# Legacies of Orientalism and Slavery in European Intellectual and Literary History

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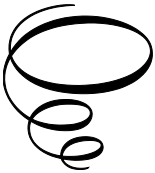
By

John Docker

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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# INTRODUCTION

# THE SALIENCE OF ETHICAL CRITICISM, AND MIXED THOUGHTS ON EDWARD SAID

The framework of this book, that which gives its diverse chapters a kind of unity, is "ethical criticism". I draw on and work with ideas and suggestions from two of its notable exponents, Wayne C. Booth and Martha C. Nussbaum. When, rather a long time ago, I was trained as a critic in Leavisite and New Critical close reading, the aim was to be rigorously critical of a text, to master it, to submit it to a definitive reading. In subsequent years, in rebellious spirit, I sought to venture away from that kind of approach, writing an essay, "How I Became a Teenage Leavisite and Lived to Tell the Tale", that appeared in my 1984 book *In a Critical Condition*.[1] I moved towards regarding the relationship between critics and authors and texts as creating quizzical even whimsical conversations, as in much of Walter Benjamin's writings; Benjamin became a hero of mine, he still is.[2] When I began exploring the writings of Booth and Nussbaum, it was with a pleasurable recognition of affinity, a kind of kinship.[3]

In the vein of "ethical criticism", then, this book considers how a selection of classic or influential texts helps us address contemporary challenges and developments. I analyse a range of texts that are helpful when addressing contemporary power dynamics, such as coercive control in gender relations, or imperial and colonial thinking, or slavery. In each chapter, this book explores the intricacy and detail of a text relating to one or more of these themes. I begin by looking closely at *The Thousand and One Nights* in terms of its wayward narratology, its displays of female power, and in relation to the Enlightenment and its significance for arguments over the conceptual underpinnings of the Holocaust. Montesquieu in *Persian Letters* (1721), and Voltaire in *Zadig* (1747), destabilize any certainty that the Enlightenment was straightforward, was in any way easily definable. After bringing slavery to the fore in chapters on *Persuasion*, *Mansfield Park* and several Jane Austen influenced texts, I conclude with a radical re-reading of *Middlemarch*. A key theme throughout is gender and power, exploring coercive control in *Mansfield Park* and

drawing attention to female agency in figures from Joan of Arc, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* through to Princess Diana.

Ideas I have found inspiring in the writings of Booth and Martha Nussbaum include regarding texts as "friends", as equals: we interact with them, we might disagree with them, yet we can always be in conversation with them.[4] Another valuable suggestion is to acknowledge, in the words of Martha Nussbaum, the importance of a plurality of critical approaches involving "particularized judgment", as I seek to do in the different chapters of this book.[5] In these terms, each of my chapters, spanning authors and texts over a long period of time, explores a different approach. In the historical plethora of translations and imitations, deriving from Indian, Persian, and Arab sources, that we know as *The Thousand and One Nights* from early in the eighteenth century to modernity, there is no identifiable author; rather, the frame story, which can be traced back to Indian folklore, featuring Shahriya and Shahrazad, cannot contain or control the meanings of the whole for the stories are so numerous that no one person could comprehend their extent. The approach of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the early eighteenth century in her famous letters is autobiographical, revealing an author who is bold, passionate, and independent, challenging her English contemporaries in her cosmopolitanism, urging as a feminist that women should be educated as men are, interacting with the Orient, making available in England an important medical discovery concerning small pox, and introducing European style heating to cold English houses. William Beckford's deranged, yet self-parodying, fantasia *Vathek* (1786), revelling in its Gothic horrors, influenced the history of Romanticism, with Byron fondly regarding it as his favourite literary work; the novel has powerful female figures, and explores androgyny.

Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of contextual complexity.[6] In Jane Austen's great novels, especially *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*, Caribbean slavery asserts itself as a pressing context, as it also does in Beckford's family history; slavery continues as an important thread in Patricia Rozema's film *Mansfield Park*, Austen's unfinished novel *Sanditon*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. In a very different register, I wonder if chaos theory can explore symbolic relations between three historical figures whom we can conceive of as "friends", Joan of Arc, Rebecca from Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, and Princess Diana. In the final chapter we observe what happens when we stop considering *Middlemarch* the centre piece of social realism, observing how much it draws on, as well as social realism, a wide range of surprising genres, often comically so, including romance, melodrama, and pantomime.

Two final observations concerning ethical criticism. The first is that Martha Nussbaum sees literary works as "guides to what is mysterious and messy and dark in our experience".[7] Such certainly applies to how much this book draws attention to the long and appalling history of slavery, with European nations and royal families in contemporary times, while sometimes willing to apologise, extremely reluctant to consider the reparations that Caribbean nations demand for centuries of cruelty. The second observation is Nussbaum's view that ethical reading is dialogical.[8] I associate this term with the theoretical riches of Mikhail Bakhtin, along with other terms he favoured such as heteroglossia, polyphony, carnivalesque, and Menippean.[9] My reading of *Middlemarch* as carnivalesque can be considered as Bakhtinian.

Any consideration of Orientalism in European cultural history has to be a long conversation with Edward Said, and in the spirit of ethical criticism I will entertain certain of his ideas as "friends", friends where yet there may be disagreements, even sharply so. In his great work *Orientalism* (1978) Said qualifies his admiration of Foucault. In his Introduction he writes that he found it useful to adopt Foucault's notion of discourse, as employed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*, as a way of understanding the systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage, indeed to produce, the Orient politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Nonetheless, later in the Introduction, Said disagrees with Foucault, for unlike Foucault he believes in the "determining imprint of individual writers" upon the "otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism". Where Foucault avers that "in general the individual text or author counts for very little", Said demurs: "I find this not to be so".[10] In *Legacies of Orientalism and Slavery in European Intellectual and Literary History* I similarly regard the individuality of texts as a guiding methodology.

