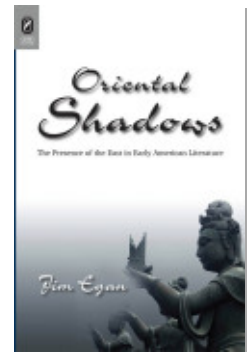




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Humanity's Eastern Home in Benjamin Franklin's Oriental Tales

In a famous 1784 letter to his daughter, Benjamin Franklin lays out his criticism of the newly formed “Society of Cincinnati.” The letter owes its fame in the twenty-first century to Franklin’s remarks extolling the virtues of the turkey as the symbol for America over the bird chosen by the Society, the bald eagle. Franklin begins his letter not with a discussion of birds, though, but by lamenting the Society’s hereditary membership requirements. While admittance to the Society would be restricted initially to those who had served in the Continental Army or Navy, membership in the future would be granted only to the eldest sons of any original member upon that member’s death. Franklin criticizes the Society’s criteria for entry as being “in direct Opposition to the solemnly declared Sense of their Country.”¹ Not only was the system contrary to the expressed will of the new country for which the society’s members had supposedly fought, but, even more damaging, it relied on the methods for advancement used by America’s enemies abroad. Franklin makes the “un-Americanness” of the system explicit by telling his daughter that the hereditary system of membership used by the Society imitates systems of rank used in “Europe” that “the united Wisdom of our Nation” had specifically decided, through the Articles of Confederation, had no place in America.

Franklin quite carefully avoids denouncing hereditary systems in and of themselves, though. Instead, he suggests an alternative model that would be “more useful to the State.” We should model ourselves, Franklin tells his daughter, less on the Europeans than on the Chinese, who are, he says, “the

most ancient, and from long Experience the wisest of Nations.”² Franklin thus reaches for the figure of China as a way of imagining the future of the infant American nation. Even more interesting, Franklin establishes a triad according to which European and Chinese institutions stand as contrasting models for a third nation, America, a triad that places China above Europe in the hierarchy of nations. Look not to Europe for ways to keep the future nation healthy, Franklin implores his daughter, but to Asia for the systems that will produce a thriving new communal being.³

On closer inspection, Franklin’s turn to China as a model for behavior should hardly surprise us. For while Franklin may have altered his views on a wide range of issues over the eighty-four years of his life, including a dramatic shift from cheerleader of the British Empire to champion of a revolution against that very empire, he remained remarkably consistent over seven decades of both public and private writings, not simply in demonstrating an interest in but also in showing great respect for Chinese culture, philosophy, and institutions. He was, as Owen Aldridge has pointed out, “the first and foremost American Sinophile.”⁴ Franklin’s great friend Benjamin Vaughan recalled that the noted natural philosopher was “very fond of reading about China” and quoted Franklin saying late in life that “if he were a young man he should like to go to China.”⁵ Franklin published selections from translations of Confucius in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in the 1730s, and he sprinkled his personal letters and published writings with philosophical tenets drawn from Confucianism. He pointed his readers to what he described as specifically Chinese methods he hoped Europeans and British Americans might adopt for, among other things, windmills, compiling censuses, determining fair compensation for physicians, making English spelling more phonetic, producing silk from silkworms, finding ginseng in the wild, using stoves to improve one’s health, shipbuilding, rowing boats, making compasses, discouraging borrowing by establishing high interest rates, and solving mathematical problems.⁶

His interest in using as models for behavior in the West practices and philosophies associated with the East extended beyond China to objects and philosophies linked to other Oriental places and peoples. In this chapter, I concentrate on just one of the Eastern forms Franklin thought would be useful in the West: the Oriental tale. Franklin wrote three such tales, all in the final decade of his life.⁷ “A Turkish Apologue” and “An Arabian Tale” were written sometime in the late 1770s and/or early 1780s, while Franklin was in France. “Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim” was written less than ten years later in 1789, long after his return to Philadelphia, while he lay stricken in his bed with the illness that would lead to his death.⁸

In order to understand Franklin's Oriental tales, we need to have some basic understanding of the history of the genre in Britain's American colonies, for this history would have helped give meaning to Franklin's tales in the first place. To do this, we need to fill a gap in the scholarship on American literature before 1800, for, despite the genre's enormous popularity in both the colonies and Europe, scholars in the field have paid it relatively little attention. When we consider Franklin's tales, though, we will need to know whether Franklin was turning to a genre that was an old favorite among American readers, or whether it was a newly discovered import. Just how common, in other words, were Oriental tales to American readers, and how long had they been a staple of American magazines? And while the genre's popularity among readers would have been reason enough for magazine editors to publish as many Oriental tales as they could in an effort to stay afloat in a market that saw one periodical after another disappear after only a few issues, we will need to consider, as well, the distinctive value Oriental tales conferred on their readers that contributed to their appeal for both magazine publishers and readers in the first place. The chapter thus begins with an all-too-brief history of the genre in the British American colonies and early nation, laying out, first, the genre's growing popularity up and down the Atlantic seaboard and, second, exploring the value attached to the Oriental tale on top of mere popularity. Our consideration of the genre's value will lead us to examine the way these tales were valuable not in spite of but perhaps in part because of the threat they posed to readers. For reading the Oriental tale might, or so it seemed to those in the eighteenth century, turn its readers Turk.

