Introduction

In general, the study of history can be meaningful only if embedded in well-defined frameworks. These frameworks can, for instance, be temporal, geographical/spatial, disciplinary, or discursive. If the scope of the framework is widened, the field of research will automatically split up to become a cluster of subordinated histories, which interact and coalesce around specific centres, boundaries, periods, and source-types. These divisions and the representation of history as consisting of various components become inevitable for the construction of a meaningful historical narrative, which conveys the idea that the course of history can be comprehended and interpreted. It is the only way in which history can be useful as the basis of a worldview, a view of the present and a sense of the future. Still, the nature and rationale of the division into components and the differentiating boundaries, as they are defined within disciplinary paradigms, can and will be questioned, challenged, and revised in order to find new and illuminating interactions and coherences.

This book emerged in the context of a research programme aimed at transcending well-entrenched disciplinary demarcations and matrices of analyses of historical processes. The programme, 'Eurasian empires. Integration processes and identity formation, 1300–1800', was set up to examine developments in a historical field that is, both temporally and spatially, vast and to identify parallels hitherto largely obscured by all kinds of disciplinary and thematic boundaries.¹ Evidently, such a broad approach presents many theoretical and methodological challenges, drawing researchers out of their comfort zones and forcing them to see their material in a new light. This process may be highly rewarding, of course, when new connections and relationships are revealed, but the results may be confined to tentative and speculative conclusions, since the research has departed from familiar interpretive frameworks. The more historical research is stretched over time and space, the more difficult it is to construct a coherent framework in which connections and parallels become meaningful and convincing.

These remarks are perhaps even more relevant for research into the history of culture and literature. Although developments within these fields are obviously linked to the historical processes in which they are embedded, they are

1 The programme was a cooperative project between Leiden University, the University of Amsterdam, and Radboud University, Nijmegen, and funded by research organization NWO (2011–2016).

not completely congruent with these processes and seem to have a dynamic of their own. Whereas political, economic, and social history are as a rule visibly linked to events, cultural history is more diffuse and less easily delimited into neatly traceable entities. To give an example, languages are a major factor in both cultural and political history, but the way in which they operate within these fields is not necessarily complementary or congruent. And, political boundaries may coincide with linguistic boundaries, but the impact of these boundaries on politics can be fundamentally different from their impact on cultural dynamics. Moreover, this impact may be completely different in various historical periods and places, for instance in the contexts of premodern Asian empires or of the modern nation-states.

Apart from the difficulties generated by the incongruence of historical segments, the study of cultural history also differs from other fields because it is dependent on other kinds of sources. Whereas political and economic history, and to some extent social history, are recorded in reports, chronicles, letters, legal documents, official decrees, personal accounts, bureaucratic files etc., on the basis of which developments can be constructed on a more or less factual level, cultural history can often only be traced in the space between these forms of historical evidence, in the aesthetic expressions of worldviews, in the broadest sense, manifested not only in art, literature, religion, and philosophy, but also in forms of social relationships in daily life and in ceremonies, rituals, and customs. There is enough evidence in history to show that these elements develop in a different rhythm than political history and that cultural systems can endure and outlive many changes of the political regime. Moreover, cultural systems seem to be more fluid than systems of political power, since they tend to transcend political boundaries and radiate within different layers of exchange between societies.

Although cultural and political histories are thus not congruent, this does not mean that they are completely independent from each other. Cultural identification is a strong incentive to form political entities, and cultural expressions—art, literature, religion—often coalesce around centres of political and economic power. Therefore, even if culture develops and spreads at a different pace and along different channels, the flows of interaction are steered and co-shaped by political entities and the distribution of political and economic power. This means that political history is an important framework for the study of cultural history, as long as one keeps in mind that it constitutes only a part of this framework, together with, for example, linguistic history. Political history can sometimes explain the emergence and proliferation of cultural trends, and the effectuation of cultural influence, but at other times it can only reveal these trends, because it wants to identify with them and promote

them within processes of power formation. Besides, sometimes cultural trends and influences are found that do not fit into the demarcations and interactions revealed by political or economic history, thus showing how they are bound to distinctive trajectories. This implies that frameworks for the construction of cultural history are often much more difficult to define.

These methodological complications should not, we think, prevent the researcher from exploring fields and domains that transcend the familiar demarcations, even if this means that the result is that he or she can only tentatively outline potential new connections and frameworks. In the present study, it is our intention to use the framework of 'Eurasian empires' in the period 1300–1800 to examine possible parallels in discourses of power and kingship in what may be called the premodern period, focusing especially on several kinds of narrative texts. It is our aim, first, to analyse representations of kingship and the power structures supporting it in fictional texts from the various areas constituting the 'imperial' phase in Eurasian history; and, second, to draw attention to parallels within the discourses reflected in these texts and tentatively discern relationships, influences, and patterns of transmission. We will try to identify resemblances and differences and attempt to design preliminary outlines of possible connections.

