



# Fabulous Orients: Fictions of the East in England

## 1662-1785

*Ros Ballaster*

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Narrative moves. Stories migrate from one culture to another, over vast distances sometimes, but their path is often difficult to trace and obscured by time. Fabulous Orients looks at the traffic of narrative between Orient and Occident in the eighteenth century, and challenges the assumption that has dominated since the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) that such traffic is always one-way. Eighteenth-century readers in the West came to draw their mental maps of oriental territories and distinctions between them from their experience of reading tales "from" the Orient. In this proto-colonial period the English encounter with the East was largely mediated through the consumption of material goods such as silks, indigo, muslin, spices, or jewels, imported from the East, together with the more "moral" traffic of narratives about the East, both imaginary and ethnographic. Through analyses of fictional representations (including travellers' accounts, letter narratives such as Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, and popular sequences of tales such as the Arabian Nights Entertainments) of four oriental territories (Persia, Turkey, China and India) Ros Ballaster demonstrates the ways in which the East came to be understood as a source of story, a territory of fable and narrative. Fabulous Orients is structured according to territory rather than genre. Each section opens by re-narrating an oriental story in which a feminine character serves to "figure" western desire for the territory she represents: the courtesan queen of the Ottoman seraglio Roxolana; the riddling Chinese princess Turandocte; and the illusory sati of India, Canzade. The book goes on to explore the range of fabulous writings relating to each territory in order to illustrate how certain narrative tropes can come to dominate its representation: the conflict between the male look and female speech staged in the seraglio in the case of Turkey and



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