Once we understand the history, value, and threat the tale posed, we can turn our attention to an analysis of Franklin's tales. Franklin, we will see, uses form to shield his readers from the threat posed by Oriental tales. A close examination of Franklin's Oriental tales shows that once he has contained the threat these tales pose for their Western readers, he uses the genre to interrogate some of the most fundamental philosophical problems of the Revolutionary era. The Oriental tale provides a geographic space for Franklin to interrogate what Dorinda Outram identifies as "a key word in the 'Enlightenment'—reason."⁹ Franklin uses one of the most popular genres of his era to cast Eastern geographic space as the site that restores reason to its rightful place, allows it to be seen for what it really is, and, in the process, offers us a glimpse of what Franklin casts as the truly human. He uses the ideas, images, and conceptions linked to the category of the "East" by the symbolic spatial economy of Revolutionary America, that is, to define the "human" itself, and, in so doing, Franklin suggests that we can

see the human in its truest, most essential form on display in the imagined geographic space of the East. In establishing the terms of true humanity, Franklin provides the conceptual foundation for the praise of individuality his *Autobiography* would ultimately be known for promoting.



ORIENTAL TALES appeared so frequently in eighteenth-century British American periodicals that Frank Luther Mott classifies them as one of the “three kinds” of fiction that dominated early American magazines.¹⁰ Tales of the East appeared in periodicals up and down the coast, in places as diverse as Baltimore, Boston, Fredericktown, New Haven, New York, Newark, Boston, Philadelphia, and Woodbridge, New Jersey. They appeared as far north as Bennington, Vermont, in *The Monthly Miscellany; or, Vermont Magazine*, and as far south as Charlestown, South Carolina, in the *South-Carolina Gazette*. Magazines that survived only a year in a market that brought ruin to virtually all early American periodicals, magazines such as *American Magazine* and *The Rural Magazine*, carried Eastern tales, as did those periodicals that found some way to stay in print for many years, such as *Massachusetts Magazine* and Matthew Carey’s *American Museum*.¹¹ Those who fancied themselves among America’s social elite read Oriental tales, as did those closer to the bottom of America’s social ladder who were fortunate enough to be literate. Women read tales of the East; men read them, too. If we use Edward Pitcher’s list of works of fiction published in America before 1800 as our guide, one in ten tales published in American magazines prior to 1800 could be classified as an Oriental tale, far exceeding any other generic category.¹²

Just which Oriental tale should be considered the first published in the British American colonies—and who authored that tale—remains a matter of dispute.¹³ While the identity of the first Oriental tale published in British America continues to elude scholars, we do know the first story in the genre to attain considerable and sustained popularity among readers in provincial North America: Giovanni Marana’s *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* (first published in London in 1684).¹⁴ James Franklin, Benjamin’s older brother, considered *Turkish Spy* so valuable that he listed it as “one of the books kept in the office of the paper for the use of writers,” along with the works of Shakespeare and various issues of the *Spectator*.¹⁵ The appeal of *Turkish Spy* seems to have transcended the political, economic, and cultural differences that divided the colonies of British America. In the staple colony of Virginia, for instance, the elder William Byrd, who died in 1704, requested that his

son in London send “all but the first volume of *The Turkish Spy*” back home to Virginia, and another member of the Virginia Council, Edmund Berkeley, who died in 1718, counted the first and fourth volumes of the series among his collection.¹⁶ Over a hundred years after the *Turkish Spy*'s first European publication, *New York Magazine* in 1794 called it “a book which has delighted us in our childhood, and to which we can still recur with pleasure.”¹⁷ The magazine did more than simply note the appeal of the work across an individual's life; it attributed the magic worked on readers throughout their lives to the literary quality of the work. According to *New York Magazine*, in other words, *Turkish Spy* was not only popular but also superior in quality to *any* of the many other works in the epistolary form it inspired, with the exception of “the charming Letters of Montesquieu.”¹⁸

Whenever and whatever counts as the “first” published and first popular Oriental tale in Britain's American colonies, these tales retained their appeal to American audiences throughout the eighteenth century before exploding in popularity in the British American colonies in the century's concluding decades. The Revolutionary period of the 1770s saw what Mark Kamrath describes as “a nearly two-decade-long fascination” that “occupies an immense amount of textual and ideological space” in American magazines.¹⁹ In the last fifteen years of the eighteenth century alone, magazines in the new nation “carried,” according to Mukhtar Ali Isani, “well over a hundred Oriental stories,” a figure that, of course, tells only part of the story in that it does not include newspapers, books, or works imported from Europe. The many tales set in the East that appeared in print were not simply translations of European origin or reprints from British periodicals. Isani estimates that “nearly *two-thirds*” of the tales of the East published from 1785–1800 “appear to be of American authorship.”²⁰

Estimates of the extent of American interest in the Oriental tale depend, of course, on just how one defines the genre. What qualified a piece of writing, after all, to be classified as an Oriental tale by an eighteenth-century reader? What features of the work would provide the cues those readers would use to label a work an Oriental tale? Imagined geographic space serves as the primary factor used to define the Oriental and/or Eastern tale for the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American reader. The terms “Oriental tale,” “Eastern tale,” and “tale from [or of] the East” were used synonymously to indicate any tale—generally but not always fictional—purported to relate to the East, as the East was defined by eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American readers. What we have seen about the East in previous chapters remains true in Franklin's time. A much larger section of the globe counted as “Oriental” and “Eastern” for

eighteenth-century British American readers. Oriental tales are thus, at least when Franklin writes and continuing on through much of the nineteenth century, tales either from or about the “Orient” or the “East,” tales purported to take place in the East or to be narrated by someone from the East.