The rationale behind this undertaking is the acknowledgement that discourses of kingship and power are not only shaped by official regulations, doctrines, and ideological treatises. Kingship may be 'formalized' by political institutions, law, decrees, and official foundations of sovereignty, but it has also what may be called an 'aesthetic' component, which consists of the cultural forms in which this official power is moulded. This aesthetic component becomes manifest in multiform expressions of royal power, ranging from the king's attire to parades and ceremonies; from the regalia of the royal tradition to the architecture of palaces; from the attendance of the king at religious rituals to the performance of various kinds of secular rituals. All these elements not only buttress the status of the king as the legitimate ruler, they also establish a connection between the formal prerogatives of power and the subjects. They contribute to the integration of the power of the sovereign into the popular imagination, fostering the acceptance of the king's claims to legitimacy. It is argued here that some types of literary works are part of this aesthetic, cultural realm, helping to integrate forms of power in society and thereby not only strengthening formations of power, but also transforming them into accepted forms of 'authority'.

A project of this kind is problematic not only for the reasons mentioned above, including the general difficulty of disrupting existing frameworks. There are other problems, too, such as, first, the enormous number of texts that

could be used as source material. From this corpus a selection should be made, which can never claim to be representative, because, as said above, there is no framework to determine the common features it should represent; second, even after a rigorous selection of the material, it should be recognized that there is still no reliable reconstruction possible of the textual history of the works involved. Some texts have been popular for ages and exist in various versions, but we lack frameworks to determine how these versions are related to each other and how they fit into the development of the work over time; third, and related to this, the lack of a consistent philological framework makes it difficult to link texts to the historical processes in which they evolved, and, consequently, to see how trends and resemblances were connected historically. It is in most cases impossible to prove influences between texts and to define trajectories of transmission.

To counter these obstacles we have adapted our procedures to our limited possibilities. First, as for the selection of texts, we were constrained, obviously, by linguistic capabilities, so the choice was necessarily confined to works and translations in English, French, German, and Arabic. Furthermore, since it is impossible to be a specialist in all the literatures involved, ranging from Spanish and English to Russian, Hindi, Chinese, Persian, Malay, Turkish, and Arabic, we had to make a selection out of the best-known works, without being able to tread outside the paths of the established literary canon. Second, since only a limited segment of the literatures involved is directly focused on kingship, texts have been chosen, too, which are indirectly concerned with questions of power, authority, and rulership, but which nevertheless serve as a component of discourses of authority. The genres that have been selected are works of the mirror-for-princes type, containing a predominantly fictional element; chivalric works of various types; love romances and narratives revealing the esoteric dimension of rulership; and satirical-critical works typical of periods of enlightenment. We will discuss these types more elaborately below.

Third, in our discussion of the texts we will confine ourselves mainly to a narratological analysis to determine the generic characteristics, the nexus of form and content, the requirements of generic conventions, the dramatic component, the intrigue(s), the representation of power, etc. Only in some cases will we expand our discussion to include the connections between the narrative and its direct historical environment. This is because often we are unable to situate a work more or less accurately within history and because works remained popular through the centuries, implying that they were perhaps not detached from the historical context, but still conveyed concepts that withstood the impact of historical transformations. And although literary works of this kind, especially romances of chivalry and love, should have been rel-

evant to specific periods and circumstances—and in fact owe their survival to them—it was probably one of their functions to record and preserve certain concepts within a cultural/political tradition. For this reason we think it is justified to analyse these elements in an ahistorical way, as long as it is admitted that they were part of history, too.

Fourth, in order to bring some coherence to the presentation of the analyses and its results, we have used a particular work as a kind of integrating matrix, and that work is the Arabic story collection *Alf Layla wa-layla*, or the *Thousand and one nights*. This work is chosen not because it is a repository from which other stories derived, as is often thought, nor because it is a stable text within the complex trajectory of transmission, but rather because of the opposite: The *Thousand and one nights* as it has evolved in history illustrates the complexity of the process of transmission and the inherent fluidity of narrative texts. It has developed over time into a reservoir containing material from various sources, which was eventually incorporated into its 'late' versions. Especially in the eighteenth century it became a cauldron of material from Asia and the Middle East, including Ottoman Turkey, but also a hub from whence this material migrated to Europe. It thus became one of the focal points and epicentres of the proliferation of narrative material from the fifteenth century onwards, not only preserving older material, but also instigating its adaptation and reworking it to accommodate it to new environments.

The *Thousand and one nights*, in its remarkable diversity, not only contains 'prototypes' of various genres, emphasizing their relevance over time, it also represents a primordial type of the literary imagination. It can be argued that the work itself, especially its well-known framing story about Shahrazad and Shahriyar, is an adaptation of the narrative concept of the mirror-for-princes.² It shows how the cycle came into being through a confrontation between Shahriyar, a powerful king, and womankind, a motif that recurs in many works of the mirror-for-princes type. Thus, it not only contains various types of narratives about power and kingship; it also itself represents a narrative of power and kingship, and as such, as we will see below, it has inspired authors to reflect on the subject and to integrate Eastern and Western discourses. Because of this integrative role and the exemplary nature of its textual history, we will refer to the *Thousand and one nights* throughout the text. It is helpful, therefore, to briefly sketch the trajectory of this significant work.