Another insight of Said's I found particularly valuable throughout my book is a distinction he makes in his essay on Raymond Schwab in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. He praises Schwab for being an *orienteur*, a scholar who is "more interested in a generous awareness of the Orient" than the "detached classification" that characterizes the *orientaliste*.[11] The distinction between *orienteur* and *orientaliste* becomes for me a kind of abiding "friend". I deploy it, for example, in chapter six, evoking the famously witty conversation in *Persuasion* between Mrs Musgrove and Captain Wentworth's sister Mrs Croft, who emerges, I fancifully like to think, as an *orienteur*, similar to Schwab in Said's characterization, in her generous awareness of the Orient. Nonetheless, when in *Culture and*

*Imperialism* Said reveals a strangely intense dislike of Jane Austen—leading in one instance to a surprising confusion between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*—and in a monologic way condemns her and her contemporaries for supporting imperialism and slavery, I join others, especially feminist critics, in registering doubt, disquiet, and protest.

I offer the narratives of this book as a journey that arcs away from my initial training in the severities and hubris of Leavisite and New Critical criticism seeking to control knowledge, to a lifelong interest in intellectual work as always open to adventure, of perspectives and methodologies associated with many approaches, but especially Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin and now ethical criticism.

## Notes

[1] John Docker, *In a Critical Condition* (Melbourne, Penguin, 1984), 1-14.
[2] See John Docker, "The Flâneur under Water, the Flâneur as Dancing Star: creating a conversation between Walter Benjamin, T.S. Eliot, and Hannah Arendt—a Meditation", *Westerly*, 19 May 2016; Docker, "Of Pearls and Coral: Jurisography and Ego History", *Law Text Culture*, vol.20, 2016, 23.
[3] My thanks to Ned Curthoys for introducing me to ethical criticism.
[4] *The Essential Wayne Booth*, edited and with an Introduction by Walter Jost (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 259-261.
[5] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol.22, 1998, 347-348.
[6] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", 348.
[7] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", 348.
[8] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism", 356.
[9] Cf. John Docker, "The question of Europe: Said and Derrida", in Ned Curthoys and Debjani Ganguly (eds), *Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2007), 273.
[10] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 3, 23.
[11] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983; London, Vintage, 1991), chapter on "Raymond Schwab and the romance of ideas", 250. See also Docker, "The Question of Europe: Said and Derrida", 272.

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE FASCINATION OF *THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS* FROM THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO MODERNITY

> Now it fortuned that he [the Sultan of Cairo] heard one night from a certain of his nocturnal reciters that among women are those who are doughtier than the doughtiest of men ... and that among them are some who will engage in fight singular with the sword and others who beguile the quickest-witted of Walis and baffle them and bring down on them all manner of miseries...
>
> ("The Adventures of the Sixteen Captains of Police")[1]

## I

Mikhail Bakhtin argues of ancient Greek Romance that the genre's narratives proceed in what he calls adventure-time, a time of *suddenly* and *at just that moment*, a logic of chance, contingency, random disjunctions, where events are inspired by fortune-telling, prophecies, prophetic dreams, premonitions and sleeping potions. Actions not only unfold against a very broad and varied geographical background, usually in three to five countries separated by seas (Greece, Persia, Phoenicia, Egypt, Babylon, Ethiopia, and elsewhere), but the novels might also contain wide ranging discussions on various religious, philosophical, political and scientific topics (on fate, omens, the power of Eros, human passions, and so forth).[2]

The long history of romance, which Bakhtin refers to as a generically syncretic novel form, frequently meets with other literary and cultural histories, not least in the Oriental Tales that were a feature of the long eighteenth century, in large part associated with the massive popularity of stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*, or the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* as they became known in England. These traditional tales came to the West piecemeal, in incomplete manuscripts dating from between the later fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries. The translations by the eminent orientalist Antoine Galland into French, at the beginning of

the eighteenth century (1704-17), were quickly followed in England by Grub Street translations and imitations (from 1706 onwards), so numerous that by 1800 there were more than eighty such collections.[3] In both French and English versions, Galland's renditions remained in print throughout the century. Here were ceaselessly inventive stories, akin to fairy tales, of high romance and adventure, stories welcomed as exotic and fantastical, opening up a range of possible narratives, from the stirring to the magical, the highly moral to the erotic. A popular model for these reworkings and departures was the story of Sindbad, the life and adventures of a picaresque hero as he travels through various countries learning the ways of humanity and seeking his fortune, with stories being constantly told of the people the hero meets. Galland's translations continued to be important in the way a brisk, unsurprised, matter-of-fact tone is used to evoke whatever is extreme, exotic, and marvellous. Throughout the long eighteenth century Oriental Tales became an important genre, appearing in many diverse forms, from the satiric (as in Voltaire's *Zadig* in1748) to the philosophic *Rasselas* of Dr Johnson (1759), to the Gothic fantasia of Beckford's *Vathek* (1786). As the genre flourished, there were multiple parodies. The later eighteenth century also saw an explosion of Oriental scholarship.[4]

N.J. Dawood, the translator of the Penguin selection *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*, tells us that the stories were highly diverse in their origins, in particular, deriving from Indian, Persian, and Arab sources. They were reworked in medieval Islam, especially between the ninth and eleventh centuries, though stories continued to be added for centuries. The original nucleus may have been from a lost Persian book of fairytales, which was translated into Arabic about A.D. 850. The Prologue, which contains the frame story, can be traced back to Indian folklore. Revisions of these heterogeneous materials were made in Egypt, probably in Cairo, by an unknown editor towards the end of the eighteenth century. Dawood argues that the *Nights* have never been regarded in the Arab world as a legitimate part of Classical Arabic literature, with its refined didacticism. More controversially, Dawood suggests that the stories of the *Nights* were the spontaneous products of "untutored minds".[5] Robert Irwin notes in his *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* that the *Nights* is an immensely lengthy collection, containing heroic epics, wisdom literature, fables, cosmological fantasy, pornography, scatological jokes, mystical devotional tales, chronicles of low life, rhetorical debates and masses of poetry. Some tales are hundreds of pages long; others no more than a paragraph. Irwin feels that in the modern Middle East the *Nights* are not regarded by Arab intellectuals as literature at all. In his view, the best

stories in the *Nights* are artfully constructed sophisticated fictions, the products of a highly literary culture, representing a long interaction between oral traditions, professional storytelling, and writing.[6]

