Written and published in 1787, Peter Markoe’s novel *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, subtitled *Letters Written by a Native of Algiers on the Affairs of the United States in America, from the Close of the Year 1783 to the Meeting of the Convention*, as evidenced by its name, demands a reading inclusive of the historical context in which Markoe wrote it. Between 1785 and 1815, Algerian corsairs, met with little resistance, intercepted American ships off the coast of North Africa, impressing, imprisoning, and enslaving over seven-hundred American soldiers in a thirty-year span. To the American populace, Barbary impressments and the specter of an Islamic world power were nothing new. For almost a century, sailors routinely found themselves in North African prisons, oftentimes for years on end before being ransomed back across the Atlantic, returning to their homes. For the British and French crowns, ransoms were simply the cost of doing business in the Mediterranean. Now, however, the newly-minted United States, having just recently shed the yoke of British colonialism and signed the Treaty of Paris, faced a significant challenge in engaging in transcontinental commerce without the protection of the British Navy—the largest and most sophisticated fleet in the world.¹

While the framers of the increasingly-insufficient Articles of Confederation gathered behind locked doors and boarded windows to discuss the future of the nascent nation, an American public grew more and more distressed by the conglomeration of states’ inability to protect its own interests. Building on a tradition initiated with the publishing of captivity narratives like Joshua Gee’s, a colonial sailor who spent seven years imprisoned in Algiers, and the renowned preacher Cotton Mather’s sermon “Glory and the Goodness of God,” American authors published in large numbers fictional representations of life under Islamic rule in North Africa and other works inspired by concurrent events. Early Republican readers simply

demanded that their literature be relevant to their lives and teach moral lessons, regardless of the
genre in which it was written. As historian Jan Lewis identifies, “Americans [in the 18th century]
drew no clear distinctions between that which was ‘fiction’ and that which was not” (Lewis 692).
This was certainly the case with regard to the proliferation of Barbary literature, as fiction
written concerning Barbary captivity increasingly centered around moral and political arguments
relevant to the United States, such as the political and social rights of women as well as the
abolition of slavery.²

Barbary impressments and the Muslim world were not just hot literary topics, however.
Islam stretched its influence into the very founding of the United States as politicians invoked
the religion to score rhetorical points in debates crucial to the structure of the new nation. To
begin her essay “Could a Muslim be President? An Eighteenth-Century Constitutional Debate,”
Denise A. Spellberg quotes from William Lancaster, a delegate voting against ratification of the
United States Constitution in objection to a religious tests ban. Antifederalists sought to
constitutionally situate the most powerful seats in the land as designated only for like-minded
Protestants. Lancaster’s foresight was that, without any method of prevention, it was inevitable
for a Catholic or Muslim man to one day become President of the United States.³ Spellberg
argues that this moment was “a unique moment in American Constitutional history, when
Muslims became symbolically embroiled in ... what it meant to be an American” (Spellberg
486). Although Spellberg’s argument reveals an apparent ignorance of the fact that thousands of
Muslims lived in the former colonies, the vast majority of whom were either slaves or former

² Susanna Rowson’s 1794 play Slaves in Algiers and Royall Tyler’s 1797 novel The Algerine Captive were
nationally prominent texts that used the trope of Americans under Algerian rule in North Africa to make domestic
arguments concerning the rights of women and the abolition of slavery, respectively.
³ Lancaster’s pronouncement, quoted by Spellberg reads:

But let us remember that we form a government for millions not yet in existence. I have not the art
of divination. In the course of four or five hundred years, I do not know how it will work. This is
most certain, that Papists may occupy that chair, and Mahometans may take it. I see nothing
against it.
slaves, it nevertheless demonstrates the participation, if perhaps only through abstraction, of Islam and its fundamental role in the founding of the United States.

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas introduced to the (German-reading academic) world for the first time the concept of the “public sphere” (Öffentlichkeit). His seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated into the English in 1989, traces the history of the bourgeois public sphere—a set of circumstances providing for the ability of private citizens and their government to publicly engage in discourse which created a mutually beneficial set of checks and balances. The public sphere, according to Habermas, gave bourgeois citizens input into their democratic system, promoting republican concepts of individualism, self-governance, and liberty while decreasing and discouraging despotism. Habermas’ multifaceted and transdisciplinary approach to the understanding of the public sphere demarcates and distinguishes between different facets of the public sphere. Of special note and importance to this essay is his understanding of the literary public sphere (literarische Öffentlichkeit). Habermas writes that the fundamental action of creating a public sphere was the appropriation of the tools already existing in the “world of letters” and transforming them from a world of private criticism to one of the public (Habermas 51). It is for this reason, perhaps, that many of the earliest novels, across cultures and languages, were epistolary in form. Habermas himself comments on the success of the “mediocre *Pamela,*” the 1740 bestseller by the Englishman Samuel Richardson, as indicative of the social power and influence of the epistle and the public’s comfort with the genre (43). His general analysis of letters, however, as noted by the use of the adjective “mediocre,” follows a more ontological path than a literary one.
Habermas’ theses on the nature and importance of subjectivity within letters strike at the crux of what makes *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* a compelling and representative 18th-century American novel. While in many ways adhering to the conventions of its time, such as those already enumerated by Habermas and Lewis, the greatest deviation and the central complication of Markoe’s novel is its narrator. Mehemet is the titular Algerine spy whose letters comprise all but three of the entries that make up the novel. In this essay, I will examine the degree to which Peter Markoe’s *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* fits into the frameworks of and functions in concordance with theories already presented on the development of public opinion and intellectual culture within the 18th century. An analysis of both the form and content of the epistolary novel will show the manner in which Markoe’s novel is emblematic of the Early Republican literary environment, an environment in which to partake in public life, as the literary critic and scholar Michael Warner explicates in his 1990 book *The Letters of the Republic*, one was either—or even sometimes both—a writer or a reader. Markoe, however, was not simply interested in the “democratization of print,” of the 18th century, to use Warner’s description of the period (Warner ix). *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, rather, is at once a satirical polemic on the errors of the Articles of Confederation and foolhardy republicanism and also a celebration of the virtues he witnesses from within Pennsylvania—largely regarding individualism and freedom of religion, expression, and association.