2 See Richard van Leeuwen, *The Thousand and One Nights: Space, Travel and Transformation* (London and New York, 2007).

The *Thousand and One Nights* and Processes of Transmission

From the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards, the *Thousand and one nights* has without doubt been the most widely known work of 'Oriental' literature. It acquired such fame in the course of two centuries that it not only became an iconic representation of Oriental storytelling, but also was gradually obscured by its own myth. The work was seen as a truthful representation of Oriental culture, of Oriental society, and even of the Oriental mind. In the realm of literature it came to be held as an ancient repository of stories from which all stories derived. In the meantime, texts emerged containing various versions whose provenance was not always clear and that contributed to the formation of a growing cluster of texts that were all in some way or another connected to the 'idea' of the *Nights*, rather than to an unambiguous philologically established corpus. This process of expansion and mystification was fostered by the various European translations that appeared, especially, in the nineteenth century. Thus, it seems that the more popular the work became, the more it was hidden under layers of new versions and conflicting claims to authenticity.³

In order to obtain a more truthful picture of the nature of the *Thousand and one nights* as a literary work, it has to be situated in history and stripped of its many outgrowths and metamorphoses. Not only should we take care to discern different layers within the corpus; we should at the same time accept that the work is not immutable and is part of processes of transmission and development that may have changed it over the course of time. Unfortunately, our knowledge of the textual history of the *Nights* is still far from complete. The manuscripts and references that we have provide only pieces of the puzzle and leave many blind spots, and although we know that the early versions were related to the wider context of Sanskrit and Persian literature, the nature of these connections and the paths of transmission are still to a large extent unclear. It also remains to be clarified how these early traces of the *Nights* relate to the later phases of its development and how we should evaluate the significance of the emergence of the European '*Nights* tradition' in the eighteenth century.

So what do we know about the textual history of the *Thousand and one nights*? As far as the Arabic tradition is concerned, the oldest trace of a man-

3 For a history of the text and translations of the *Thousand and One Nights*, and for further references, see: Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, eds., *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA, 2004).

uscript of a work with the title *Thousand and one nights*, and mentioning Shahrazad, that we have dates probably back to the ninth century, and in Arabic literary works we find references to a work titled the *Thousand and one nights*, or *Thousand nights*, in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The oldest manuscript that contains a substantial text is traced back to the first half of the fifteenth century. This version consists of 282 nights, and it is still unclear how it is related to the previous references to the *Nights*. This version, which shows the traces of a Mamluk milieu, remained the core of later manuscript versions made in the eighteenth century, both in Europe, by Arab immigrants, and in the Arab world. In the latter versions, this core was supplemented with stories from various sources, pertaining either to the corpus of canonical Arabic literature (*adab*) and to the reservoir of popular or oral storytelling. Thus, the Arabic tradition can be divided into an early phase, culminating in the fifteenth-century manuscript, which may either be a reworking of earlier versions or an autonomous collection under the title *Thousand and one nights*; and a later phase, in which material from other sources was incorporated.

The different Arabic versions of the *Thousand and one nights* and some of the references in the Arabic tradition strongly suggest links with Sanskrit and Persian predecessors. First, the peculiar form of the collection—a framing story with embedded tales—and the theme of the framing story—postponement related to adultery—can be found in Sanskrit texts, too, a connection that is confirmed by several motifs in the framing story that are clearly taken from Sanskrit examples. Apart from these formal elements, the evidence from the librarian Ibn al-Nadim (eleventh century), who compiled a list of current books, indicates that the *Nights*, in one form or another, may be derived from a Persian text called *Hazar afsane*, or ‘Thousand nights’, which presumably was translated into Arabic in the ninth or tenth century. This may explain why so many names in the collection are of Persian origin. However, Ibn al-Nadim’s statements about the work and his other reference to an Arabic text titled *Thousand nights* are insufficient to establish a direct trajectory from Sanskrit examples through a Persian intermediate link and an early Arabic version to the fifteenth-century manuscript. The evidence clearly outlines a broader literary context and prehistory of the work, but unequivocal proof is still lacking.