## II

The frame story in the Prologue introduced the character of Shahrazad to world literature and cultural history. Here we learn (in Dawood's translation) that "long ago" there lived in the lands of India and China a Sassanid king, who had two sons, Shahriyar and Shahzaman. Shahriyar inherited the kingdom of his father and governed it with "such justice that all his subjects loved him". Shahzaman, his younger brother, became king of Samarkand. After some twenty years of happy rule in their respective kingdoms, the brothers desired to see each other. King Shahzaman appointed his Vizier his deputy, and set out for his brother's dominions. Shahzaman, however, had forgotten a present he wished to give, and had to return to his palace, unheralded. Entering his private chambers, he found his wife "lying on a couch in the arms of a black slave". The world darkened before his eyes. He drew his sword, killed them both (his wife, now "this foul woman"), and, pale and sick at heart, resumed his journey, haunted by her "perfidy" and "treachery". When he reaches his brother's capital, Shahriyar is overjoyed to see Shahzaman, but noticing his melancholy, invites him to go hunting, for both were fine horsemen. Shahzaman declines. As he sits overlooking the King's garden, Shahzaman sees his brother's wife, a woman of surpassing beauty, enter, along with "twenty slave-girls and twenty Negroes". They all sit next to the fountain and proceed to undress. The King's wife then summons to her Mass'ood, a "black slave", who "mounted her after smothering her with embraces and kisses". So did the "Negroes with the slave-girls, revelling together till the approach of night". When Shahriyar returns from the hunt, Shahzaman tells him of his own misfortune with his ex-wife in Samarkand, and of his observations that day in his brother's garden. Shahriyar wishes to see with his own eyes, which he does with the benefit of disguise.

Half demented at the sight, Shahriyar urges his brother to join him in roaming the world to see if any other king has met with such disgrace. In secret, renouncing their royal state, they travel for many days and nights until they come to a meadow by the seashore, where they rest under a tree. "Suddenly", however, from out of the sea appears a gigantic jinnee, like a "black pillar" almost touching the sky, carrying a chest on his head. Struck with terror, they climb the tree. Here they have the opportunity to observe the jinnee open the chest and take out a box, which he opens; from it arises

a “beautiful young girl, radiant as the sun”. “Chaste and honourable lady”, the jinnee addresses her. He then falls fast asleep, his head upon her knees. The Box Woman, however, espies the two kings high in the tree. She lays the jinnee's head on the ground, and beckons them to come down. They plead their terror of the jinnee. She threatens them with a “cruel death” at the jinnee's hands if they don't obey. Once on level ground, she immediately demands that they “pierce” her with their “rapiers”, and, mindful of her threat that she will wake the monster, “they proceeded to mount her in turn”. When they had performed for her, serially, “as long as she desired”, the Box Woman shows them a string threaded with ninety-eight rings; their owners, she says triumphantly, have “all enjoyed me under the very horn of this foolish jinnee”. The two kings have to give her their rings. Finally, she reminds them of “how cunning we women are”, since the jinnee had placed her inside a chest with “seven locks”, yet she has escaped so many times.

The brothers then return to Shahriyar's palace, where he immediately puts his wife to death, along with her women and the black slaves. Thenceforth King Shahriyar makes it his custom to take a virgin in marriage to his bed each night, and kill her the following morning, a practice he sustains for three years, until a clamour rose among the people, who flee the country with whatever daughters are left. The day comes when the Vizier, roaming the city, can't find a virgin for the King, and returns to his house with heavy heart. His daughter, however, Shahrazad, possessed of “many accomplishments” and “versed in the wisdom of the poets and the legends of ancient kings”, decides to make herself the latest offering, hoping she might yet live and be the cause of “deliverance” of the “daughters of Moslems”. Against her father's earnest pleadings and his relation of a warning fable, Shahrazad is married to the king. She tells her younger sister, Dunyazad, to be on call to ask for a “tale of marvel” once the king has lain with her. Such occurs, and the king, troubled with sleeplessness, eagerly listens to Shahrazad's story, the story that defers her death and the death of further Moslem daughters. These stories, though many are told by characters within the stories she tells, last, naturally, for a thousand and one nights, by which time Shahrazad has borne King Shahriyar three sons. In the Epilogue, Shahrazad, on the thousand and first night, asks that their little children be brought before the king, and pleads with Shahriyar to spare her life. Shahriyar embraces his three sons, and, as “his eyes filled with tears”, he tells Shahrazad that she was already pardoned before the coming of the children, for he had fallen in love with her: “I loved you because I found you chaste and tender, wise and eloquent.” The people are overjoyed at the news of Shahrazad's salvation,

and the king also tells his assembled court that "repentance has come to me through her". The city ("decked and lighted") celebrates in the streets and market-squares, feasting at the king's expense for thirty days and thirty nights. Alms are lavished on the poor and needy. "Shahriyar", so the Epilogue and the *Nights* end, "reigned over his subjects in all justice, and lived happily with Shahrazad until they were visited by the Destroyer of all earthly pleasures, the Annihilator of men."

## III

In his playful quizzical *The Natural History of Religion* (1757) the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume argues, in a pluralizing and relativizing mode, that the polytheism of Greek and Roman antiquity exhibits a tolerant, sociable, international and cosmopolitan spirit, accommodating to mythological stories that are complex, contradictory, and discordant. An historical truth of polytheism, Hume reflects, is that its stories cannot be reduced to any standard or canon, or afford any determinate articles of faith, since the narratives of the gods were numberless, and though, perhaps, everyone believed a part of these stories, no one could believe or know the whole. In summary, polytheism must acknowledge that no one part stood on a better foundation than the rest, so there was no reason for preferring one to the other. Pagan religion, therefore, Hume observes, could never be ascertained by any fixed dogmas and principles.[7]