In his essay examining three archetypal examples of the North African figure in Early Republican literature, scholar and critic Jacob Crane focuses his reading of *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* around the centrality of race to the character development of Mehemet. Crane identifies *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* as an exploration by Markoe of republican themes and values possible and effective only through the physical and tangible threat that is represented
through the explicitly racialized body of Mehemet. Crane, then, describes his analytical practice and understanding of the 1787 novel as situated between two competing theories of republican representation, with one side being scholars like Warner who emphasize the world of print culture as the center, while other scholars view acts of public performance and orality as the primary mode of expression and demonstration of power within the Early Republican world.

Crane’s interpretation of *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* is contingent on the acceptance and understanding of Mehemet as disembodied and disconnected from the narrative. Among other sections of the novel, Crane carefully parses two framing letters of the epistolary, an “introduction” written not from the perspective of the title character. Integral to Crane’s analysis of the novel is the letters’ purported translation, a plot device constructed by Markoe in order to explain the circumstances by which the letters have become legible for a wider English-speaking and American audience. Crane latches on to this fact, concluding:

> We can see the translation of Mehemet’s letters as inextricably linked with the disappearance of his body; the recirculation of the fictional Arabic original in the form of an English epistolary novel comes hand in hand with the assimilation of the spy’s otherness into the American public. (Crane 343)

Here, Crane adeptly identifies one problematic of both Markoe’s novel and the still-prevailing understanding of the Early Republican period: Markoe seems to recognize the founding of the United States as a period from which Muslims and Islam were both absent, or at least played no legitimate role in. Certainly, that was the perspective of the delegate William Lancaster, and his assumptions made in constitutional debate underscore his symbolic point regarding a practitioner of Islam holding the highest office in the land. Despite these assumptions, the reality of the 18th century was that Muslims well and truly occupied space within the emergent nation. While
Spellberg argues that Muslims were a symbolic element of the definition of citizenship within the Early Republic period, it cannot be denied that the institution of slavery was more than a symbol in the creation of the status of citizen. Crane’s essay addresses this reality by tackling what he believes to be the operative technique of Mehemet’s narrative, what he calls the “discursive layering” of foreign modes of identification, namely “linguistic, territorial, and religious,” that constitute the “process of assimilation” for an 18th-century Muslim man in the United States (346-347). Crane opines that the act of fictional translation and publication of Mehemet’s narrative is just the sanitation of a figure of difference—a person that would otherwise be unfit for the public sphere.

Crane’s reading and understanding of Markoe’s novel no doubt are influenced by Edward Said’s field-altering work *Orientalism*. Crane acknowledges this critical lens, placing himself as a member of a group of scholars who have only recently “begun to explore the vast archives of early American cultural engagements with Islam” in order to qualify Said’s claim that the “United States had little interaction with Islam until after World War II” (334). In the introduction to his 1978 book, Said lays forth a description of Orientalism, offering a number of qualifications to better understand the framework around the designation of the term. While he posits that the Orient itself is “not an inert fact of nature,” he nevertheless acknowledges the geographical reality that it occupies (Said 12). While designations between East and West, or Orient and Occident, are certainly man-made, he writes that the two “geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (13). A crucial element of Said’s definition and construction of the term is the necessity of a power relationship and imbalance between the Orient and Occident. Crane’s ultimate thesis, that Barbary figures in Early American literature work to “repeatedly recenter … public debates on the (raced) body as a threat to the rhetorical
integrity of the Republic,” allows for perfect assimilation of his argument into the theories of Orientalism which Said presents. “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony,” Said claims, writing that such a power relationship is always and entirely of “Western Dominance” (13). Already, this necessary quality of Orientalism, which Said himself acknowledges, creates a complication with regard to *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*. As such, Crane’s claim of Mehemet operating as just a “foreign orientalized body” within the novel must be considered with delicate attention paid to the context within which the novel operates.

In what is ostensibly an effort to answer the question of the arrival of the narrative and to identify the author of the anonymous text, Markoe’s opening letter of the novel, written through the voice of the Philadelphia printer William Prichard, underscores the importance of anonymity to the literary environment of the Early Republic era. As a text itself, the narrative arrives without a claim of authorship; the original title page leaves void any identification of Peter Markoe as the only proprietors of the text explicitly mentioned are the printers, Prichard and Hall of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In fact, it is apparently Prichard himself who opens the novel, offering an introduction to the text he has entered into the public sphere.4 “Prichard’s” letter, however, is not merely an introduction to the anonymously written text but is an integral part of the novel itself.