Whatever may have been the case, the fifteenth-century manuscript surfaced in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was translated into French by the orientalist Antoine Galland (1646–1715) and—since it contained only 282 nights—it was supplemented with material from other sources. These sources were, first, separate manuscripts with similar stories preserved in the Bibliothèque Royale (notably the cycle of Sindbad); second, stories transmitted to him orally by the Syrian traveller Hanna Diyab (the stories of ‘Aladdin’

and 'Ali Baba' among others); and, third, stories from a Turkish collection translated by Galland's colleague François Pétis de la Croix (1653–1713). The result, which was published in twelve volumes between 1704 and 1717, was thus a hybrid collection, which only partly reflected an original work. It was nevertheless received with enthusiasm in France and beyond, and it became the starting point for the enduring European tradition of the *Thousand and one nights* with its many translations, pastiches, adaptations, and 'continuations', and of the incorporation of Oriental images and literary models into European culture. It can be argued that the multifaceted impact of this work was not hampered by its hybridity but rather fostered by it.

The eighteenth century witnessed not only the European encounter with the *Thousand and one nights* but also a revival of the work in the Arabic literary tradition. In France, two manuscript versions were compiled by two Arab migrant scholars living in Paris, using Galland's core manuscript as a basis. These versions are usually denounced as forgeries, but closer inspection shows their resemblance, both in procedure and in contents, with manuscript versions produced in Egypt later in the century. These latter manuscripts contain the usual core and supplemental material, but it remains unclear whether they reflect an effort to restore a previous version of the collection, as far as it was remembered at the time, or should be seen as just a haphazard *bricolage* of narrative material. Another possibility is that the collection was at the time not seen as a specific work, but that, rather, the title was used as an 'umbrella' to bring stories of various kinds together in one manuscript, a method that was not unusual at the time. Whatever may have been the case, the Egyptian manuscripts of the end of the eighteenth century were printed in the so-called Bulaq-edition of 1835 and became the standard version of the 'modern' tradition of the *Thousand and one nights*.

It is tempting to link the revival of the Arabic tradition of the *Nights* with the popularity of the work in Europe. After all, after the success of Galland's *Mille et une nuits* Oriental scholars went in search of *Thousand and one nights* manuscripts in Egypt and Syria, and thus the market for copyists significantly increased. It is known that at least some of the manuscripts ended up in the hands of European scholars and diplomats. However, this link is not totally self-evident, and it may be more rewarding to see the revitalization of the *Nights* not within relations between Europe and the Arab world but rather within those between the Arab world and the Ottoman context. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that the Ottoman conquest of the Arab lands in the sixteenth century and the consolidation of the Turkish administration in the subsequent period gave rise to a new historical and cultural framework, which created new patterns and opportunities for literature. The Ottomans were eager

to inventory, collect, and translate the cultural and scholarly heritage of the newly conquered provinces, and they, conversely, brought the literati of these provinces in touch with their own Turkish-Asian background. It would seem that this created a fertile ground for literary exchange.

In his book on the historical references in the stories of the *Thousand and one nights*, Jean-Claude Garcin attempts to re-evaluate the later Arabic versions of the *Nights* and to locate them in their historical context. Some of his conclusions may be too speculative, but he has drawn our attention to two important aspects: first the possibility of the transfer of narrative material from Asia to the Middle East after the Timurid invasions (after app. 1400); and, second, the possibility that some of the material may not be ancient Arabic narratives, but rather originated in the Ottoman context in the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries (for example the story of 'Umar al-Nu'man'). Although there is not sufficient evidence to prove that the fifteenth-century version of the *Nights* as we know it, which became the core of later versions, was an original literary work written by an author who adopted examples from Central Asia, it would still seem logical to assume that the later phase of the *Nights* tradition would reveal traces of the new historical and cultural interactions of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.⁴

Although we would need much more evidence in the form of manuscripts before we can reconstruct a new embedding of the *Thousand and one nights* within the trajectories of transmission of Central Asian, Persian, and Turkish narrative material, we have some leads for further speculation. First, it is not improbable that the emergence of chivalric literature in Mamluk times was related to commercial contacts between Egypt and Asia; second, we know that from the fifteenth century onwards works were translated from Arabic and Persian into Turkish; third, the Mamluk and Ottoman rise to power in the Levant, with their Turkish/Asian background, facilitated the exchange of narrative material from various cultural domains. It is significant that a Turkish translation of the *Thousand and one nights* was made in 1636 and that several stories that were incorporated in the eighteenth-century versions of the *Nights* were known in Turkish in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. This may indicate that this supplemental material was selected from narratives circulating in the Ottoman empire at the time; third, in this way the Ottoman context not only gave an impetus to what may be called a cultural 'renaissance' or a cultural 'modernization'; it also opened channels for cultural interaction and transla-

4 Jean-Claude Garcin, *Pour une lecture historique des 'Mille et une nuits': Essai sur l'édition de Bûlâq, 1835* (Arles and Paris, 2013).

tion; and, finally, it would seem that the eighteenth century was an important period not only for its interest in narrative texts, but also in its preoccupations with recording them in manuscripts. Especially in Egypt, but also in India, we see that important texts were laid down in (adapted?) manuscript versions at that time.