As for the stylistic and/or formal features that allow a work to count as an Oriental tale, eighteenth-century commentators and modern literary scholars rarely provide explicit, detailed explanations. The lack of precise definitions by eighteenth-century analysts should hardly surprise us, given the genre’s modern origins. Why debate the definition of a literary form born, unlike the classical genres, out of the crudities of the modern marketplace, those in the eighteenth century might have wondered. When they do offer brief descriptions of the genre, their ideas of what distinguished this peculiar “style” grow out of the way they understood the East. The Orient, these commentators say, lends itself to parable and fable. The “metaphorical” quality that eighteenth-century writers claim characterizes the Oriental tale can be found most clearly in the realm of plot rather than language. So, the language of an Oriental tale is not to be taken at face value; in order to understand these tales, we must look beyond what we are explicitly told to what we are *not* told. Second, not unlike the genre of Romance, what happens in these tales can exceed the bounds of the physical world; these tales do not, in other words, aim to be literal transcriptions of the actual world but, rather, try to present scenes in which what happens can only be imagined. Such allegorical plots work well in an Oriental tale, we are told, because of the peculiar nature of the imagined geographic space of the Orient. The space itself is understood as unreal in the sense that it is cast as relatively unknown, a place where the physical laws known to exist in the West might not operate everywhere at all times.

This was the understanding of the Oriental tale that appeared in some of the very spaces used to demonstrate American culture’s civilized status while at the same time those very spaces worked to produce the civilization it claimed to be merely putting on display. I am referring here to the appearance of these tales in British American magazines of the period. As material objects, of course, these tales are printed with ink no different from that used to display the other stories in the magazines, newspapers, and other printed material of the period. Like every other piece of printed matter, tales of the East appear as simply ink on paper. But the editors, printers, and authors responsible for devoting the ink to an Oriental tale could very easily have chosen to expend it on a wide range of other topics. Given the very low survival rate of American periodicals during this period

and the difficulties printers faced just to stay in business, those who had a financial interest in what occupied the space of the page must have thought that spilling ink on matters of the Orient would allow them to recoup their investment. They must, in other words, have placed great faith in the genre's ability to generate more money in magazine sales than the cost of the ink, paper, and so forth that it took to print them in the first place.

How do we explain this value? What value, in other words, did these tales add to an otherwise blank space of the printed page that other figures of speech might not have added? What was it about this genre that would have produced greater surplus value than other kinds of tales? Or, at least, what value did the genre have that would have led those who invested in magazines to believe they would not only recoup their investment but make a tidy profit as well? Part of their value to those responsible for deciding what went on the page surely had to do with the symbolic status of Oriental goods in general in the late eighteenth century. The display and consumption of such goods signified an elevated social status in Revolutionary British America, a status that helped allow British Americans to feel on a par socially with their supposed betters in Europe in general and in England in particular. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier."²¹ Demonstrating their own taste by drinking Chinese tea out of cups made in the Oriental style while sitting in rooms surrounded by porcelain objects displayed on walls covered with silk, Americans sought to identify themselves as persons of distinction. In this way, John Wei Tchen argues, "things' Chinese had become" by the period of the American Revolution "one of the forms of currency" used by British Americans "for gaining cultural distinction."²² The Oriental tale served as yet another "thing" through which provincial Americans could demonstrate—and help produce—their status as members of the metropolitan community. After all, though an extraordinarily popular genre, these tales had gained literary and cultural distinction when the leading members of England's cultural elite—including but not limited to figures regarded with great respect in the British American colonies such as Joseph Addison, Oliver Goldsmith, Lady Montague, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson—went to great extremes to announce that they, in fact, read or wrote or planned to write in the genre. Oriental tales thus signified a cosmopolitanism and worldliness to American readers that could be transferred onto those who read them, or at least onto those who claimed to have read them.

By including Oriental tales, then, a periodical could claim the same kind of cultural value that Revolutionary-era British Americans conferred upon tea, porcelain, and other so-called Oriental goods. In this way, Eastern

figures of speech redefined a physical space cast by its promoters as distinctly if not definitively American—the space on the page, that is, of American printed matter—as cultured, as civilized, and, at the same time, as civilizing. The practice of devoting so much space on the paper used for print in British America to figures of the East suggests an attempt by those responsible for the contents of those pages to transform American into Eastern space because, in fact, the Oriental symbolic space carried greater cultural value than other places on the globe in the eighteenth century. Printers, editors, and authors used these tales' symbolic status as signs of civilized culture. They did so in an attempt to transform as if by magic the supposedly degenerate cultural status of American print culture into one that would be considered, if not equal to Europe's, at least good enough to avoid the mockery American cultural products usually received when read abroad.