The letter begins with an invented story explaining the provenance of the text. “About a fortnight ago a large packet was dropped in my store in the dusk of the evening,” the letter begins, attempting to explain the lack of authorship noted on the title page (Markoe 1). This scene is one not unfamiliar to it was, if not a common, a realistic and plausible explanation for

4 While Prichard’s letter is the first of the novel, there is a note on the back of the title page by one “J B. Smith,” purported “prothonotary of Philadelphia county” who affirms the text as the property of Prichard.
the arrival of a manuscript to a printer. It was the method utilized by the sixteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin to have his “Silence Dogood” letters published without the printer’s, who was, in fact, his elder brother, knowledge of authorship. While this fact would not be revealed in print for another half-decade by way of the publishing of Franklin’s autobiography, one can imagine that Markoe— a literary and intellectual figure in the city of Philadelphia— would have been intimately acquainted with the stories and rumors of its most famous resident. Markoe’s opening to his novel, then, is clearly rooted in an already-existing literary tradition. Not only are connections to Habermas identifies the “novel written in letters” as relying on the juxtaposition between the private and public (Habermas 49). Prichard’s letter, addressed directly “To the Public,” exemplifies what Habermas identifies as the epistolary “terrain of subjectivity,” an arena in which subjectivity, the “core of the innermost private” is directed and “always already oriented to an audience” (Habermas 49-50).

*The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* is one of many concurrently-published works in the 1780s which utilized anonymous or pseudonymous publication. In fact, it is not irrelevant that Markoe’s novel is concurrent with the publication of the Federalist papers, a series of essays written by framers of the constitution, including Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. At the moment of *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*’s publishing, the American literary public sphere was inundated with authors publishing under pseudonyms, especially when it came to arguments over important political and government decisions. While Franklin’s Silence Dogood proved a satirical and light-hearted *nom de plume*, playfully jesting at the invented persona’s character, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay used their most significant pseudonym to send a direct political message. “Publius” of the Federalist papers represented a political and historical statement, as the Federalists utilized a Latin name to stress the importance of the source of the
newly-minted American republic. By writing under a Latin pseudonym, the authors of the Federalist papers made the claim that they, as the creators of the first representative democracy of the modern era, were, in fact, the heirs to the Roman Republic. Publius also serves as the quintessential pseudonym for this study as it made an inherent argument about the nature of political discourse in the United States. “Publius” functions as a representation of the public sphere and as a statement to the ideal circumstances of literary circulation and intellectual discussion; that names and status not need be attached to opinions in order to be considered and taken seriously. It is for this reason that the pseudonym of Mehemet, the name under which Markoe writes much of his novel, is so notable. The name Mehemet serves as the antithesis to Publius; it is neither American, Republican, nor Protestant. Rather, Markoe draws upon a literary tradition, perhaps beginning with the Baron de Montesquieiu’s *Lettres persanes*, wherein Islam and the Orient stand in opposition to Western thought and ideals, yet at the same time, literature from their perspective allows the Western audience to more accurately and introspectively view themselves and consider their actions and customs. As an Antifederalist himself, it is not surprising that Markoe would work in such a way to actively and so deliberately subvert the rhetorical practices of the leading and most widely-circulated federalist authors.

Already discussed in this essay is the manner in which Markoe obfuscates his identity as the author of the text in a display of the paradox of the genre of letters that places private intimations in a public setting. This juxtaposition of the private self in public continues in the first letter of the principal narrative, wherein the narrator, Mehemet, announces his intention to sail to North America in order to spy on the newly-independent nation. Mehemet’s letter begins with an affirmation of his Muslim faith as he reports that he has “undertaken an office of the highest consequence to my country and the Musselman faith” (Markoe 7). Mehemet justifies his
mission as a religious duty, writing that, if successful, he shall “rank with those, who have gained immortal honor in this world, and the joys of Paradise” (7). Despite the fact that Markoe, through his introductory letters, has already revealed the status of his novel as a quasi-conversion narrative, Mehemet’s story begins with such religious fervor. Almost instantaneously, however, Mehemet must cast aside his Muslim faith and Algerian origins in order to execute his mission. He describes the method of his obfuscation of identity, writing that to travel unnoticed, he “appear[s] in the character of a native of the south of France” (9). “My knowledge of the French language,” he reports, “the predilection of the citizens of the states for their allies, and the swarthiness of my complexion,” allows him to successfully pass off his identity as a French traveler (9). Evident already in this first entry is the Habermasian understanding of the genre of letters, as Mehemet is, through the epistolary form, able to display his private self to an American public, all while remaining anonymous in his contemporary setting.

