principle of fairytale, a genre which does not explore individual psychology or interiority. The word 'arabesque' was first applied to Moorish decoration in Spain in the seventeenth century and evokes an ornamental, branching line. Unlike Hogarth's 'line of beauty' and its sinuous symmetry, the arabesque intrinsically involves a pattern efflorescing on all sides, hence the term's meaning in ballet, when it invokes a pose with one leg and both arms fully outstretched. Though arabesque has not become an aesthetic term as widely understood as 'grotesque' or 'carnivalesque', a figural relationship does exist between it and the structure of the *Nights*. Endlessly generative and cyclical, arabesque embodies vitality, resourcefulness and the dream of plenitude (no surface left bare) towards which the frame story and the ransom tales themselves are moving.

The stories in the book are not confined by the texts they inhabit, or by the nights over which they are told. They form a book, but also a genre which is still changing, still growing. The tales spill out from the covers of the volumes in which they appear, in different versions and translations, and escape from the limits of time that the narrative struggles to impose. They keep generating more tales, in various media, themselves different but alike: the stories themselves are shape-shifters.

II

Like one of the genies who stream out of a jar in a pillar of smoke, *Alf Layla wa-Layla,* the *Arabian Nights*, or the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*, has taken many forms and has answered to many masters. Now in this version, now in that, it has no known author or named authors, no settled shape or length, no fixed table of contents, no definite birthplace or linguistic origin (India, Persia, Iraq, Syria and Egypt, have all contributed since the earliest vestiges of such tales were found in the ninth century). Late antique myth forms one deep layer of the palimpsest (the Greek *Romance of Alexander*, in the second or third century BC, features many motifs that will appear in the *Nights* – including one of the earliest examples of a flying vehicle, thought out in practical detail); the stories strike frequent echoes of the Bible and the Koran. The sacred folklore of the three world religions that flourished in the eastern Mediterranean creates another stratum: stories carried by pilgrims, traders and crusaders, criss-crossing by land and sea, and the bustling culture of political and economic centres constellate into the layers nearest the surface.

As different stones and fossils from aeons of geological strata are tumbled pell-mell on to a beach by a landslide, the stories contain traces of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, and of Indian, Egyptian, Greek,

Latin, Russian and Turkish myths floating in the ocean of the streams of story, all of which have contributed plots, motifs, tone and literary forms. Allusions to analogous story cycles as well as to individual tales are sprinkled here and there before the book takes shape. There are however three principal streams flowing into the cycle in Arabic: Persian sources have nourished it: for example, Shahrazad's name, and those of the Sultan and his brother – Shahriyar and Shahzenan – allude to the Sassanian dynasty and are congruent with Shah, as in 'Shah of Persia'; from Persia also come the beautiful and elaborate fairy romances and journeys to enchanted territories like 'The Tale of Camar al-Zaman and Princess Badoura'. Secondly, the culture of medieval Baghdad, when the city was at the height of its wealth and learning, provides another identifiable seam – Harun al-Rashid, the legendary ruler in that heyday, haunts some of these stories, with his restless curiosity and his hunger for more marvellous things to think about. And thirdly, Egypt, with its capital Cairo in the Mameluke period, provides the ambience of innumerable tales, characterised by powerful enchantments wrought by jinn and often lodged in goods, and by low-life 'rogue' and comic episodes.

Homo narrans observes no ethnic divisions, and has more than one god before him; like Grimms' folk tales, which have a specific history in German literature and yet derive from other cultures and have migrated far and wide, the *Arabian Nights* present a polyvocal anthology of world myths, fables and fairy tales. But the book is also a masterwork of Arabic literature, distinctively arranged and told, with a flavour that is unmistakably its own.