Circulated among British American readers throughout the colonies and early nation, Oriental tales brought the East into domestic and public spaces of British America. The Oriental tale, Ros Ballaster reminds us, was a “fabricated import, a hybrid construction similar to other commodities in demand and imported from the Orient in the period similar to Indian muslin or Chinese porcelain.”²³ The Oriental tale, like porcelain, silk, and tea, integrated the Orient into the everyday lives of supposedly provincial Americans. It was not just that these tales were now being read in coffeehouses and private homes by more and more British Americans, making the East a crucial part of some of the very spaces in which Americans tried to demonstrate their civility. Oriental tales did not halt their incursion after they had been allowed into physical spaces that played crucial roles in forging British Americans' definitions of themselves. Once let into the new nation's homes and public houses, the Oriental tale, through its formal structures, set its sights on the imaginations of its readers and, thus, their very ways of organizing the world around them. Sometimes tales of the East put their readers into imaginary dialogue directly with people from the East; other times these tales took their readers literally inside the most intimate areas of the consciousness of Oriental characters. In asking readers to imagine themselves as occupying bodily spaces against which British American audiences had long been taught to define themselves, the Oriental tale jeopardized its audience's sense of who they were and the values with which they associated themselves. If civilized, literary society claimed that Oriental tales such as Franklin's offered its readers such powerful visions of the human that they were an ideal place to turn to in order to understand the most fundamental aspects of humanity, what was to stop the readers of this genre from trying to adopt the manners and even identities of the

people these stories portrayed? What was to stop readers of Franklin's tales to, as it were, turn Turk when confronted by the philosophical sophistication offered by the East? To answer these questions, we need to turn now to an analysis of Franklin's Oriental tales.



WE BEGIN OUR examination with the very last of Franklin's published writings: "Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim on the Slave Trade" (1790). I have chosen to begin with a tale published at the end of Franklin's life because this particular story provides the best entryway into the problems and concerns shared by each of the tales Franklin wrote. Before we analyze the story itself, though, we need to first consider its generic status. For while I have asked us to consider the text as one of Franklin's Oriental tales, the letter has never been classified by critics as an instance of the genre. Instead, critics who have discussed "Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim on the Slave Trade" have generally considered it alongside narratives of Americans captured by Barbary pirates.²⁴ These narratives, often referred to as Barbary captivity narratives, began appearing in American periodicals in approximately 1785 and remained popular until around 1815. They grew out of the conflict between the new nation and the Barbary states once British protection was no longer afforded American vessels operating in Barbary waters, resulting in the taking of numerous American ships and the capture of their crews and passengers.²⁵

It is true that Franklin's tale grows out of and is, in fact, a direct response to events surrounding these conflicts. In 1790, after James Jackson gave a speech in Congress wondering whether Franklin's signature on an antislavery petition demonstrated the venerable old patriot's senility, Franklin responded from his deathbed—albeit anonymously—with "Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim on the Slave Trade." In co-opting the voice of an Algerian in defense of the enslavement of captured Americans in Africa, Franklin hoped to discredit the arguments advanced by slavery's opponents by showing them to be identical to arguments that had been discredited throughout the colonies. To do this, Franklin turned to the genre of the Oriental tale, not to a form of captivity narrative that had not yet become recognizable. Written at the beginning of the crisis before the explosion of stories that helped define a particular Barbary subset within the genre of captivity narratives in general, Franklin's letter resembles not so much those later narratives to which it is most often compared by scholars as it does the Oriental tale with which Franklin was intimately familiar. Franklin's piece,

after all, takes the form of a letter from an informant, one of the characteristic forms of the Oriental tale and one that is relatively unknown among Barbary captivity narratives. When examined through the lens of this genre rather than, say, as an early instance of the Barbary captivity narrative, the story works to imagine for its readers the category of humans united by the inability to reason.

Published in *The Federal Gazette* of Philadelphia in the March 25, 1790, issue, this story, precisely like Franklin's moralistic Oriental tales, must be translated for its "real" meaning to be understood. The tale works through a version of allegory in the form of irony by saying one thing but meaning something else. Franklin adopts the guise of the letter-writer—a standard form for the Oriental tale throughout the century—responding to what he has read in the *Gazette*. Jackson's speech urging Congress to avoid "meddling with the Affair of Slavery, or attempting to mend the Condition of the Slaves," reminds Franklin's persona of a speech made by "a member of the Divan of Algiers" named Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim in 1687. After these initial framing remarks, the rest of the letter consists entirely of a "translation" of what Franklin's readers would have immediately recognized as a completely fictional speech. How would they have so easily recognized that it was entirely made up? For one thing, the speech mimics the arguments made by Jackson in particular and by American supporters of enslaving those of African descent in ways that do not apply and were known by readers not to apply to American citizens held for ransom in Algiers. No one claimed, as Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim does, that Algerian pirates had enslaved over 50,000 Christians, and the absurdity of the idea that so many Christians were living against their will in Africa over 100 years ago would have clued Franklin's readers in within the very first lines of Ibrahim's speech. Instead, Franklin simply has Ibrahim offer the most common arguments of those who favored slavery in America. They claimed it would be financial suicide for those in the South who depended on slave labor while, at the same time, it would unleash onto the streets of Algiers a foreign people who would be unable to assimilate and who wouldn't want to go home. They would refuse to leave Algiers, Ibrahim insists, because far from being oppressed as slaves they knew they were far better off in Africa than they had been and would be in their own home countries. And, as if these economic and practical reasons were not enough to convince his listeners, Ibrahim closes by claiming that, in fact, the holy book to which Algerians look for moral guidance, the *Koran*, authorizes rather than forbids slavery by those of its faith. It is as if Ibrahim has a checklist of the Southerners' arguments for slavery from which he plagiarizes.