After developing these rather speculative views, it becomes clearer how the *Thousand and one nights* can be used for the present study. First, the textual history of the *Nights* covers a huge area and a broad span of time, linking ancient India with pre-modern Europe, with medieval Persia and the Arab/Ottoman Middle East as formative centres. Second, the *Nights* is a cycle in which old and less old material has blended. It definitely contains ancient stories and stories from popular and oral circuits that have survived through the ages. It seems, however, that this ancient material continued to circulate and was therefore still relevant enough to be incorporated into the later compilations. Thus, the *Thousand and one nights* can serve as an example of a corpus of literature that reflects tastes and mentalities of several periods. Third, the diversity of the material allows us to locate it in the framework of historical processes, while at the same time acknowledging the persistence of literary trends, concepts, and themes. It thus seems to comply with one of the primary functions of literature, anchoring specific concepts and themes in textual genres and preserving them within a tradition, and presenting them in a form and context relevant for changing historical contexts.

Fourth, the work can be seen as a narrative space where several literary traditions converged. It is an Arabic text that contains the traces of a Sanskrit and Persian prehistory and that provided a literary form that enabled it to, once again, integrate material from new Persian and Turkish environments. Apart from functioning as a repository attracting material from all directions and clustering it into a formal whole, it also functioned as a vehicle for these stories, making them known to other environments, most notably Western Europe. It was not only a passive receptacle, but also an active proliferating force for literary material. Fifth, by performing these functions, the work lays bare the workings of processes of transmission, which are complex and fluid, and related to historical change but still resistant to change, and which have a structuring function while being subject to diffuse forces. Most significantly, the example of the *Thousand and one nights* shows one of the paradoxes of processes of literary transmission: a work that brings to light a treasure trove of material circulating within the tradition, enabling it to be preserved and re-circulated in new forms and new environments, while at the same time distorting and obscuring its own history. As a literary point of gravitation, the *Thousand and one nights* has attracted considerable attention, acquiring

an almost mythical status, deviating the eye from its complex history and its situatedness in historical processes. Works such as the *Nights* both steer and regulate processes of transmission and eclipse underlying currents.

Sixth, as said above, all these dynamics are accumulated in a work whose form and thematic and generic purport reflect an age-old literary procedure, which is the function of storytelling as an 'antidote' against the vicissitudes of time, violence, and death. As we will see, this theme, related to the authority of the king, is a literary archetype that has withstood the ages and that has transcended all cultural boundaries. But it is an archetype with a certain twist, because while mimicking the form of the mirror-for-princes, it at the same time seems to mitigate the main concerns of the genre. It is thus to some extent subversive, parodying and challenging the official claims to power and relativizing the potential of despotism. It is these characteristics that make it particularly apt as a model for our discussion below, exemplifying generic types, narrative strategies, and processes of transmission.

Source Material

Formations of power, in the broadest sense, ranging from institutions to functional or individual prerogatives, are primarily anchored in official texts and documents. Power is legitimated by legal codices, formal acknowledgements, official histories, and principles of administration. It is embedded in institutions with a formalized status, in agreements and decrees, in hierarchies of functions and capacities, in executive bodies and councils. Nevertheless, it is ultimately based on the ability and privilege to use force, to impose measures, to control society, and to preserve the monopoly of the ruler. Evidently, the corpus of texts and documents in which the legitimation of power was organized differed in various societies and historical periods, ranging from corpuses of legal texts to books explaining the responsibilities of the ruler and his counselors, or decrees regulating the relationship between the nobility and the king. The nature and size of this kind of corpus will vary: in ancient and medieval times it was to a large extent replaced by customary practice and tradition, while in more formally regulated societies these texts and documents formed the top layer of a large administrative bureaucracy.

The corpus of official texts supporting formations of power reveals only a part of the actual discourse and mechanisms of power. It is usually restricted to an elite, a circle surrounding the centre of power where the relations between powerful groups are balanced. Although it may legitimize power configurations, they spring from a spirit of rationality and organization, which aims to

impose a certain structure on society in which the division of power is formalized and consolidated. It reflects the way in which the ruler/government defines itself and in which it envisages its position vis-à-vis society, and as such is to some extent isolated from society as a whole. It is merely a reflection of the *modus vivendi* among the potential contestants for power, which is perhaps capable of enforcing a certain constellation of power but not of integrating it into the social imagination. For a power apparatus to work smoothly it not only requires formal endorsement by a legal system or official decrees; it also requires a cultural component that shapes its logic into acceptance and transforms an inherently enforced situation into the harmony of normality.