Crucial in this first letter is the subtle inclusion and reference to physical appearance. Mehemet’s “swarthiness,” his dark complexion, is no impediment to his disguise. In fact, it seems he need not alter his racial appearance at all. “I was a Frenchman,” he writes, attributing his acceptance into the Western world to factors irrelevant to skin tone (9). Here, Markoe once again echoes the writings of Benjamin Franklin, who, in his 1751 essay “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, writes:

That the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small. All Africa is black or tawny. Asia chiefly tawny. America (exclusive of the new Comers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes, are generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English, make the principal Body of White People on the
Though Franklin, writing in 1751 as a loyal subject of the British Crown, would later reverse many of his political statements, Markoe’s utilization of his racial commentary shows a complication of the idea of *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* as a simply a depiction of a racialized Oriental other. Rather, any racial commentary by Markoe must be considered alongside an earnest look at sentiments contemporary to the publishing of the novel. Markoe’s adjustment to Franklin’s claim of Africa consisting entirely of “black or tawny” peoples shows a dynamic understanding of race in the 18th century. It also, importantly, gives credence to the claim that Markoe must not be read as simply an Orientalist author. Rather, Markoe, in crafting his narrator Mehemet, must be—and indeed is—acutely aware of the complicated cultural ramifications of a Muslim narrator. At this moment, Markoe, rather than orientalizing the body of Mehemet, actually affirms what may perhaps be a disruptive and subversive understanding of the category of race. While Mehemet’s skin color, especially in the context of Franklin’s writing thirty years prior, works to highlight the value Markoe places on language, it leaves unanswered larger questions about race.

While Mehemet passes as a Frenchman and gains acceptance into this maritime community, lingering in the background are questions about African slavery in the United States and the place of darker-skinned people in an American public sphere—questions and areas Markoe is unwilling and uninterested in exploring. No doubt Mehemet is racialized, but he is racialized in a chiefly European fashion—a caveat and nuance that complicates a reading of the novel as an overtly Orientalist text. Rather, it is Mehemet’s identification with the geographical

---

region thusly labeled that leaves traces of a Saidian orientalism within the novel. By virtue of employing a North African narrator, Markoe cannot help but step on the landmines of cultural difference if he is to offer us an at least somewhat realistic representation of this outsider’s experience in Philadelphia.

Mehemet’s acceptance into an American, although first French, environment is based on his ability to communicate effectively. In describing his first journey from Algiers to Gibraltar, Mehemet demonstrates the ability of his linguistic knowledge to rescue him from unpleasant situations. The first ship’s crew, ostensibly British, regard Mehemet, who in their eyes is a Frenchman, with “hatred and contempt” (9). Mehemet gains favor, however, through his ability to converse in English, writing, “I conversed with them freely in English, which I understand perfectly and speak with tolerable fluency; and very soon conciliated their favor” (9). In his very first letter, Mehemet stresses the importance of language and discourse. It is notable that the swarthy spy is shunned not on account of his appearance but rather his linguistic and national background. To rectify this, Mehemet demonstrates his ability to effectively engage in conversation, asserting that discourse, and the ability to participate in discussion, is the key to acceptance into a public sphere. Mehemet renders moot all other aspects of his identity that may have inhibited him from gaining favor with his fellow sailors once he demonstrates his proficiency in English, the obvious lingua franca of the ship. This uniting role of language is reaffirmed in Letter V, while Mehemet still lodges in Gibraltar. Mehemet here describes his disguise as perhaps lackluster: “In deportment an Algerine, a Frenchman in dress and language, I was at first the object of their amazement; but after the second visit it abated, and I am no longer the theme of their whispers” (27-28). Mehemet describes the allay of his spectacle as a result of, once again, discourse: “I soon … entered into the spirit of their conversation, which was decently
and lively” (28). Mehemet’s ability to converse, this time in French, gains him acceptance into a social setting where he was just recently an outsider. By his second visit, he notes his group’s “conversation was as unguarded, as their looks and motions” (29). This interaction once again demonstrates the primacy of language and discourse, at least in Markoe’s mind, over other modes of identification in the realm of the public sphere.

Just as a broader understanding of the Early Republican literary environment is necessary for a holistic understanding of the role that *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* plays within its genre and circumstance, a dive into the biography of Peter Markoe himself proves equally enlightening towards the message of his novel. Through Timothy Marr’s introduction to *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, authored concurrently with the first re-publishing of the novel in over one hundred years, we can understand Markoe as the autobiographical Mehemet. Though not a Muslim himself, Markoe’s upbringing and life journeys mimic some of the experiences of his character. Like Mehemet, Markoe saw the United States through a similar outsider-insider perspective, to use the terminology of Tunisian scholar Lofti Ben Rejeb. In his essay “Observing the Birth of a Nation: The Oriental Spy/Observer genre and Nation Making in Early American Literature,” Ben Rejeb positions the character Mehemet as simply a rhetorical strategy, a plot device that allows Markoe to comment on what he sees occurring within the United States. “The outsider was the rhetorical mask of an intellectual elite in a state of introspection, the expression of a critical mind that questioned its own attitudes and values,” Ben Rejeb offers, effectively equating Mehemet’s views and observations with those of Markoe (Ben Rejeb 257).

Marr’s introduction offers much in the way of biographical details that help to formulate a coherent map of Markoe’s life and draw connections to that of Mehemet’s. Markoe, like Mehemet, was in many ways a cosmopolitan foreigner. Born on the island of Saint Croix, then
part of the Danish West Indies in the early 1750s, Markoe was by citizenship Danish. As a teenager, he sailed across the Atlantic to study in England. It is perhaps this transatlantic experience that influenced his strong views in support of the creation of an American Navy, an issue that holds a large place within the novel. As Marr offers, Markoe’s upbringing likely “led to a commitment to American democracy that was more transnational than most of his fellow members of the Philadelphia mercantile elite, perhaps encouraging him to identify with the perspective of an alien Algerine outsider” (Marr xvii).