The stories form a shaped book with an overarching plot, created by the frame story of Shahrazad and by certain powerfully sustained themes: alongside the wiles of women there is the injustice of tyrants, as well as the caprices of destiny, the perplexity of desire and the power of love, luck in money, and its opposite, misfortune. The book has commanded audiences everywhere, but its status is dubious, especially in its cultures of origin, where, rather surprisingly, the tales were for most of their existence not as highly appreciated as in Europe. One of the first references to them, in the work of al-Masudi, a tenth-century scholar, uses the phrase *Alf khurafas*, meaning a thousand trifles, tall stories, enjoyable but not worth serious attention. The *Nights* continued to be considered popular trash, written in an impure Arabic beneath the attention of proper literati; and as pulp fiction, the cycles of stories were excluded from the classical Arabic canon. In spite of numerous allusions to the Prophet, quotations and echoes of the Koran, and exemplary characters such as the brilliant and pious slave girl Tawaddud, the stories represented too colourful a spectacle of magic and jinn, pleasure, transgression and amorality, to be

found orthodox or respectable, and have never reached high status in their countries of origin. This attitude only began to change in the mid-nineteenth century, since when some of the most eminent writers in Arabic (Mahfouz, Tayeb Salih, Gamal el-Ghitan, Radwa Ashour, Elias Khoury, Hanan Al-Shaykh) have also taken up the style and structure of the *Nights*.

The stories exist in a tangle of styles and a polyphony of vocal registers: poetry and prose mingle; high-flown court lyrics from the Persian tradition will interrupt a comedy. These passages of poetry act as rhythmic markers to the unfolding story, slowing it down like an aria in opera, and adding emotional accents to the events described (cursing, blessing, praises of the beloved). They also recall the world outside the story, bringing in voices from the larger culture to which the audience belongs. Such mise-en-abyme effects, as one narrator within a story picks up from another, dizzyingly plunge the reader from one level to another, sometimes at three or four or more removes from the voice of Shahrazad herself. The extravagant acrobatics and vertiginous flights of language and metaphor, the ingenious plying of action and reversal, does not so much suspend disbelief as bring the impossible into embodied life, and – the tales persuade us – the fantastic appears before our mind's eye.

The huge narrative wheel of the *Arabian Nights* parades the variety and ingenuity of narrative forms: proverbial anecdotes, riddles, lyric songs, love poems, epigrams and jokes lift the simple unfolding of the fable or fairy tale; it spins out erotic incidents, bawdy scenes, cross-dressed encounters, and devices such as that perennial comic subterfuge, often adopted by Shakespeare, of the bed trick. Magic flights and spells and fumigations and potions bring dreams – and disasters – at the whim of capricious powers. Spells and enchantments, soul and body migration, possession and disorientation give the tales their fantastic character, but also represent a vision of psychology, human volition and interdependency. Young women are changed into dogs, young men are turned half to stone, princes into apes and parrots and ugly beasts: the human shape is not constant, and souls can be spirited away to inhabit other forms. Hosts of genies (jinn) and fairies (peri) and other magical creatures (marids, afrits) appear and determine the action; they can fly to the zenith and dive to the depths of the sea. If rewards fall at random, so do punishments. Curses work. Luck holds, sometimes. Lessons are hard to draw, and often dubious. Cruelty and violence erupt at every turn, heads are lopped off, the earth opens and reveals buried treasure or swallows the unwary; kings practise summary justice, viziers plot and deceive, sinister 'magians' – the alchemists and sorcerers of the *Nights* – have designs on innocent young heroes, beggars become kings and dewy young brides turn out to be deep-dyed in the dark arts of sorcery. There is really

no rhyme or reason for the unfolding of the plots. When a motive drives the action, envy often rules. Besides envy, lust is the principal catalyst.