The cultural components of power constellations are, of course, varied and not always clearly defined. They reside in all kinds of discursive fields and forms, from religious and philosophical texts to popular songs and historical texts in which rulers are glorified. They are found in all kinds of customs and ceremonies, in which the symbols of power are displayed and celebrated, from enthronement and burials to royal visits, royal feasts, royal proclamations, and public events. They are related to religion and clerical feasts and rituals in which power is consecrated as belonging to the celestial order and in which the bonds between political and religious legitimacy are confirmed. They find expression in holidays, popular feasts, seasonal festivities, and marriage customs, but also in the relationships between the ruler and the fine arts, science, fashion, and architecture. In short, they manifest themselves in all social mechanisms that harmonize the claims of political power with an existing cultural order; they are meant to transform the rational basis of power into a coherent set of symbols that not only appeals to the collective imagination, but also fits in the symbolic system supported by traditional and cultural identity.

Among the prominent media conveying the symbols of power is, of course, literature, in its various forms and genres. Literature, and especially fictional literature, is not only a medium for the elite to construct images of itself, but also a discursive means for the populace to express its attitude towards the traditional, historical, and contemporary articulations of power. It contains and perpetuates certain symbols and concepts, and integrates these into broader visions of life and society. It conveys images of the past and the present that reveal tensions but also continuities and the historical roots of claims to power. It is the aim of this study, as a sub-project in the Eurasian empires programme, to examine the ways in which formations of power, and especially kingship, have left traces in the fictional literatures of the societies involved, especially China, India, Russia, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and Europe. The intention is primarily to supplement the official discourses of power with impressions from more subaltern discourses recorded in a corpus of texts of a different

genre. A study such as this may provide insight into the ways in which claims to power were integrated into culture and thereby into the collective imagination, facilitating the functioning of government and the effectuation of power in society.

The aim of the sub-project implies a selection of sources favouring texts that do not primarily reflect the self-images of those in power and the official discourses supporting the elite, but rather texts that reveal subaltern voices and visions of the population of those in power and constructions of kingship. This is not easily realized, especially for the period under study, between 1300 and 1800, mainly because of the limitations imposed by the mechanisms of text transmission. In the first place, literature that is often characterized as 'popular' usually flowed in oral circuits and was transmitted through hearsay rather than through written texts. By definition, it is not easy to obtain knowledge about these oral circuits and the material conveyed through them; second, literature that appeared in written form was often commissioned or at least endorsed by either royal courts or the elite of notables, and thus reflected their perspective rather than that of society as a whole; third, if manuscripts or printed versions appeared, at least part of the population could not read or write, and therefore the effect of these texts is easily overestimated. These observations, of course, are more relevant for some places and societies than for others.

The limitations imposed by the contextual factors do not mean that the 'popular' view is completely obscured from our view. As explained above, it is possible to see the development and transmission of culture as a fluid process in which various layers interact. In the field of literature, the material that has survived clearly shows traces of a dynamic interaction between 'elite' literature and 'popular' literature, which did not form separate traditions, but rather fed on each other and contributed to each other's development. For instance, a work produced at a royal court could be a sophisticated and polished retelling of a popular epic, which in turn might be derived from previous court compilations. Conversely, the 'royal' version of a cycle might have provided storytellers with new material, giving new impetus to the oral circuits. The problem from our perspective is that this mechanism is not always easy to unravel. As in the case of the *Thousand and one nights*, the existence of a 'vulgate' of a literary work may obscure its place within the literary dynamics and its prehistory either in written or in oral form; older manuscripts may have been destroyed because a more sophisticated version had come into being; the official version may not have been the culmination of a storytelling tradition, but only an incident after which the oral version of the work was proliferating as before, potentially enriched with new motifs or formal embellishments. Therefore, we can best imagine the development of literary works as a fluid process

in which material separated and converged, was reshaped and reassembled, through the interaction between oral or popular circuits and courts or cultural centres where works could come to the surface that would otherwise perhaps have remained invisible, but that showed only one of their potentially many forms.

Taking these considerations into account, for our present purposes a selection of texts has been made that conforms to the complexities involved. Because of the diffuse nature of literary transmission and the difficulty of assessing the extant material, texts have been chosen that may be characterized first of all as 'hybrid'. That is, they are mostly marked by being situated 'in between' in various respects, in the expectancy that this hybridity will allow us to catch a glimpse of what should be recognized as unofficial or 'popular' discourses, or discourses criticizing the claims of rulers. The 'in-between-ness' of the texts relates to different aspects:

In between elite and popular literature: as argued above, it is not easy, and perhaps even not possible, to draw a line between what may be called 'elite' and what might be termed 'popular' literature. This is partly due to the fact that the domain of popular literature, in the strict sense, is not accessible because the source material is lacking. In addition, criteria to demarcate the two domains may change depending on period and place. It is difficult to determine the readership of manuscripts in, for instance, Ming China or Mamluk Egypt, or to locate the venues and audience of oral storytelling in Persian towns during the Safavids. Moreover, the progress in printing techniques in China and Europe tended to efface the boundaries between the two domains, since material could reach a much wider and more differentiated audience, allowing the emergence of a market for books and the figure of the 'professional' writer. Even in that case, the royal court or other 'elite' centres played a significant role in the collection, recording, and proliferation of texts, establishing the taste of the upper classes as the standard for 'civilized' literature. However, as explained above, the difficulty of marking off the two domains implies a measure of permeability: material from the domain of popular literature flowed into the corpus of canonized high-brow literature and *vice versa*. For the present study material was chosen that shows traces of the two categories, either courtly literature enriched by themes and motifs from popular literature or popular literature stylized into manuscript or printed versions. Consequently, it should reveal the interaction between elite and popular literary discourses, reflecting common perceptions of kingship.