In terms of historical affinities between postmodernism and the Enlightenment, J-F. Lyotard in *Just Gaming* admiringly evokes features of polytheism and mythology that reprise Hume's *Natural History of Religion*. Lyotard tells us of his delight in "paganism", which he also identifies with "modernity" and "postmodernity". Such are modes of thought that can exist at any time rather than being located in a specific historical period. We are in "modernity" and "postmodernity" whenever we lack firm "criteria". What is characteristic in the stories of Greek and Roman mythology is that "there is no stable system to guide judgments"; what we perceive is a society of gods that is constantly forced to redraw its code; no prescription can be surely founded upon such stories. Whereas the Christian God is a master of the word and wishes to create the world, the Greek gods are masters neither of the word nor the world. The gods are "not all-knowing". Whatever we know of the opinions of the gods comes from stories told about them and the stories they tell themselves. Furthermore, there can never be an original source for such stories, and there is never a first utterer. What we learn of the possible origins of

stories is related "in terms of stories that presuppose other stories that in turn presuppose the first ones". The gods become the "heroes of numerous, almost innumerable, narratives, all set into each other", and narratives in such a pagan cosmos are close to games and masks: "This bars the way to the very notion of a subject identical to itself through the peripeteia of its history."[8]

When, Lyotard suggests, the gods speak to humans, as when they consult an oracle, there is always uncertainty, ruse, the possibility of deception, the allowing for chance. Whatever the oracle says is to be taken with prudence, with measure, perhaps even with humour: "There is always the possibility of relating things differently." The relations of humans with the gods perform a space of ceaseless negotiation, between the stories the gods tell and the stories humans tell; in paganism, which is modernity and postmodernity, we are always immanent to stories in the making, there is no authoritative outside, no metalinguistic position we can take up. Further, appearance and reality don't necessarily coincide, for one does not know if the person one takes at first as a beggar is actually a god; one lives in a world of sudden possible metamorphosis, of perpetually uncertain identity.

Hume and Lyotard's evocation of pagan storytelling is very close to the narratology of *The Thousand and One Nights* in the long eighteenth century. In similar spirit, we might say that the *Nights* enchant because they betray no single ideological or discursive meaning, nor does any single story—not even the frame story, especially not the frame story—control the meanings of the whole, for the stories are so numerous that no one could know their extent, they appear innumerable.

As Hume comments of the mythological stories of Greek and Roman antiquity, so we can say that the stories of the *Nights* exhibit a tolerant, sociable, international and cosmopolitan spirit, accommodating to stories that are complex, contradictory, and discordant. There is frequent ambivalence within or between stories, dazzlingly, dizzyingly, so.

## IV

Such is evident in stories that involve "race" and blackness. There is, as Irwin points out in *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, a strain of fear in the *Nights*' stories where Oriental women choose to associate with and lust after black men, often figured as tall, strong, and powerful; a longing that will lead to the abyss, the destruction of all stable values, hierarchies, desires. Violent revenge might also be enacted against both her and him.[9]

In "The Tale of Al-Ashar, the Barber's Fifth Brother" (in Dawood's translation), Al-Asher is tricked into entering a house of thieves by an old woman and is then entranced by a "young woman, attired in splendid silks and blessed with more loveliness than the eyes of men had ever seen", who has an accomplice, a "tall black slave, holding an unsheathed sword in his hand". Stripped of all he owns and left for dead among a "heap of corpses", Al-Ashtar later gains revenge against the black slave (beheading him).[10]

Yet even in the frame-story, where such violent revenge is also enacted, the writing is characteristically contradictory. When King Shahriya's (first) wife calls in the garden to her black slave Mass'ood, he smothers her with embraces and kisses: between woman and slave there is a mixing of frank sexual enjoyment with affection and tenderness, a relationship of dalliance and sensuousness brutally ended by King Shahriyar"s sword.

## V

In the *Nights* there is also frequent ambivalence within or between stories concerning gender.

Near the beginning of "The Tale of Al-Ashar, the Barber's Fifth Brother", before his misfortunes set upon him, Al-Ashar had a dream, that with wealth accrued from the glassware he had bought with his inheritance, he will marry the Vizier's daughter. In this dream, he imagines himself as absolute lord, she as absolutely submissive. When, on the wedding night, his bride would appear before him, he will not even look at her, despite the pleading of her women. In the bridal chamber, he will continue to be disdainful, neither speaking nor glancing at her, though the trembling young bride will offer him a glass of wine "with all submission", saying she is his "slave and servant". As she raises the cup to his mouth, he will wave it away with his hand, and spurn her with his foot—at which point in his reverie Al-Ashar actually kicks over the glassware, all his worldly goods. Then quickly follows disaster, his inveigling into the house of thieves by the old woman and being robbed and left for dead by the beautiful young woman and the tall black slave.

Al-Ashar's dream of female submission is not met in the abundant stories of the *Nights* where female figures are active, wily, cunning, resourceful, powerful, whether for good or ill. In story after story, female power and sexuality are figured as not controllable. In "The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers" (in Dawood's translation), a rich and beautiful young woman is married to a man who is a great traveller. While

he is away in a distant land, she falls in love with a "handsome youth who himself loved her tenderly". The youth, however, is involved in a brawl, and is thrown in prison. The young woman, hearing the news, puts on her finest robes and hurries to the Governor, telling him that her young lover is her brother and is the victim of a plot. The Governor is so entranced by her seductive looks that he falls in love at first sight, and asks her to wait in his harem. The young woman, who "lacked neither cunning nor knowledge of the ways of men", suggests instead that the Governor come to her house that evening, an invitation he eagerly accepts. Much the same happens when she visits in turn the Cadi, the Vizier, and the King; each promises to visit her that night. Then she goes to a carpenter, who makes for her a large cupboard with four compartments, one above the other. The carpenter is also smitten, and he too is invited to visit her. In the evening she arrays herself in splendid robes, puts on her richest jewels and sweetest perfumes, and waits for her guests. She gets each to disrobe and then dress in absurd clothes ("a curious yellow robe and bonnet"). As each man reaches a pitch of amorous frenzy, there is a knock on the door as another arrives, and, crying, that must be my husband, each time she locks them one after another in the cupboard of many boxes. She insists that the Governor, before he is locked in, sign a release form for her young lover. When they are all encased, including the carpenter who has come last and climbs to the top compartment, the young woman takes the Governor's order to the prison, frees her lover, and they set out for another kingdom. Meanwhile, not daring to utter a sound, the five men stay in the cupboard without food or drink for three days, when the carpenter gives in to an urgent need: "his piss fell on the King below him. Then the King pissed on the Vizier; and the Vizier pissed on the Governor; and the Governor pissed on the Cadi." Finally, the neighbours investigate, open the cupboard, and find the "senior officers of the kingdom" rigged out in "fancy costume". The luckless lovers, looking at each other, burst out laughing.