Perhaps no biographical detail is more important to this essay than Markoe’s religious heritage. The son of French immigrants, Markoe was born to a “wealthy sugar-growing family of Huguenot descent,” according to Timothy Marr (xv). The Protestant Huguenot experience in France was one of centuries of religious persecution in which the Protestant minority faced religious violence and forced conversion under the rule of Catholic monarchs. Markoe directly addresses this heritage as he, even though in the voice of the Muslim Mehemet, lambastes “the banishment of the Protestants [which] reduced the internal resources of France in the reign of Louis the XIVth” (Markoe 14). Markoe, practically outlining the message of the novel, continues, “I shall not attempt a regular dissertation on the fatal effects of religious intolerance, … but in Christian countries, persecution always proceeds from those who are, or at least are supposed to be, the most enlightened” (14-16). Markoe’s message here draws upon his religious background as he prepares the reader for his argument. Clearly, conscious in Markoe’s political mind was the history of absolutism in France and the religious restrictions against and repression of non-Catholics. This is not only evident through the aforementioned references to French Huguenots but also in his remarks about Catholicism. Mehemet spurns the “ignorance, sloth, and barbarism” of Catholic Portugal, whose “streets swarm with monks and convents are crowded
Allen 15

with nuns” (54). Mehemet even reflects on the oppression of the Jewish people by Catholics, stating that “Spain has become tolerant, and Portugal has ceased to be barbarous,” so that the “the Hebrews, which for ages [have] been oppressed by the rude hand of fanaticism, will now spread and flourish anew” (35). It is this Huguenot background, I posit, that supplies much of the basis for Markoe’s radical doctrine of Christian individualism. Building upon his own Calvinist/Lutheran tradition that emphasized literacy and individual interpretation of holy scripture, Markoe transfers this concept to everyday participation in a political and literary world.

Although Markoe utilizes the first letters of his novel to preface the ideological framework of his argument, his discussion of Early Republican culture and the American landscape begins in earnest, unsurprisingly, with Mehemet’s ultimate arrival in Pennsylvania in Letter XI. It is, after all, only from within the country itself that the outsider can finally become the insider. Before beginning his deconstruction of the culture before him, however, Mehemet reinforces the effectiveness of his disguise, declaring, “when I survey my person in the mirror, I rejoice for two reasons; first, that I resemble a Christian, and secondly, that I am not observed by an Algerine” (66). Notable is the ease with which Mehemet is able to disassociate with his religious and national past, as a simple change of clothes and mind permits him to take his first step into the American public sphere. This scene, while at once is an explication of Mehemet’s clandestine inclusion into a broader public, is also a moment for Markoe to strike at the historical reality unfolding in front of him. While Mehemet’s elation at being “not observed by an Algerine” may at once be a reference to his lack of self-identification as an Algerine when he sees his image in a mirror—a rather profound commentary on selfhood and identification, it is also Markoe’s reminder to his audience of the power of Algiers in a global and transatlantic
context. Markoe contextualizes Mehemet’s relief as Mehemet offers a remark on the Barbary impressments, writing, “I have so much the air of a Christian slave on his first landing at Algiers,” a poignant reminder of the inescapable geopolitical power structures and reality that dominates the background of the novel (66-67).

In the subsequent letter, Markoe presents his first argument towards the importance and benefit of a dominating Protestant ethic within the United States. In Letter XII, Mehemet first reports on the state of the dynamic between individualism and tyranny in Pennsylvania, comparing it to what he knows from Algiers:

In most nations there are three sorts of tyranny; the first civil; the second ecclesiastical; the third I shall call the tyranny of fashion. The first is well known in Algiers; the second has been heard of; but the third is altogether unknown. The Pennsylvanians have known but little of the first, and nothing of the second; but the greater part of them is grievously oppressed by the last. (69)

Mehemet’s initial observations offer praise to the state of Pennsylvania for maintaining a religiously open and decidedly non-tyrannical system of government. He compares this new land favorably to his homeland, except for the reign of the latter tyranny. As Mehemet launches into a polemic against the evils of fashion and popular culture, arguing that it dismisses key values of individualism and reason, Markoe offers a first glimpse at how his radical individualism applies to issues beyond religious freedom. By making an explicit link between religious, civil, and cultural repressions, Markoe demonstrates the applicability of this core tenet of how he believes American society should be best structured: a system that caters to individualism and works to actively prevent the erosion of reason and free choice.
Mehemet’s commentary on tyranny harkens back to an earlier moment in Letter VIII wherein, despite being hosted fairly and well by a Jewish man in Lisbon, he argues for a religious inquisition of the world. “I am lodged at the house of Isaac d’Acosta, whose civility makes ample amends for his extreme bigotry. Methinks I hear the exclaim,” Markoe writes, again addressing his American readership directly, “are not bigotry and civility incompatible?” The answer, he opines, is “by no means” so (50-51). Mehemet’s discussion of the prevalence of tyranny of fashion in Pennsylvania is a reminder and caution that even in a state of civility, with neither civil nor religious tyranny, bigotry is possible, and Pennsylvanians must beware themselves. His musings on the tyranny of fashion conclude by offering that many who have fallen victim to the allure of fashion “have gone so far as to set humanity at defiance, and are closely allied to deceit and cruelty” (71).