In between genres: In general one might say that in pre-modern times the distinctions between genres were not systematically defined. Boundaries between history and fiction, *historia* and *fabula*, were often blurred; epic romances often

contain important elements of love romances; works of education and instruction are often provided with edifying or exemplary tales; miscellaneous narrative material from various sources may have been integrated into a coherent story or novel; chivalric romances may, almost imperceptibly, turn into novels; political critique may take the form of parables, allegories, parodies, or fictional letters. Here, again, it is the hybridity of the material that will provide a more fruitful insight into the interaction between power and the people, and in the functioning of texts in the formation of ideological discourses. As we will see, generic complexity often adds to the efficacy and impact of a work in relation to its projected aim.

In between old and new: The idea of the fluidity of textual transmission also concerns the periodization of the material. In principle, texts from the period 1300–1800 were chosen, but some of the texts may be based on predecessors from before that period. Moreover, texts may have originated before 1300 but have remained popular for centuries, being re-edited in new versions, adaptations, or compilations. Especially these texts, which circulated for many centuries, have often reached us in relatively late versions (eighteenth or nineteenth century). Of course, this makes it difficult, sometimes extremely difficult, to determine the historical setting to which the narrative refers. To what extent do they reflect a historical context or several historical contexts? To what extent were they meant to convey historical types and stereotypes? Still, the interesting thing is that these texts often have both a historical and a trans-historical component: the evolution of the narrative can often be traced because it combines archaic themes and motifs with ‘modern’ elements signifying successive transitions in the historical context in which it thrived. This can, for instance, be seen in the apparently contradictory references to ancient kings and technologies of warfare of a much later date. In these instances, too, the hybridity of the texts makes them the more interesting, in spite of the methodological complications.

In between history and fiction: In many of the texts studied here a central role is attributed to historical figures, although the story itself is evidently imaginary. This hybridity is not only intended to enhance the truthfulness of the story, which, in spite of its fictional enwrapping, is still based on historical events; it is also a means to anchor certain values and concepts, represented by the hero, in history, and subsequently to transmit these values and concepts to the transhistorical realm of fiction, where it is not only preserved for future generations, but also formally adapted to be incorporated into the popular imagination and the cultural/literary tradition. If we consider historical texts, generally, as belonging to official discourse, then here, again, we will find a hybrid form in which official discourse overflows into subaltern perspectives.

It should be noted that texts of this kind may have been compiled on purpose by those in power to propagate certain ideas about kingship or to link a ruler to illustrious predecessors. So, again, what we perceive is not a text imprisoned in either official or popular discourse, but rather a text illustrating, even embodying, the interaction between the two. Fictionalization is often required to enable the transformation of history into a narrative, which, in turn, is a precondition for it to be interpreted, understood, and preserved in memory. Fiction subjectivizes history and makes it accessible to the non-specialist reader, situating it in the collective imagination and memory. As we will see, the linking of history and fiction is often accomplished by adding dramatic intrigue, which structures the story into a coherent, meaningful narrative. Still, since the definitions of fictional and historical discourses, as categories, changed over time, it should be kept in mind that it is difficult to assess what was seen as 'fictional' by a broad audience in the past.

In between doctrine and practice: As said above, whereas official discourse is mainly concerned with the principles and concepts of power, preferably on an abstract level, the texts studied here all contain an explicitly 'practical' component, implying that they are predominantly directed at adventures and events. This does not mean that the 'doctrinal', conceptual, framework of power is absent; on the contrary, this aspect is often accentuated. It means that these concepts are not *presented*, but rather *represented*. In most cases there is a duality at work linking abstract principles with concrete events and examples; or with illustrations of them in fictional (or quasi-authentic) tales. This procedure is, of course, connected with fictionalization: by adding a fictitious element, a dialectic emerges between official and unofficial discourses, resulting in the reshaping of an abstract principle into a concrete (but imaginary) narrative element, for example a specific event or a specific narrative *persona*. This is a typical strategy to convey abstract concepts to a broader audience. Conversely, by transforming doctrines into narrative events, they gain access to a different layer of social/cultural discourse, and thereby become part of a tradition which is broader, more resilient, and more fluid than 'official' political discourse, which may be prone to sudden changes of power and the collapse of political structures.