The stories do not obey internal rules about character, motive, verisimilitude or plot structure; they do not easily fit existing theories about fiction, history or psychology. Their excesses of emotion, desultory and extreme violence, twists of fate and improbable outcomes, seem to flout the generally accepted order of things. This makes them exciting, alarming and compelling: why is one young woman, with every sign of reluctance and remorse, beating two bitches every evening till the blood runs? Why have all three wandering holy men, the three dervishes or kalenders, lost an eye? The inventions in the tales remain utterly fantastic and have an eerie compulsion: the magnetic mountain draws every nail from a ship that falls by ill fate within its sphere of attraction, and reduces it to splinters; the giant bird, the Rukh (or Roc), breakfasts daily on two Bactrian camels; in the frozen cities of past glorious civilisations, everyone is turned to stone and heaped in riches; and the dead queen with wide open eyes of mercury lies on a bier guarded by automata which slice off the head of anyone daring to steal the jewels that cover her body.

Once you start reading, the telling itself, as Shahrazad sets one story inside another, acts like metre and rhyme in poetry: your mind rushes ahead before you can put up resistance (just like the Sultan). Given the intricacy of the tales, as you lose yourself in the labyrinth, the prosody resembles something fiendishly patterned, more *terza rima* than heroic couplets, so it is interesting that one of the most exacting forms of all, the Malaysian pantoum, is based on Arabic lyric patterning. Also, though the book collages so many different materials and forms of literature, it does in the end – like a very long and complicated puzzle – come out. Shahrazad's tales gradually move on from the virulent, complacent cynicism of the frame story, and of many earlier tales too, towards a politics of love and justice that opens the cruel Sultan's eyes to another vision of humanity and to his responsibilities as a ruler.

Causality in the *Nights* breaks laws of science and plausibility; fate rules according to its arbitrary logic, incarnate in its sinister or benevolent agents – jinn, sorcerers, peris. The hero will forget the prohibition, and his destiny, as ordained, will take its course (in 'The Tale of the Second Dervish', the prince will have his eye put out). The inevitable will happen, however long and forked the journey towards it, and its unfolding will heighten the otherworldly atmosphere that provokes astonishment. Oracles decree a future that cannot be thwarted: several tales turn on human attempts to prevent the fulfilment of such prophecies (three men are warned they will meet Death under a tree and indeed, when they dig

up buried treasure there, they kill one another; Chaucer reimagines the story in the Pardoner's Tale, as does B. Traven's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, filmed by John Huston). However deep the beloved child is hidden from the death that has been foretold, however far the doomed victim runs, the appointment with fate will be kept. Kismet surpasses the Greek *moirai* in fatality, shows even less mercy, and never explains, unlike the Olympians who always argue their position. The tales also break with the narrative conventions of romance and fairytale, which one might expect them to obey. Even a blessed youngest son, for all his virtue and courage, will not be spared (as in the story of 'Judar and his Brothers').

Jorge Luis Borges took his cue from the nested boxes and self-mirroring regression of the *Nights*. The great reader and fabulist once commented that all great literature becomes children's literature; he was thinking of the *Odyssey, Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* as well as the *Tales of A Thousand and One Nights,* but his paradox depends on the deep universal pleasures of storytelling for young and old: stories like those in the *Arabian Nights* place the audience in the position of a child, at the mercy of the future, of life and its plots, just as the protagonists of the *Nights* are subject to unknown fates, both terrible and marvellous.

III

Only twenty-two manuscripts containing stories from the *Nights* have survived. One collection, now in the Arcadian Library, London, gives a powerful sense of the way the stories circulated: 30 octavo notebooks, written in a variety of hands, with a sprinkling of red-letter headings, the boards have been softened by handling, the pages tatterred and torn, in some places patched and edged – these copies have been read to bits. As with paper money after long use, a smell of human hands and breath rises from these working copies – they have every look of a professional storyteller's precious resources. On the inside cover at the back of several volumes, sums and a kind of tally appear to have been kept: the number of listeners? Receipts?

As Florence Dupont has shown so fascinatingly in *The Invention of Literature*, some of the greatest works of human imagination were created as texts to be performed and heard. They belong to written literature, but their making precedes print and multiple copies, and their form as well as their transmission took shape in relation to audiences, not silent readers. The passage from oral to written and back again is much more complex than a simple contrast between literature and orature. *The Arabian Nights*, before their publication, can be placed in this context. The stories did not need to be read from the page to become known.