Markoe’s satire is at its most effective in its political letters, as Mehemet’s attention turns to what is, at least ostensibly, the real matter of the novel. As his title would suggest, Markoe’s primary interest and purpose is to examine and critique the “Affairs of the United States in America, from the Close of the Year 1783 to the Meeting of the Convention.” As such, the crux of the novel and Markoe’s political message centers around the formation of the American government, as Mehemet spies on the framing of the constitution. Letter XIV contains some of Mehemet’s most critical insights and features a series of extended metaphors to describe the utility, or lack thereof, of a bicameral legislature. Mehemet, as he describes the state legislature of Pennsylvania, writes, “If their constitution is experimentally found to be good, they will maintain it; but the best will prove defective, if they are ignorant of their rights, or inattentive to the preservation of them” (77). As he moves into the first of his three “proofs” of the superiority of a unicameral legislature, Markoe’s voice rings out the loudest:
The constitution of Pennsylvania may be compared to a foot-ball, which is kicked from
goal to goal by two parties or sets of players, with alternate triumph. The spectators are
deeply interested in the success of the one or the other party. Well kicked, says one; there
it goes, cries a second; here it comes, exclaims a third; what a fall neighbor Bustle has
had, roars a fourth; he is up again, like a clever fellow, bellows a fifth. Huzza! Huzza!
–But, if a second foot-ball should be introduced, the greatest confusion would ensue. Two
foot-balls at once! What a solecism in that manly exercise! (79).

Mehemet follows this proof with a second and third involving a spit roast and a hen’s egg, before
introducing a counter-proof involving a double-wheeled wheelbarrow in support of a bicameral
legislature. This humorous letter, with rather imaginative and abstracted constructions of how a
legislature functions, perhaps best reflects the intentions behind Markoe’s novel. The letter
concludes with a recentering of the Islamic voice, as Mehemet reports, “while these infidels are
disputing about government, may thou continue an ornament to thy country, and a terror to a
corrupted populace,” utilizing an explicitly political conversation to offer a stark contrast
between the apparent freedom of the United States and tyranny of Algiers (81).

Likewise, Mehemet’s perspective in Letter XVIII allows Markoe to comment on
contemporary events like Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts and the refusal of Rhode Island to
sign onto the proposed constitution. In Letter XVIII, Mehemet reports on “an ignorant multitude,
headed by Shays” in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the rogue actions of Rhode Island, “the
least considerable [state] in the union,” which “has refused to send members to this
[constitutional] convention … and [will] countenance defection and revolt” (99). Mehemet
suggests the establishment of “an Ottoman Malta on the coasts of America” and requests
permission to negotiate with “Shays, the Massachusetts insurgents, and the refractory leaders of
the revolt in Rhode Island” (100-101). Once again, in this political letter, Markoe’s perspective is clear. Writing in objection to the actions of Shays and Rhode Island, Markoe uses the foil of a Muslim spy to highlight the danger that these rebellious entities represent to the United States. In these explicitly political and governmental moments, Markoe has no difficulty containing the voice of Mehemet and controlling his satire, and Mehemet can very much be read as an attempt at cultural relevancy. During these letters, he reads almost as an empty foil, a simple device for Markoe to offer a poignant insight into the political machinations working before the American people before then making a remark on either the threat of a Muslim invasion or the tyranny of the North African governmental system. Yet Mehemet is, in turn, a vehicle for the exploration of worldly themes, such as the roles of women and religion in society, that escape the control of Markoe, as his neatly packaged satirical intentions are confounded by the cultural ramifications of Islam in the late 18th century.

Mehemet’s developing understanding of religion in Pennsylvania expands as he witnesses more and more customs that were before unfamiliar to him. Letter XV, a message to his wife Fatima, describes his first witnessing of Christian worship. “I have lately heard the rhapsody of a female preacher,” he writes, expressing awe and dismay at a woman preaching in public with “her head uncovered … dar[ing]” to preach in public (83). Mehemet expressed incredulity at the fact that “this woman, such appareled, or, to speak more properly, almost unappareled, preached to a crowded congregation in a civilized country” (84). This moment, which the editor Marr notes as referring to the evangelical preacher Jemima Wilkinson of 1782, demands a sophisticated reading of Markoe’s satire. Mehemet begins his letter by reflecting on the “cruel and intolerable” circumstances that have led him to “breathe the same air with profane Christians” (82). This letter, then, is clearly one removed from the voice of the author. Mehemet,
now apparently holding strong knowledge of Christian scripture, objects to the preacher on the basis of the apostle Paul’s teaching: “Although women are forbidden by one of their first Nazarene teachers to speak in their churches, or to appear in them with their heads uncovered, yet this woman, in violation of both these precepts, dared to appear in the manner I have described” (83-84). Mehemet follows these objections with a tirade against the comportment of women in public in Pennsylvania, demonstrating the character’s repressive tendencies. Mehemet makes clear that these presumptions about the role of women in public life come from a religious standpoint, as he concludes the letter by writing that “not even the beauty of a Houri can atone for the levity of laughter,” rationalizing his discomfort to this public spectacle on the basis of his own religious customs (84-85). Mehemet’s disapproval of the scene before is a direct cause of what earlier he identified as religious tyranny. Markoe’s juxtaposition of two scenes antithetical to tyranny, a woman preaching and a woman laughing in public, both of which greatly upset Mehemet, demonstrates well the link between religious and civil tyranny. Notably, Mehemet objects to both on the basis of religion, both Christianity and Islam, demonstrating the propensity of both, if adhered to in excess, to lead to personal restrictions.