Here is a story from the world of medieval Islam that might remind us of the carnivalesque reversals and inversions some centuries later in early modern Europe. The young woman is, in Natalie Zemon Davis' phrase, a Woman on Top.[11] The important men of the kingdom are locked in boxes, along with a lowly carpenter, who urinates on them from on high: in Bakhtin's terms in *Rabelais and His World*, the lower bodily stratum mocks political and judicial importance and abuse of power; there is a carnival decrowning of the high and exalted, the men forced to wear (female) comic fancy costume. And part of the reason the young woman can defeat the men of power lies in her freedom (as or while veiled) to

move about the city; she refuses their invitations to their harems, and they have to come to her abode.

In "Women"s Wiles" (in Burton's ornate translation), part of the Baghdad cycle of stories, a "merry" young woman passes a shop, where she sees inscribed these words: "There be no craft save men's craft, forasmuch as it overcometh women's craft". Immediately challenged, the young woman conceives a plan. The next morning, she appears at the merchant's shop. She tricks the young man into believing that her father is the Chief Kazi (magistrate) of the city, at the same time discovering to him a glimpse of her bosom, her "crystal" arms, and unveiled face, which was like a "full moon breaking forth on its fourteenth night". He falls immediately in love, and soon after hastens to the Chief Kazi, securing his daughter's hand in marriage. But it turns out that the Kazi's daughter is in no way the merry "crafty" young woman. The next morning, the disconsolate young man repairs to the hammam (bathhouse), the coffee-house, and then his shop, feeling like shedding tears of impotent rage. At noon the young woman returns. She tells him she will get him out of his plight if he rewrites the epigraph on his shopfront, which he gets a scribe to do, so that it now reads: "There be no craft save women's craft, for indeed their craft is a mighty craft and overcometh and humbleth the falseth of men." Then she tells him to go back to the Kazi and tell his new father-in-law that he is descended not from a merchant family but from the mountebanks, ape-dancers, bear-leaders, drummers and pipers who hang about the citadel, indeed that his father was actually an ape-dancer, a minstrel. The plan works, for the Kazi, pompous and concerned for his high social status and that he is the upholder of the law, demands instant divorce for his daughter. He cannot have a son-in-law who is a "man of the dancers and vile of origin". The young man returns to his shop, and consequently marries the young woman, who turns out to be the "daughter of the Shaykh of the guild of the blacksmiths". In this story, reminding us of the multiple inversions in World Upside Down broadsheets in early modern Europe discussed by David Kunzle, woman defeats man, young defeat old, those middling in social status defeat high, and carnivalesque itself, the minstrels of the citadel, overcome the pomp and threats and solemnity of the law; even animal, with the young man saying he is descended from an ape-dancer, defeats human. The usual world has been sent spinning, topsy-turvy, *mundus inversus*.[12]

## VI

Cultural historians of early modern Europe have suggested that trickster figures common in the popular entertainments and stories of the Middle East migrated westwards over the centuries to become well known in European carnival festivities, stories, and theatre, as with Morcolf and Guifa. Trickster figures created ambivalence, both feared as uncanny, as ever outside ordinary human lives and constraints, as so individualistic as to threaten human sharing and community, yet also admired as mocking with endless comic resourcefulness, cheek and irreverence official claims to truth and certitude. Trickster figures also fascinated because they could outwit the harshness and destructiveness of fate. Tricksters held out the hope to humanity that fate is not inescapable and prescribed, not least when they would pass a recurring, almost ritual test, having to escape death, the hangman, fate as relentless, remorseless, final.[13]

In the *Nights* female tricksters abound, frequently far from admirable, but certainly women of power. In "The Rogueries of Dalilah the Crafty and Her Daughtyer Zaynab the Coney-catcher" (in Burton), we observe in Baghdad in the time of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid the doings of old Dalilah the Wily, a "past mistress in all manner of craft and trickery and double dealing", not least by disguise, admired by her daughter as a "trickstress". Dressing as a pious Sufi, she manages to trick a variety of citizens, including an Emir's wife, a young merchant, a dyer, and an ass-driver, out of their goods and valuables. Then Dalilah the Wily dresses as a slave, and manages to part from their jewellery a goldsmith and the young son of the Provost of Merchants. The dyer, the ass-man, the young merchant and the goldsmith along with a Moorish barber she has also defrauded search the streets, find Dalilah, and bring her before the chief of police, the Wali. But they and the Wali and the police all fall asleep and Dalilah steals away, though not before defrauding the mistress of the Wali's harem. Again, Dalilah is apprehended, and this time is left "hanging", crucified by her hair on a cross on the bank of the Tigris. But she out-tricks them all, somehow getting an ingenuous Arab horseman on his way to Baghdad in search of honey-fritters to change places with her on the cross. She then dresses in his clothes, turban, and burnous, and rides his stallion back to her house. Her pursuers are then out-tricked by her daughter the "handsome" Zaynab. Later, however, Dalilah and Zaynab are pardoned by the Caliph because of their "cleverness", Harun al-Rashid making them keepers of the Royal pigeon messenger service.