The frame not only specifically calls our attention to the “Reasonings” found in the speech but also tells us that the fact that the reasons given by the American congressman and the African divan are precisely the same proves the way “Interests” “operate” on “Intellects” “with surprising similarity in all Countries.” We see that, read in the ironic tone in which it asks to be interpreted, the letter wants us to understand that what the congressman has called “reason” is nothing other than “interest,” and that, far from being peculiar to this individual spokesman, such a substitution of human vanity for disinterested thinking provides the link between the human species across the globe, regardless of whatever classifications we might make that distinguish one people from another.



THE EROSION OF those boundaries that puts the philosophy of a white, pro-slavery American congressman into the mouth of a member of Alger's government appears in different form in Franklin's “A Turkish Apologue.” In the opening paragraph of this story, Abdéllamar, the fable's protagonist, engages in an interior monologue that places us inside Abdéllamar's very mind in order to hear him speak “within himself.”²⁶ In order to hear Abdéllamar's dialogue with himself, the reader must, if only for a moment, imagine him- or herself as inhabiting a space that eighteenth-century theories of the self would have cast as accessible to one's self and only to one's self. One might say, that is, that the reader must imagine him- or herself in the very place where the self imagines it is most itself, where, that is, the masks the self adopts when engaging with the outside world are laid aside, creating, in effect, a realm of the pure, unmixed self. What's more, the reader would have to imagine him- or herself inhabiting this space in such a way as to be undetectable to that self. Given that the reader enters this realm of the pure self without disrupting the sense that this realm has been compromised by “external” forces, I think it is safe to say that the reader at this moment transforms him- or herself into the very self he or she now inhabits. When reading “A Turkish Apologue,” Franklin asks us to become—or at least pass for—Turks.

In taking us not only beneath the skin of the protagonist in this way but, indeed, into a space closed off to all but the self and God—or so eighteenth-century readers would have imagined—the tale thus leads us imaginatively into what would otherwise be an “Eastern” space considered dangerous by Franklin's imagined audience. Franklin leaves no doubt about the geographic spaces with which we should associate this character.

Indeed, he goes a little overboard in pointing out the status of this character as a person from the East when he refers to Turkey in the title, then announces the character's unmistakably "Eastern" name in the fable's opening sentence, and, as if all this did not demonstrate to Franklin's satisfaction just where on the map we should place Abdéllamar, devotes the second sentence to the entirely irrelevant information that Abdéllamar "had studied all the fine Arabian Writers." In repeatedly locating his reader in the East, Franklin takes us into a space that early modern Western readers had long been taught to define themselves explicitly against. When eighteenth-century readers turn Turk in order to listen in on Abdéllamar's conversation with himself, they threaten their own status as Westerners by inhabiting the most intimate mental spaces of a consciousness that stands for the alien and alienizing influence of Christianity's archrival, Islam.²⁷

Given the enormous popularity of the Oriental tale, the transmigration the reader undergoes in "A Turkish Apologue" represents something much more than a unique rhetorical ploy devised by Franklin. Indeed, it might be seen as the defining paradigm for one of the most popular genres of eighteenth-century fiction in British America as well as across the ocean in Europe. How does Franklin shield his readers against this threat to their very status as members of Western civilization? Against the threat of turning Turk when imagining themselves at the very core of a Turkish person's being, Franklin offers form. Allegory protects Franklin's readers from becoming the very thing against which Christians in the West had long defined themselves and their community. The peculiar qualities of allegory allow readers to be so close to another consciousness that they could be mistaken for that other without threat of losing their distinctiveness from that other. The tale's reader can, through allegory, be two things at the very same time. Through the use of allegory Franklin can immerse his readers in the very qualities associated with the East by the symbolic spatial economy without having that immersion threaten to redefine the reader as Eastern.

We can see how this works by examining the titles of Franklin's most generically conventional Oriental tales, "A Turkish Apologue" and "An Arabian Tale." What, after all, is specifically "Turkish" about "A Turkish Apologue"? Is there any quality, characteristic, or element that might have been thought distinctively "Arabian" to be found in "An Arabian Tale"? These are not tales that, in any sense, are fundamentally *about* the people or places their titles name. Indeed, by calling one an "apologue" and the other a "tale," Franklin uses the titles to limit the way these works should be read. For eighteenth-century audiences, both "tale" and "apologue" would

have signaled the presence of allegory. Tales and apologues were, at least in eighteenth-century American periodicals, most often allegorical narratives. In this sense, the titles ask readers to see these tales as being quite specifically about something they do not directly claim to be. The inclusion of words that signify both categories of people and/or locations on the globe alongside such markers of allegory suggest that we should not expect anything distinctively Turkish or Arabian but, on the contrary, something that will be about something other than the people and places it names.