While Mehemet is still his knowledgeable and keenly-observing self throughout this letter, Markoe’s novel nonetheless seemingly gives in to the overwhelming pressure of the cultural ramifications of his title character. As Mehemet complains of American women who “speak before they are spoken to” and “smile in the presence of men,” the structures of satire within the novel collapse, and we are left instead with confusion over the intended message of Mehemet’s report to his wife. Having just presented a letter in which he utilizes Mehemet’s voice and societal position to advocate for his own ideas on government, Markoe confounds expectations by inhabiting more precisely the perspective and thoughts of a Muslim man—or at
least what he imagines such a perspective to be like. While he offers an interesting take on Pauline doctrine, perhaps encouraging a readership to consider the ramifications of strict adherence to a religious philosophy, the message is ultimately muddled.

While Letter XV is indubitably an effort by Markoe to satirize the Muslim spy and his religious and social views about the role of women, the complexity of the letter ultimately confuses the narratorial voice and leaves the reader with an uncertain message. Clearly, Markoe attempts to utilize his narrator’s physical presence in Philadelphia to comment on issues he believes to be relevant to his readership and the time at hand: he makes use of Jemima Wilkinson, offers up a Pauline reference, and even demonstrates a relatively dynamic understanding and knowledge of the Qur’an. In a novel that Markoe centers around the framing of the Constitution and a Muslim man’s reaction to the political climate of the 1780s, Markoe’s commentary on the political and social role of women in Philadelphia becomes muddled by the relevant historical powers at play. His satire cannot overcome the specter of Islam that his narrator—at least through the first fifteen letters—represents, and as such, Markoe loses control of Mehemet’s voice. While Ben Rejeb is not incorrect in identifying the Outsider/Insider phenomenon of Oriental literature as a particularly illuminating method of introspection, any resemblance of introspection from the part of Markoe is lost in Letter XV. Instead, he presents, in a rather drastic departure from the beginning of the novel, with a despotic and controlling Muslim caricature of a husband—a dramatic shift in the personality of Mehemet.

*The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* ultimately concludes, as foreshadowed by the introductory letters, with Mehemet’s conversion to Christianity and assimilation into American life. The novel ends dramatically with this conversion, as Mehemet rebukes Algiers for the United States, writing:
And thou Pennsylvania, who has promised to succor and protect the unhappy, that fly to thee for refuge, open thy arms to receive Mehemet the Algerine, who, formerly a Mahometan, and thy foe, has renounced his enmity, his country and his religion, and hopes, protected by thy laws, to enjoy, in the evening of his days, the united blessings of FREEDOM and CHRISTIANITY. (125)

Ostensibly, Mehemet’s rebuke of Islam and acceptance of Christianity is precipitated by a series of convoluted plot twists that include a Rabbi from Lisbon having betrayed him to the Dey of Algiers and his wife having left him for their gardener and converted to Christianity herself. Fatima’s conversion, at which moment she renames herself Maria, is especially notable as it once again represents a moment in which Markoe seemingly loses control of the satire. Fatima’s abrupt betrayal of Mehemet seemingly folds the narrative in on itself, causing a wild sequence of events within a small number of pages. Having established from the onset of the novel Mehemet’s conversion, Markoe must hurriedly find a device to make his titular spy, whom he has just shown as a scheming and loyal citizen to the Dey of Algiers in the previous letters, renounce his country and religion. Once again, it is Fatima, just as in Letter XV, who forces such a complication. Unsurprisingly, however, we do not hear from Maria. Instead, it is through Alvarez, Mehemet’s former gardener, that Mehemet learns that “Maria, formerly Fatima, having received baptism according to the rites of the church, has consented to be [Alvarez’s] wife” (119). Alvarez relates that Mehemet “never possessed” the affections of Maria, and that “she endured his company, because she was his slave,” and ultimately states that she was “convinced by [his] arguments” to become a Christian (119-120). Maria’s conversion, however, raises questions about her response to Mehemet’s earlier writings. Although having claimed earlier that were a Philadelphian woman “blest with thy conversation, how would thy precepts and example
at once enlighten her understanding and improve her conduct,” it seems clear now that Maria’s inclinations and philosophical viewpoints rest more in line with those as described to her in Letter XV (85). Indeed, Markoe’s seemingly-haphazard structural device of conversion only reraises the questions regarding the implications of Mehemet’s views in Letter XV.