Tricksters and sharpers of all kinds abound in the *Nights*, and some stories stage contests between tricksters. In "The Adventures of Mercury

Ali of Cairo" we witness a kind of world trickster championship. Mercury Ali, so named because he is like "quicksilver" as he eludes every attempt of the Cairo chief of police to catch him, travels to Baghdad, there to joust with Baghdad's best sharpers, prominently among them Dalilah the Wily and her daughter Zaynab, with whom Mercury falls in love, Zaynab having opened her veil to him, "whereat he took one glance of eyes that cost him a thousand sighs". In this story Dalilah has extra powers, being able to read information in a tray of sand by means of a "geomantic figure", and Zaynab can open locks without a key. The Cairene engages in a series of jousts with the clever women of Baghdad and also Zaynab's uncle Zurayk; at one point Ali cross-dresses as a woman, donning "petticoat-trousers" and a "pair of false breasts". Finally, Mercuri Ali wins through, with the help of his Baghdad friends, and his cleverness is rewarded by the Caliph, who upon meeting him "loved him for the valour that shone from his eyes", and gives him barracks wherein to house his men from Cairo. Ali marries Zaynab as well as three other young women, and the story of his adventures is written down by order of the Caliph, to be stored in the royal muniment-rooms. Harun al-Rashid in these stories is friend and even protector of tricksters and their guile and wiles: Caliph of and in a World Upside-down.

One of the most remarkable series of stories in the *Nights*, "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad" (in Dawood), composed of many tales, begins with a young porter helping a young woman to shop; she is "dressed in rare silks and cloaked in a gold-embroidered mantle of Mosul brocade"; she gently raises her veil, and shows to the young man "dark eyes with long lashes and lineaments of perfect beauty". When they arrive back at her home, the weary porter is permitted to rest for a while with the young woman and her sisters, who live in a "magnificent, lofty house facing a great courtyard", its doors of "ebony plated with red gold". The young man, overcome by the beauty of the three sisters, finds he cannot leave, and they suffer him to stay. They all drink and get merry around the courtyard fountain. One of the young women disrobes, and jumps in, "frolicking and washing her body, filling her mouth with water and squirting it at the porter". Her sisters do likewise, as does the porter, then they all play a sexual game, asking the meaning of what lies between their thighs. They laugh and sport till evening, and the sisters allow the porter to stay on condition he obeys them strictly and asks no questions about anything he sees.

The young women require the same condition of some further unexpected visitors, three one-eyed devishes and also Harun al-Rashid and his vizier Ja'afar and Masrur his executioner, not unusually wandering

about Baghdad in disguise (here as merchants), in search of adventure. The visitors notice curious, distressing, sights. The sister who is mistress of the house takes up a whip and mercilessly beats the heads of two bitches. Then she flings down her whip, and taking the dogs in her arms, presses them tenderly to her breast. The youngest sister plays a mournful song on a lute, and the second sister, hearing it, wails aloud, beating her breast and rending her garments. She falls down in a swoon, and the visitors, watching with pity and horror, see upon her body marks of lashing. Unable to control their curiosity before such moving and mysterious behaviour, the visitors break their promise, and ask to be told the stories that might explain what they are seeing. Annoyed, the women stamp their feet, and seven black slaves appear, with unsheathed swords: "Lay hold of these babbling fools", the sisters cry, "and chain them one to the other." The men are then ordered to tell their stories, on pain of death, which the dervishes do. As is common in the *Nights*, in "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad", stories defer the threat of imminent death, just as in the frame-story with Shahrazad and Shahriyar, though here in another reversal it is men who must tell stories to women.[14]

## VII

When Said spoke approvingly in 1992 in an interview in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* of the Deleuzian desire for writing that is "unbuttoned, unfixed, and mobile", he could have been characterising with great exactitude the kind of startling fascinating enigmatic odd quirky writing, often highly erotic, we find in these anonymous tales.[15] *The Thousand and One Nights* offers (famously) stories within stories within stories, an interlacing that, Dawood suggests, owes its origin to Indian folk-tales.[16] Such narratology in European cultural history was not new. It had already influenced, through the cultural heterogeneity of Arabized Sicily and the intellectual splendours of Moorish Spain, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and more generally Arab literature and philosophy had widely impacted on the literary and intellectual history of medieval Europe, in the poetry and music of the troubadours as well as in philosophy and medical and scientific knowledge. In turn the *Nights* had been influenced by European cultural history, by the *Odyssey* (as with Sindbad the Sailor stories, or in "The Tale of the Third Dervish" and "The Tale of the First Girl" in "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad") as well as by the ancient Greek romances discussed by Bakhtin.[17]

In the multiple narratives of the *Nights* with their multiple narrators there is a continual exchange of stories between characters: that, often, is

how characters, having just met, relate. The frame story in the Prologue launches the *Nights* thus: "It is related — but Allah alone is wise and all-knowing — that long ago there lived in the lands of India and China a Sassanid king." The stories do not attempt to conceal their status as stories, referring to events long ago, in distant lands, or, if set in Baghdad or Basrah or Cairo, to fantastical happenings. It is a "story of marvel" that on the first night of one thousand and one Shahrazad tells her new husband Shahriyar and her sister Dunyazad. Sometimes there is competition among the storytellers for the most extraordinary tale. In "The Tale of the Hunchback" series, the tailor begins by addressing his audience, including a king: "Of all the tales of marvel that I have heard, your majesty, none surpasses in wonder the incident which I witnessed yesterday." The stories are told not as truth but as a celebration of writing itself, of fictionality, fantasticality, extravagance: an aesthetic of excess.

Only Allah knows truth, is wise and all-knowing, not the storyteller. In "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad", Harun al-Rashid, desperate to hear their stories after such an intriguing night spent with them, next day at his palace instructs his Vizier to call in the young women. The Vizier, now stern and official, demands that they tell the caliph, Prince of the Faithful, "nothing but the truth" of their behaviour with the two bitches and why one sister has weals on her body. The women then tell Harun marvellous tales of adventure and misadventure, involving more sisters and also a female jinn, and including a visit, having been blown ashore in an unknown ocean, to a city where all the inhabitants have been turned "into black stone, while everything else in the shops and markets, from rich fabrics to ornaments of gold and silver, remained as it had been". As Roland Barthes once wrote of narrative that it wishes always to preserve itself, so in the *Nights* stories frequently move sideways, are diverted by other stories, lose graspable continuity. The stories frequently defer death itself, including their own death. In some stories (as in "Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp") there are breaks in the story, clearly marked — "So much for the Moorish sorcerer" — where perhaps the Arab professional story tellers played with suspense and interruption.[18]

Let's return to Said's call for writing that is "unbuttoned, unfixed, and mobile".

