott's translation, for instance, describes the effect of the King's murderous marriage ritual in terms of the grief of countless fathers who are “inconsolable [at] the loss of [their] daughter[s]” and “tender mothers dreading lest their daughters should share the same fate.” The King's treatment of these young women so thoroughly permeates the community that the country is filled with “the cries of distress and apprehension.”⁵⁵ Scheherazade hopes the successful completion of her plan will “stop the barbarity which the sultan exercises upon the families of this city.”⁵⁶ This sentimental reaction to the King's murderous behavior poses a threat, the narrative tells us, to the kingdom itself. Happy families are thus linked to a healthy, stable, political order.⁵⁷ The stories in the translations thus produce two related effects: they save Scheherazade's life and, at the same time, relieve the communities' families of their emotional pain.

In casting Scheherazade's stories as saving the lives of women while simultaneously healing a grieving nation of families, the storyteller in the *Nights* performs a distinct and particular social function that Poe's Schehe-

razade pointedly does not. Poe removes all such language from his version of *The Arabian Nights*, or at the very least it must have seemed he had quite consciously done so to any careful nineteenth-century American reader of the tales. His Scheherazade tells her tales for her own purposes, not to restore her country's health or even to save her own life. She tells her stories in Poe's tale, that is, without the threat of death hanging over her and, perhaps even more importantly, without the accompanying threat to the community's women, for the stories are told after she has "finally triumphed" and "the tariff upon beauty [is] repealed" (M 1154). With her life no longer in danger and Arabia's women safe from the King's wrath, Poe must provide another motive for Scheherazade to keep talking. Scheherazade's Poe justifies the production of still more narrative by recourse to something in the stories themselves. She has not, she tells us, provided us with "the full conclusion of the history of Sinbad the sailor" (M1154). In this way, the narrative is produced to satisfy what the author casts as an aesthetic quality defined by the stories themselves: wholeness. She must keep telling us stories because this particular cycle of stories has a beginning and an end that exist independently of the author or audience. She cannot be fully satisfied unless Sinbad's story is told to its conclusion.

Poe makes sure we know that the author's satisfaction matters infinitely more in "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" than does the satisfaction of her audience. We see this when Poe yet again parades for all to see his perversion of the traditional frame story that accompanied every translation of the *Nights*. If Scheherazade offers tales in *Nights* tuned specifically to satisfy her audience so that she—and the other women who would follow in her wake should she fail—could stave off death, Poe's Scheherazade couldn't care less about her listeners' responses. To be sure, she says her stories will "entertain" her audience, but they will do so, we learn as the story progresses, only on her terms. If they fail to entertain, well, Scheherazade seems to believe this says more about the listener than about the tales themselves. Again and again, she brushes aside the ridicule we saw the King heap upon her tales. So, for instance, after he classifies her stories as "preposterous," she "continue[s] . . . without being in any manner disturbed by these frequent and most ungentlemanly interruptions on the part of her husband" (M 1169).

When Poe shifts the storyteller's concerns away from her audience toward the stories themselves, Scheherazade's plight comes to bear a remarkable resemblance to the nineteenth-century author in America as Poe imagined that figure. She reminds us of Poe's vision of the author, first of all, in her unwavering fidelity to a story's "true" and "complete" form,

even if a commitment to the story's "inherent" qualities conflict with the desires of her audience. Poe even grants her belief in the formal qualities of literature a form of punitive power usually reserved for God. For the act of refusing to allow Scheherazade to tell her stories in full, he "reaped for him[self] a most righteous reward," a phrase that echoes Biblical verse in which God himself metes out such rewards on the basis of righteous—or, in the case of the King, decidedly unrighteous—behavior.

Scheherazade's resemblance to Poe's notions of those ideas, issues, and principles for which an author should stand are nowhere more evident, though, than in her final thoughts "during the tightening of the bowstring." Poe uses these thoughts to send the reader away with a notion of a thoroughly individuated author, an author, that is, who bears the hallmark of a modern individual: a distinctive voice who can be silenced only by the grave (M 1170). After all, how else to understand Scheherazade's characterization of the stories the King will be denied once the bowstring performs its office as "inconceivable" if she is merely telling stories of natural phenomena? Why would she say that "depriving him of many inconceivable adventures" will be the King's "reward" for her murder if these are stories that can be told by anyone? Couldn't someone else tell the stories? Indeed, the fact that the unnamed narrator of the story has pointed out to us that these stories are not Scheherazade's inventions but are, in fact, merely historical anecdotes only highlights the abilities of this particular storyteller. She transforms the "natural" into stories others would be unable to imagine, and she writes these stories that are so vivid they transform the mundane into the miraculous for herself and only for herself rather than as a way to restore communal health. What could be further from the Scheherazade of the *Nights*, who tells generic stories not simply as a way of saving her life but on behalf of her entire community, than a storyteller who persists in telling her own stories her own way regardless of the consequences to herself and without thinking of, as though it were not worthy of her consideration, the impact those stories might have on the community at large? If the *Nights* call our attention to the power of stories in a community, then, "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" presents us with a teller of tales who cares more about maintaining the purity of her own vision of storytelling in spite of the risks and who does so while individuated from rather than indivisible from those around her.