But this does not mean that by titling the tales as he does and setting them in Turkey and Arabia Franklin evacuates these locations of the meanings and associations that these people and places would have had in the late-eighteenth-century symbolic spatial economy. Quite the contrary. Arabia, Arabians, Turks, and Turkey would serve the needs of an allegorical narrative precisely because of the aesthetic associations these figures would have produced among readers at the time. As I noted above, allegory and parable were styles cast as distinctively if not exclusively “of the East.” One need look no further than the work of Hugh Blair, surely the most influential writer on rhetoric and style in the Revolutionary and early national periods.²⁸ Though his goal is to demonstrate that writing which his contemporaries label “oriental” is not, in fact, distinctive to any particular region, Blair provides a useful window into the qualities eighteenth-century thinkers associated with what he calls the “oriental style.” Blair claims that a “strong hyperbolic manner” characterized by “concise and glowing” language that employs “bold and extravagant figures of speech” had “been long” seen as the “peculiar” signatures of what was called a specifically “oriental manner” of writing.²⁹ We needn't look far in American magazines of the period to see an instance of the very tendency Blair identifies. *Massachusetts Magazine* in 1789 claims that the very “style of the eastern nations is figurative and metaphorical.” In order to document his claim, the anonymous writer of this piece asserts that “eastern . . . sages . . . deliver many of their moral lessons in parables and fables” (76–77).

Franklin takes his reader to this land where the words we read never—indeed, cannot, by the laws of allegory—directly reveal the truth to define the human. The same figure serves Franklin's purposes in each story, for Franklin uses each of his Oriental tales to define the human by mystifying the category of reason. In both works, the protagonist's reference to “reason” prompts a response from a “superior being” that, in turn, brings about the story's denouement. Appeals to reason, in other words, bring about the narrative's conclusion, the moral of the story, which in each case seems to be that human reason is not really reason at all.

In the case of “An Arabian Tale,” we learn of the limits of human reason when Albumazar, the story’s protagonist, asks Belubel, the genie who keeps him company in his place of retirement atop “the lofty mountain of Calabut,” to “inform” and “enlighten” him.³⁰ What leads Albumazar to prostrate himself before this genie? His “reason” cannot resolve a theological conundrum. Albumazar has found himself unable to “account” for the “existence of evil in the world” that stands in stark contrast to “wisdom and goodness of the Most High” in spite of “all the efforts of [Albumazar’s] reason” to reconcile the two.

Belubel uses the invocation of “reason” as an opportunity to define the human. He does this, first, by completely ignoring Albumazar’s question. He never provides an answer for how evil can exist in a world created by a thoroughly wise and good God. He never even bothers to try to answer the conceptual problem the protagonist describes. Instead, he redirects Albumazar’s—and the reader’s—attention to the category of “reason” and, in doing so, implies if does not directly state that what humans call “reason” is anything but. The “quality . . . thou callest reason,” Belubel tells his supplicant, is reason in name only. It is what humans “call” reason, not reason in its true form.

Once reason has been exposed as merely a label with no content, Belubel goes on to claim that humans have turned reason on its head. He does this when he tells Albumazar that reason “would rather be a matter of humiliation” than pride if the “good magician” only “knewest its origin and its weakness.” “Men,” Belubel patiently explains to an Albumazar, who has now cast himself as the genie’s eager pupil, are precisely those beings who “canst yet have no conception” of the “powers and faculties” of those creatures above them in the great chain of being that leads, ultimately, to God himself.

The gratuitous insertion of Belubel’s definition of the human in “An Arabian Tale” suggests the work that Franklin expects the symbolic space of the East to perform. The East, this rhetorical gesture suggests, serves as a space for the definition of the human. How else to explain Belubel’s rush to provide a definition of the human as a corrective to one that was never offered? When Belubel takes aim at the way humans use reason to establish their very “value,” he denounces a claim about how humans understand their own self-worth that is made in the story only by Belubel himself. Albumazar never says their capacity to reason establishes the value of the human species. Only Belubel makes this claim. Offering his definition out of the blue, as it were, signals a defensiveness about that very definition that

implies, even if it does not explicitly name, the existence of other, competing ways of defining what it means to be human.

The gratuitous inclusion of a definition of the human suggests, further, a lack of self-knowledge on the part of humans in the first place. After all, why would a human need a definition of what it meant to be himself? Who else would know better what a human is than a human? To define the human in such a way implies other possibilities, other ways of understanding human nature. Take Belubel's reading of Albumazar's call to "reason." His reading seems to assume that the human capacity for reason—or what we humans call reason—provides the foundation for the value of the human species in the first place. He never says this directly, but then he doesn't have to. The way the story uses his assumption about what constitutes the true foundation of human value, without indicating any need to explain the basis of his assumption, in order to move the dialogue forward suggests a generic logic operating beneath the explicit logic of the characters in the story. Belubel offers a definition of the human not because it is called for by Albumazar's appeal to reason, but, instead, because it is called for by the genre of the Oriental tale. The eighteenth-century British American reader would expect to find supernatural beings interacting with humans as if it were only natural in the imagined geographic space of the East in the Oriental tale; so, too, would he or she only expect to find a definition of what it means to be human in that space.