While Mehemet’s transformation from a Muslim man to a Christian is abrupt, evidence of a gradual shifting of perspective is clear. Mehemet’s religious conversion is the cementing factor that confirms and validates his position within an American public sphere, and the disavowal of his religious and national beginnings are the final steps in that assimilation process. Most notable is Letter XIV, in which Mehemet writes to his Algerian handler, “perhaps you will say I have already caught the infection,” after his discussion of Pennsylvania’s legislative system. Mehemet’s classification of republicanism and the Protestant ethic, which ultimately consumes him, as a disease is telling; the more one is exposed to the ideas, the likelier they are to feel similarly. Mehemet’s conversion, then, was unavoidable. Having been exposed incessantly to a contagious culture so different from his own, Mehemet was without recourse to prevent the infection of an individualist and republican mindset. Indeed, we can track Mehemet’s progress through this transformation in mentality, as in Letter XVII, he writes wholly in support of the ideals of Pennsylvania:

The manners and behavior of the people correspond with their government. No man creates or feels terror. The national countenance is therefore mild, and the national deportment manly. There are undoubtedly some unworthy citizens; but the noblest soil often nourishes the most venomous serpents. Of their private virtues I can only say, that benevolence must prevail among a people, who build hospitals and never inquire about a man’s religion. (93)
As Mehemet learns more and more about the customs of Pennsylvania and the United States more generally, he cannot help but favorably contrast that which he views before with that which he has left behind in Algeria. “I have often lamented the situation of our Deys,” Mehemet writes, stating that “the authority of the Dey is founded on the soldiery,” and the Dey himself is “obliged to act the tyrant” (104). “What minions of despotism,” he questions, “will deny that authority proceeds from the people” (107). Mehemet’s musings on authority, just moments before his rejection of nation and religion, are a further demonstration of the spread of his disease. “Although an Algerine, devoted to the service of my country, you must permit me at times to be the philosopher,” he writes, working to justify his seemingly traitorous remarks by affirming fealty to the Dey and positioning his reports as merely the requirements of his profession as a spy (92). It is clear, however, that as Mehemet becomes more fully exposed to open and free discussion, he identifies directly with a philosophy of radical republican individualism. Markoe makes clear both the many sources of Mehemet’s conversion as well as its implications. Mehemet’s conversion to Christianity was a lengthy process; it was not, despite appearances, a spur-of-the-moment decision. Additionally, and most crucially, it is Mehemet’s conversion and his renouncement of country and religion that allow his acceptance into an American public sphere and for his letters to be published. Predicated on this entry into the public sphere, however, is a requirement to dispel any authoritarian or despotic allegiances or connections. For this reason, Mehemet must renounce his country and religion, as he has continuously demonstrated their incompatibility with what Markoe understands to be American values.

While Mehemet’s conversion is messy, it nonetheless reinforces the major themes of the novel. Mehemet’s banishment from Algiers and permanent relocation to the United States highlights a metanarrative around the irony of letters. Mehemet is expelled from Algiers after a
letter sent by his host in Lisbon has him convicted of treason. It is also through letters that Mehemet receives notice of the betrayal of his wife and the dissolution of his marriage. A series of letters, then, seems to be the downfall of Mehemet, and even when he tries to prove his fealty to the Dey of Algiers through a collection of letters—the very same ones presented to the reader—the Dey refuses to read them. “Wretch! Begone,” the Dey declares, asking, “Dost thou hope to impose on my understanding by such shallow devices?” (116) The glaring question and uncertainty is, however, what exactly do the letters prove? While they certainly show a spy who has plotted the creation of an “Ottoman Malta” on the North American continent, Mehemet’s letters demonstrate an unusual affinity and affection for Pennsylvania and the Republican culture of the United States. No matter what the letters ultimately prove, the message of the Dey’s banishment of Mehemet is clear. A tyrant, the Dey of Algiers is unwilling to honestly and rigorously consider the text before him. American readers, Markoe argues, are not to be like the Dey. Here again, Markoe returns to the themes of the very opening letters of the novel, those in which he claims a certain value to his novel and assures his readers that these letters pose no danger: “Whether they will instruct or amuse, I will not pretend to say; but I am confident, that they will do no harm” (6). Left to their own devices, an honest reader, in the eyes of Markoe, will glean insight from this collection of letters and form their own opinion of their utility.

_The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania_ is a demonstration of the difficulty of writing with what we might term cultural sensitivity in the 18th and 19th centuries. While Markoe does indeed dip into what can be construed as an orientalist framework in his depiction of Mehemet, yet to reduce the entire novel as an example of orientalism and to write Markoe off as an Orientalist author is to ignore the historical reality of the novel. That is not to say, however, that Markoe’s viewpoints and arguments are without their own drawbacks and complications.
Markoe’s radical understanding of republican individualism props up a rather unrealistic argument that posits that through open and uncensored debate and speech, the best ideas will persevere and rise to the top. This reductive vision of the world, in turn, results in the relegation of Islam in his novel, as all those with ample exposure to Christianity are ultimately converted. Despite this, Markoe ultimately presents to us a sympathetic, and perhaps even a somewhat autobiographical, narrator who, despite a past antithetical to the values of the United States, finds himself at home and his voice worthy of an audience in his adopted country.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* is the works it inspired in the years after publication. Benjamin Franklin, in one of his final works of satire before his death in 1790, utilized a similar trope as Markoe, writing his “On the Slave Trade,” through the perspective of a despotic Algerian tyrant, a similarly-named Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim. Ultimately, Franklin’s treatment of Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim is much colder than Markoe’s relationship with his own narrator, yet, in focusing on the Algerian enslavement of American and European sailors, the work offers another example of the complicated power relationship between the North African coast and the emergent American nation. Ultimately, *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, a political satire of what Markoe views as failures of republicanism in the United States, which, in its employment of an Algerine narrator and adherence to 18th-century conventions, cannot help but bleed out into larger social, religious, and cultural debates.
Works Cited