By the time he kills off in the story's final sentence the very figure who represents America's hope for literary achievement, then, Poe has used the contrast between the aesthetic associated with the King and the one represented by his storyteller to demonstrate what is at stake in debates over

the direction of American literary culture. To put it perhaps too bluntly, the story shows that those who advocate for a nationalist literary aesthetic risk killing the very source of true aesthetic production. But the issues raised by the story's ending refuse to be resolved in so neat a fashion. His imagined "solution," so to speak, to the problems faced by those concerned with the production of literature in the United States raises at least as many questions as it answers. Would white, male American readers be entirely comfortable that the answer to their country's literary deficiencies was to be found in an Arabian woman from ancient history?

Indeed, Poe's transformation of the traditional story so that Scheherazade's stories no longer spare her from execution but actually become responsible for her death threaten to dethrone her from her very position as the figurative solution to America's literary woes. On the one hand, as we saw above, Poe sacrifices his image of the proper aesthetic so that he can illustrate in the most dramatic fashion possible the cost of an errant aesthetic theory. But Poe's most extreme inversion of the plot of *Arabian Nights* also and at the same time puts his audience—and Poe himself, for that matter—at a safe distance from what must have seemed, simply by virtue of her being an Arabian woman, to Poe's readers to be a very dangerous figure. The death sentence he metes out to the very character with whom we are supposed to side shields his readers from the danger of becoming too Oriental. The corpse's abject status allows Poe to keep his largely male, probably exclusively white audience a safe distance from the story's figure for the truly civilized aesthetic. No longer does Poe ask his readers to consider themselves part of Scheherazade's community, a community united by a shared aesthetic theory currently under siege. When Scheherazade dies, Poe asks his readers to imagine themselves as fundamentally different from the story's title character. She has crossed the ultimate divide. Readers of Poe's story are alive; the character of Scheherazade is dead. In placing Scheherazade at arm's length by killing her in the story's final lines, though, Poe protects his readers from the threat she poses without having to sacrifice the aesthetic principles she represents. Readers can, in other words, still side with her on the proper direction of American literary culture even after—especially after—they no longer have to imagine her as besting figures of patriarchal authority.

Or at least this seems to be Poe's hope. The hostility toward female figures indicated in the way Poe stages Scheherazade's death suggests that her dying is not quite enough to ward off the threat she poses. Readers of Poe will hardly be surprised to find in his work such thinly veiled hostility toward women. After all, in one of his most well-known prose works,

“The Philosophy of Composition,” when recounting how he wrote what was and would remain his most popular poem, “The Raven,” he tells us “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”⁵⁸ Poe takes this hostility to a new level with his portrayal of Scheherazade. He transforms a figure of female empowerment—a figure who gains her power by recourse to the aesthetic, a figure who uses the aesthetic as a way to put a stop to violence against women by the most powerful male figure in the nation—into one who ends up being a figure for powerlessness itself. Far from being actively engaged in working against a patriarchy that specifically targets women’s bodies, Poe’s Scheherazade passively accepts her fate—and she does so in the name of the very aesthetic that had been the source of her strength and the means she used to subvert the will of the state in its campaign of violence against women.

The hostility with which the story treats its protagonist demonstrates a deep, unresolved ambivalence at the very heart of Poe’s effort to solve America’s literary problem by turning to the East, an ambivalence that, in some respects, mirrors the contradictory way in which American readers and writers understood the East dating back even before Bradstreet. On the one hand, Poe draws on the image of Eastern rule as despotic, tyrannical, and irrational, images that by the time Poe wrote had become clichés in the countless Oriental tales Americans consumed, to ensure that his readers will have no sympathy for Scheherazade’s royal husband, Poe’s figure for the aesthetic theories he railed against in his magazine reviews and essays. At the same time, he calls on the image of the Orient, and specifically the tale he revises, *The Arabian Nights*, as the space of storytelling in its purest form, a space of sophisticated cultural products that bear the mark of centuries of civilization to which the United States—and Europe—can only aspire. In drawing on this second element of the Oriental imaginary, Poe asks his readers to imagine themselves as if they were Orientals as a way of civilizing American culture. If Western political ideas and racial character are understood as superior, the romance theory on which the *Nights* depends presents a model superior to what Western cultures—not limited to America but also including Europe—have produced. It offers a space, in other words, that effectively equalizes America with its former colonial masters by positioning both Europe and the United States as cultural inferiors to Arabia’s literary masters. In suggesting that this superior, Eastern model of literature could serve as a model for the United States—were it not, that is, for those who foolishly advocate an unacceptable aesthetic theory—the story offers a way of imagining America’s entry into the status of civilized cultures, a way that imagines American culture as superior to Europe through the adoption

of what it casts as a more Oriental aesthetic theory. In so doing, the story suggests that the American cultural scene must become more Oriental if it is to be civilized. But, at the same time, it needs to be sure that it doesn't become too Oriental. America needs the romance aesthetic associated with the East for it to be a truly civilized culture, Poe suggests, but America needs just as badly to be safeguarded against the dangers posed by the very feminized Orientalism on which entry into the pantheon of civilized nations depends. In the final analysis, "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" offers no resolution to this contrary view of the role of the East in helping America become more civilized; it is satisfied merely to illustrate the contradiction with which its readers must wrestle.