Said's *unbuttoned* can refer to how bawdy the stories can be, their sexual play, and also to the sensuousness of the writing. When the porter first sees the sister of the young woman in their house, her forehead was "white as a lily", her eyes more lustrous than a gazelle's, her brows are like crescent moons, her cheeks anemones, her mouth like the crimson ruby on King Solomon's ring; her teeth are whiter than a string of pearls,

and “like twin pomegranates were her breasts”. So struck by such beauty is the porter that he almost drops the basket off his head, the basket that contains the food bought on the shopping expedition, food that had already itself been sensuously evoked, for at the fruiterer’s the imperious young woman had bought “Syrian apples and Othmani quinces, Omani peaches, cucumbers from the Nile, Egyptian lemons and Sultani citrons, sweet-scented myrtle and henna flowers, camomile, anemones, violets, sweet-briar, and pomegranate-blossom”. Cooked food in the *Nights* is also usually highly sensuously evoked, with references to “chickens stuffed with pistachio nuts” (“The Tale of Shakashik, the Barber’s Sixth Brother”), or “roast meat and roast chicken, peppered rice, sausage and stuffed marrow, stuffed lamb and stuffed ribs, kunufah swimming in bees’ honey, fritters and almond cakes” (“The Tale of Judar and his Brothers”); in another story there is “coffee flavoured with amber” (“Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp”).

Said’s *unfixed* can refer to identity in the *Nights*, how characters go through transformations and metamorphoses and disguise in shape, form, and fortune, including from human to animal and back to human. The world of the *Nights* abounds with magical beings, the jinnee and the jinniyah, ghouls and witches, and landscapes are also frequently magical. Appearances deceive, characters are not as they seem. There is frequent treachery by those who appear to befriend or love you. In “Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp” a Moorish magician appears before Aladdin as his uncle, and then later as a lamp-seller; the Moor’s brother, also a sorcerer, takes form as Holy Fatimah, a woman of great piety and saintliness. Sometimes a donkey or other animal turns out to be a jinnee or jinniyah. In “The Tale of the First Girl” in “The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad” the eldest sister is flung overboard from her ship, and, like Sindbad the Sailor as well as Odysseus, manages to cling onto a piece of timber and get to the shore of an island; there she encounters a “little snake hurrying towards me, pursued by a great serpent which was striving to devour it”. The young woman kills the serpent, so saving the exhausted snake (“so tired out that its tongue trailed on the ground”), which yet turns into a “young girl”, who says she is a jinniyah, and the serpent had been a vile jinnee.

In the *Nights* there is tension between fate as fixed, preordained and destructive, and as open, unfinalized (to use a Bakhtinian term). Fate, the sudden play of miraculous good fortune and terrible misfortune, of plenitude and nothingness, of centred life or disaster and exile, is unpredictable and haphazard.

Certainly, fate is not secure for those with might and power. When a jinnee suddenly appears, answering the call of a magic ring, he will frequently say to the holder of the ring (as in "The Tale of Ma'aruf the Cobbler"): "I am here! Ask and receive! Would you have me build a capital, or lay a town in ruin? Would you have me slay a king, or dig a river-bed?" In terms of literary history, shades of Shelley's *Ozymandiaz*. Indeed, in the *Nights* kings frequently do suffer catastrophic reversals, and are forced into wandering and homelessness, like the one-eyed dervishes, all ex-kings, in "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad": a story I find myself attracted to again and again!

Said's *mobile* can refer in terms of gender to the narrative power of the *Nights*' female figures as well as the crossdressing of the various tricksters. In the *Nights* female characters are not confined to the harem, but, veiled, freely move about the cityscapes of Baghdad and Cairo. In "The Tale of the First Girl" in "The Porter and the Three Girls of Baghdad", the eldest sister reports that she is a merchant. She tells how, "longing to travel abroad in quest of profit and amusement", she had a ship fitted out for a long voyage with provisions and merchandise, and set sail from Basrah. In the city where all the inhabitants have been turned to black stone, she tells the one person she finds alive to come with her back to Basrah: "I myself am mistress among my household, with a following of slaves and servants; also I have a ship here laden with merchandise."

In "The Story of Two Sisters who were Jealous of their Younger Sister", two elder sisters envy their youngest sister because she has married the Sultan of Persia. Each time she has a child by the Sultan, the jealous sisters tell him that she has given birth to, in turn, a dog, a cat, and a log of wood. Somehow convinced, the Sultan, enraged at his wife, has her installed and locked in an open box next to the principal mosque, where she is spat upon by the devout as they enter, though she wins their hearts by her "dignity and meekness". Meantime, on the birth of each, the wicked sisters set the babies adrift in a cradle in a canal in the palace grounds. Each time the babies are rescued by a palace official, who with his wife adopts them as his own, though as they grow and are tenderly cared for by their foster parents, they reveal themselves to be obviously noble of birth (a common folk motif the *Nights* here shares with European folklore).

The foster-parents name the boys Bahman and Perviz, after two of the ancient kings of Persia, while the youngest, a girl, is called Parizade, or the child of the genii. The foster-father, recognising their real rank, appoints a tutor to teach the young princes to read and write. But the princess insists that she too have lessons, and soon Parizade knows as much as they do, in

fine arts, geography, poetry, history, and science. The princess could also ride, shoot with a bow and arrow, and throw a javelin as well as her brothers, and sometimes even better. The foster-father decides to leave the employment of the Sultan, and moves to a splendid country house a few miles from the capital, surrounded by an immense park.

After the foster-parents have died, and her brothers are out hunting, the princess is fatefully visited by an old woman, a pilgrim, who tells her that her life will not be complete until she acquires various "wonders": the Talking Bird, whose voice draws all other singing birds to it and can be heard even above the nightingale; the Singing Tree, where every leaf is a song that is never silent; and the Golden Water, where a single drop will create an inexhaustible fountain. These wonders can be found, says the old woman, at the borders of the kingdom, near India, some twenty days riding away, on a mountain. Accordingly, the princess and her brothers' journey to the far away kingdom, and are determined to scale the mountain. Her brothers go first, but each is turned into a large black stone, because they have turned their heads to heed the unseen voices which insult them from every side. Only Princess Parizade, "disguised as a man", successfully climbs the magic mountain; she ignores the insults and does not turn her head (cleverly, she has stopped her ears with cotton). She brings back the Talking Bird, a branch of the Singing Tree, a drop of the Golden Water, and restores the brothers to grateful human form, as well as a multitude of knights who had also failed and been turned to black stone.