Belubel's redefinition of the human as without true reason substitutes narrative for reason. Here, Belubel seems to say to Albumazar and, in effect, to the reader as well, let me tell you a story that will help you understand why humans are incapable of finding the solution to the dilemma you describe through their reason. Any understanding of the story Belubel tells, though, depends on the powers of reason for it to be convincing. The story resolves the conflict through what David Lovejoy has called "a rationalistic anti-intellectualism."³¹ The genie asks Albumazar to "see" something that literally cannot be seen. He uses "see" metaphorically to demonstrate the limits of reason, and, in so doing, depends on the human ability to draw what can only be described as reasonable inferences from nonempirical evidence. After all, one can only "contemplate," as Belubel says, the "gradual diminution of faculties and powers" in the "scale of beings from an elephant down to an oyster" that the genie elsewhere says one "seest." How often does one have the scale of beings presented to one's vision at all, much less in the order of their respective places in the scale of beings? Where does one "see" the "faculties and powers" of each of these creatures on display?

One does not “see” the intelligence and/or faculties of the elephant or the oyster, but rather one sees these creatures in action and, in watching them, deduces their powers and faculties from their actions so that, in effect, their actions become a signifier of those powers and actions. The “small step” that separates the “powers and faculties” of these creatures exists only in the imagination of the onlooker. It cannot, as Belubel says, be “seen.” These gaps in status are thus not visible to the naked eye; they exist only as conceptual deductions applied to the creatures in a relational scheme where the placement of one species in the hierarchy of species depends entirely on a distance between those two species that exists only in the imagination, only in the world of signifiers. It demonstrates the limits of human reason by recourse to that which is invisible to the human eye and which is, in fact, available only through the mental activity of imagining some figures who are not visible to the human eye who exceed the human capacity to reason.³²

Now that we have seen how Franklin turns our attention to the East as a way of exposing the problems with human reason, we are ready to see how he recuperates the very category that his tales of the East have asked us to question. We can see how this works by turning to Franklin’s second Oriental tale, “A Turkish Apologue.” In this story, Franklin has God himself identify “reason” as misnamed. Reason, God tells an anonymous Angel, is simply “Vanity” wrongly labeled. We learn this when we hear God instruct this Angel to “Take from [Abdellamar] all his Appetites . . . and all his Passions, except his Vanity, which he calls his Reason.” In order to understand the significance of this categorization of reason, we need to remember that the very genre of the apologue transforms characters into representative figures. As a form of allegory, the apologue asks us to read characters and ideas not as representations of particular individuals or ideas but as figures for the conceptual category (or categories) of which that individual or idea is merely a small part. So, just as the story’s generic conventions ask us to read Abdellamar not simply as a particular man but as a figure for the human condition in general, so, too, do those same generic conventions ask us to understand “Reason” not simply as an instance of misnaming but as a figure for the human capacity to misname in general. It is not simply that humans misunderstand the true nature of reason but, rather, that reason serves as the very figure for humans’ misunderstanding in general, a misunderstanding that is represented as a misnaming.

The problem Franklin presents us with in this story, then, consciously or unconsciously, turns out to be a linguistic problem, a problem of signifier being mismatched with the signified to which it should, rightly, be attached. One thing is called something that we now know it is not. In this way, the

story suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the world—a disjunction between the labels we attach to the world and the essential qualities that define those things we name. When the signified becomes detached from the signifier in this way, all those who use this particular signifying system can be said to be unable to understand truly the world in which they live and, indeed, their own actions and motivations.

We must remember that in suggesting that what humans label “reason” is, in fact, “vanity,” Franklin takes aim at one of the defining categories of his era. For what eighteenth-century reader—in France, England, or the Confederation of American States—would not think of the call to “reason” that had swept Europe throughout the eighteenth century? The very category called upon by countless eighteenth-century writers to challenge conventional wisdom, even to establish a new form of government and, along with it, a radically different system of social organization, was, Franklin tells us, not what we thought it was.

Such a theme might have led Franklin to a thorough critique of the Enlightenment and, along with it, the American Revolution. Instead, “A Turkish Apologue” aims to have quite the opposite effect. Franklin uses his tale of the East as a way of preserving the category of reason. By having God say that humans have mistaken their vanity for reason, the story puts the identification of the improper signifier into the voice of the very figure who is responsible for establishing a relationship between a word and its meaning. God, after all, is the transcendental signifier, the namer of all things. God thus implicitly acknowledges the existence of the category of reason. He simply insists that humans do not possess it.

Why reserve the category of “reason” for the realm of heaven? The apologue removes reason from the realm of the human in order to save reason from contamination by what Mary Douglas has called the “social pollution” symbolized by the “vulnerable points” exposed when the body’s borders are transgressed.³³ This becomes clear when we examine God’s response to the interior monologue that opens the narrative. When God is “offended” upon hearing Abdéllamar question why the Almighty has “given [Abdéllamar] the Passions and Appetites of Animal Nature” that only “debase” him, he takes away those very characteristics Abdéllamar hopes to “subdue.” The death of Abdéllamar from starvation at the close of the narrative shows that these very “appetites” allow him—and, of course, all humans—to survive. In this way, the story demonstrates how these supposedly “animal” aspects are absolutely essential to the very existence of the human. They may be shared with the “animals,” but humans would not be humans without them and, as a result, animal aspects define the human as well.

The story never renounces the “animal” nature of these appetites, nor does it challenge in any way the language of “debasement,” “defilement,” and “disgust” that Abdéllamar associates with those appetites. The story, in effect, concedes the “animal” nature of the human. It is the rejection of the “animal” nature of the human that the story challenges. In so doing, “A Turkish Apologue” subtly reinforces a binary opposition between body and intellect, an opposition that operates to, among other things, limit the claims of human reason by exposing it to the potentially corrupting influence of bodily desire. It is no coincidence that Franklin names only two obstacles to Abdéllamar’s devotion to “profound philosophic Speculation”: eating and sex. Eating and sex put the purity of reason at risk by allowing exterior objects to penetrate the body’s boundaries. The narrator calls attention to this when he has Abdéllamar suggest that his status as “a reasonable Being” might be “defile[d]” by the simple act of “putting Bits of the Flesh of a dead Beast into my Mouth.” So as not to leave any doubt about what is most appalling here, the narrator makes sure to conclude by stating the obvious: “and swallow them.”

While the mere thought of eating “disgusts” Abdéllamar, sexual intercourse threatens to unman him. Here, too, Franklin specifically and pointedly poses bodily pleasure as a threat to Abdéllamar’s status as “a reasonable Being,” and here, too, Franklin casts the threat as one to the body’s very boundaries by having Abdéllamar wonder why he should “mix” with another in this way? To show us that sexual intercourse between any two individuals, no matter how sanctioned by love or authority, no matter their social status, can escape the debasements the protagonist associates with the body, Franklin goes to great lengths to connect the woman with whom Abdéllamar might have sex to the very symbols of what would count in the eighteenth century for female purity. For Franklin does more than simply label the potential bride a “Virgin” who, he assures us, is as “fair as the Morning” itself and “fresh as a Rosebud.” This is a woman, the narrator insists, whose virginity rivals that of the “Houries of Paradise,” who have their virginity restored every day even after they have “despoiled” themselves through sexual activity the previous night. Sexuality does more than simply disgust our philosopher, as eating did. Sexual intercourse threatens the very humanity of Abdéllamar, who speaks of having sex with his potential Bride as having to “perform the Functions of a Brute.” Sex threatens to unman the narrator by transforming him into the very definition of the nonhuman, the “Brute.” Sexuality, the performance of the male role in heterosexual activities, one of the very acts, it would seem, that would demonstrate manliness

in eighteenth-century British American culture, puts him at risk of losing his very identity as a man.

The binary that casts true reason as threatened by the most basic of human bodily functions, the story suggests, keeps the family alive. The very category of "reason," indeed, even the very binary that sets body and mind in opposition to one another, casts all things pertaining to the body as forms of debasement, and so seeing these qualities as bodily and therefore debased becomes inextricably linked to the maintenance of the social system the story depicts. To suggest that sensual pleasure represents something other than debasement puts the borders of the body, and the borders of society, at risk. We see this in the way the story registers failure by casting the real tragedy of Abdéllamar's death as the way it prevents his parents from being able to "continue to live in the Offspring of their beloved Son." In imagining himself as pure intellect, Abdéllamar kills not only himself but, and more importantly, his family's line and that line's social advancement. The story closes not by focusing our attention on the protagonist's death, but by calling attention to the precise ways in which that character's actions have hurt his parents. The final paragraph relates in detail how his parents' "fond Hopes . . . of seeing Abdellamar [*sic*] promoted to the most Honourable Offices, for which he seem'd so fit" are dashed. Abdéllamar's actions have done more than merely "cut off" his parents' "flattering Expectations" for him, though. Misnaming reason for vanity ends his parents' hope of "finding themselves continuing to live in the Offspring of their beloved Son." Abdéllamar's mislabeling of vanity prevents his parents from living on through their descendents. The tragedy of "A Turkish Apologue," then, is not that an individual dies as a result of his linguistic mistake; the tragedy is that such a mistake does a disservice to his parents and literally kills off a family line.

In asking us to mourn not Abdéllamar's death but rather the deleterious effects of his death on his family's fortunes, Franklin uses the East to examine not only the true nature of the human in its individual form—separate, solitary, distinct—but also, through the protagonist's misunderstanding of the relation between mind and body, the effects of this misunderstanding on the social body. Franklin turns our attention East, in other words, to show us, first, the value of reason in helping produce healthy individuals and, then and only then, to demonstrate the threat to social reproduction if we fail to heed these warnings.

When Franklin turns our attention to the East, then, both before and after the Revolution, he does so in order to offer a vision of the category

that eradicates rather than erects borders. The “human” that Franklin conjures up for us in Turkey, Arabia, and Algiers is not only a human lacking in national identity but also one whose chief characteristic challenges the very discourse of his age. Franklin’s “human” might be called a “cosmopolitan” human in the sense that this human type extends across the globe, but it is cosmopolitan only insofar as it recognizes its intellectual limitations. Looking East, Franklin asks us to see a human who knows no geographic boundaries but who is defined, instead, by the internal limits of his (and the gender is quite important) mind. It is this vision of the human—gendered male but without racial specificity—that provides the conceptual foundation for Franklin’s vision of the self-made man for which he would become famous. This is a man who makes his own way in the world, but he does so not without keeping an ironic distance from reason’s claims and not without going into great detail about the dynamics of social reproduction.