In the later unravelling of the story, the Sultan, out hunting, makes acquaintance with Bahman and Perviz and Parizade, and, with the assistance of the Talking Bird, realizes they are his lost children. The Sultan hastens back to his capital where he has the jealous sisters executed "in less than an hour". He then proceeds to the principal mosque, where, with tears in his eyes and before his whole court and a vast multitude of his subjects, he apologises to his imprisoned wife. Joyful reunion with their children follows at the country house. They all then return to the capital, the princess riding next to her mother, the Talking Bird on Parizade's lap, with a train of birds following it.[19]

If women can be merchants or resolute climbers of perilous mountains, they can also be jinn flying through the air or moving through water. In "The Tale of the Second Dervish" the dervish has been bewitched by a hideous jinnee and transformed into an ape (though an ape who can write poetry). A Princess, who has learnt the arts of enchantment and sorcery, fights with the jinnee in order to help the dervish, successively transforming herself into a wolf, a cock, and a whale: more striking images of World Upside-down.

Said's unfixed and mobile can also refer to aspects of social critique in the *Nights*. In "The Tale of Al-Kuz, the Barber's Fourth Brother", the barber tells of how Al-Kuz was a prosperous sheep-breeder and butcher of Baghdad, until undone by the treachery of a wicked old sorcerer, who defrauds him of his fortune, mesmerises the neighbourhood into thinking Al-Kuz substitutes human flesh for mutton, and also strikes out Al-Kuz's left eye. Al-Kuz is brought before a judge, who sentences him to a lashing, confiscates all his goods, and banishes him from the city: "and, indeed, had Al-Kuz been a poor man, he would have put him to a cruel death". In "The Tale of Al-Ashar, the Barber's Fifth Brother", while he survives the attentions of the defrauding young woman and her black slave accomplice and gains a fortune from their spoils, Al-Ashar is confounded by being brought before the Governor. Even though Al-Ashar tells of all that had befallen him, the Governor is unmoved: "the Governor seized everything for himself, and, fearing that the Caliph might hear of his action, decided to get rid of my brother by banishing him from the city". Al-Ashar has not travelled far before he is set upon by a band of highwaymen, who, finding him without any worldly goods, beat him mercilessly and cut off both his ears: a story of levelling between Governor and highwaymen. In "The Tale of Shakashik, the Barber"s Sixth Brother", the barber relates how Shakashik came to live in friendship with a generous humorous old man in a splendid mansion in Baghdad, but when the old man dies, "the Caliph seized all his property", and Shakashik is forced to flee for his life. In "The Tale of King Sindbad and the Falcon" (in "The Fisherman and the Jinnee" series), a story that anticipates a key moment in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a Persian king is stricken with sorrow for rashly killing a falcon which has saved his life.[20] Later in the story another king decides to behead a surgeon who has saved him, because the doctor appears to have magical powers that one day he might use against him: a story of the misuse of power by kings, but also of revenge by tricksterish guile, for the severed head continues to talk and kills the king by a ruse.

Often in the *Nights* there is reference to an ideal of just rule. Such is evident in the frame-story, before King Shahriyar became unhinged by his wife and then the box woman. Social altruism is also highly valued, as when Aladdin, assisted in his rise to riches by his magic lamp, scatters "gold among the people, who now made him their idol on account of his munificence". After he has married Badr-al-Budur, the Sultan's daughter, Aladdin every day rides about in the city scattering gold and doing charitable deeds: "He increased the alms for the needy and poor, and himself distributed it to them with his own hand." When, unknown to Aladdin, a Moorish sorcerer makes Aladdin's palace along with the

Sultan's daughter disappear, the Sultan has Aladdin brought before him manacled and chained. When the citizens see their hero being so treated, they know he is about to be beheaded by the Sultan's executioner. Armed with clubs and other weapons, the people storm the palace, and the Sultan, observing his subjects scaling the walls, quickly tries to regain favour with the population by proclaiming that he has spared Aladdin's life. Here is a vision of unruliness and rebelliousness in citizens and subjects we don't usually encounter in the annals of Orientalism. Such unruliness, throwing into relief the abuse of power by rulers who wish to claim absolute authority, also gives context, a genealogy, for Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, a novel which, so Irwin argues, has been clearly influenced in its multiple story-telling by the *Nights* (which themselves were influenced in their narrativity by traditional Indian storytelling).[21]

## VIII

In his essay "Raymond Schwab and the Romance of Ideas" in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (1984), Said is sympathetic to Schwab (who had written on Galland as first French translator of the *Nights*) and his idea that there have been continual "cultural exchanges between Orient and Occident", and that the European awareness of the Orient in the eighteenth century and early in the next was productive, in Oriental influences in pre-Romantic and Romantic cultural histories. Said adds that Schwab should also have noticed the degree of *derangement* stimulated by the Orient in Europe in the pre-Romantics and Romantics. In his essay on "Islam, Philology, and French Culture: Renan and Massignon", Said contends that in nineteenth-century English literary culture the *Nights* and Islamic culture in general were marginalised, associated with childhood fantasy and immaturity, with aesthetic and stylistic excess, with a feverish imagination and lack of urbanity.[22]

Said's pessimistic judgement here has been disputed as too absolute in the criticism that has yet been inspired by him, arguing that for centuries interactions between Orient and Occident have been and continue to constitute a lively and influential history. Robert Mack, the editor of the World's Classics *Oriental Tales*, feels that theorists of the rise of the novel have tended to minimize the role of romance in the history of modern forms of prose fiction, as if such forms coincided with the development of realism. If, however, Mack argues (in Bakhtinian spirit), we view the history of prose fiction in all its polyglot inclusivity, we can notice romance as a possible foundation upon which the modern novel has been built. Mack sees the romances inspired by the *Nights* as a kind of