In between languages: The selected texts do not only transcend boundaries between oral and written domains, official or popular discourses, forms (prose, poetry) and genres (history/fiction, epic/novel); they also cross various barriers of language. Some were written in the 'standard' language of official literary style, while others were written in vernacular or contain colloquial elements. Many have been preserved in several languages and thus have become part of various literary traditions and linguistic realms. In some cases, these versions

may indicate conscious translation within the circuit of high-brow literature, while in other cases they just reveal trajectories of a narrative and mechanisms of transmission. In some cases, too, they show how several linguistic and literary realms interpenetrated and intermingled, especially in the Indian subcontinent (Persian, Hindi), Central Asia (Persian, Turkish), and the Middle East (Persian, Arabic, Turkish). Often court languages were different from the language of the people, a situation that, of course, affected the trajectories of transmission of literature and the relationship between popular and high-brow literature, showing the basic dynamics of the proliferation of narrative material. These considerations are relevant not only for the Asian context; in Europe, too, texts circulated in various countries and languages, creating a common reservoir of narrative material, originating, especially, in the Celtic, Spanish, and French traditions. From the sixteenth century, narratives were translated, adapted, imitated, and plagiarized to profit from the emerging market for printed books. These texts are full of Oriental elements and references to the East, heralding the periods of more systematic orientalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In between local and universal: As a result of the proliferation of narratives over linguistic, cultural, and social domains, and the adaptations and revisions this implies, most texts show an interaction between elements clearly traceable to the local context and more universal frameworks, forms, and themes. Narratives may deal with a local king or a relatively narrow social embedding, while at the same time dealing with the general issues of power, kingship, and morality. This interaction shows, among other things, how the texts are related to different discursive levels and how they thereby fulfil their function as a medium to channel values and concepts between different segments of society.

These observations about the hybrid character of the source material indicate that the narratives to be examined here are considered to be subjected to both stabilizing and transformative forces, permanently redefining their territories in interaction with contextual possibilities and constraints. Form, genre, social context, language, tradition, and history all contributed to structure the patterns of transmission and transformation, each in its respective pace, influenced by, but not coinciding with, the political structures embedded in the cultural stratum. It will be noted how much this typology of the texts and their place in their cultural environment remind us of the *Thousand and one nights*, as a model representing the confluence and redistribution of narrative material, and showing the complex nature of processes of transmission. Not only the *Nights* as a whole, but many individual stories, too, exemplify this process and are part of it, as ramifications of multifarious corpuses. They show

FIGURE 1 *Prince and astrologers, Mughal dynasty, ca. 1585–1590.*

the dynamics and fluidity of the transmission and the influences structuring it, including their incorporation in an agglomerate work such as the *Thousand and one nights*.

On the basis of these hybrid properties, several themes have been chosen to organize the material and its analysis. Within these thematic groups, texts have been selected that illustrate the basic elements and patterns and that reflect attitudes in different periods and places. Of course, it is impossible to

include texts from all societies involved in all thematic groups, and as a rule some examples have been selected from different cultural realms to indicate how themes were incorporated into the narrative texts and highlight potential parallels, and, evidently, significant differences. The thematic groups are the following:

Kings, ministers and concubines: The basic model of this group is the cycle of tales titled *The seven viziers*, or, in Europe, *The seven sages of Rome*. This group is characterized by the triangular relationship between the king and the two figures closest to his personal and official *personae*, and who compete for his attention: the vizier/minister and the concubine/queen. This type of narrative is closely related to the genre of the mirror-for-princes. Apart from the *Seven viziers* cycle, which spread over the whole of Eurasia in the course of several centuries, some other cycles/stories will be analysed with a similar dramatic intrigue from more specific surroundings, all showing a fundamental aspect of kingship: its essentially dialogic nature.

The righteous king and the supernatural realms: This group will be focused on stories in which the ideal king is portrayed in his relationship with the supernatural forces that are hidden under the surface of social and political life in the empire. As in the previous group, relationships with viziers or other counterparts are central. The texts to be analysed in the second chapter are the cycle of the *Thirty-two steps to the throne*, and its cognates, and the Arabic cycle of Harun al-Rashid stories from the *Thousand and one nights*. These narratives are typically centred around an idealized historic or legendary figure who is endowed with the capacity to conjure the refractory demons of evil.

Continuing the theme of the supernatural, the narratives in the third chapter show the strong relationship between royal authority, good governance, and esoteric knowledge. A recurrent theme in narratives of kingship is the relationship between supernatural forces, fate, and the birth of kings. But whereas it is perhaps the king who is predestined to rule, it is the vizier who enjoys the favours of supersensory knowledge and insight. These themes in stories reflect not only harmony in a cosmic order, but also the link between good rulership and esotericism as a phenomenon and a science. The texts that will be studied in this part are the story of 'The queen of the serpents' from the *Thousand and one nights*, the Chinese popular novels *Creation of the gods* and Feng Menglong's *The sorcerer's revolt*, and Jan Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*. The latter two narratives, in particular, reveal, on the one hand, the deep-rooted connections between kingship and esoteric knowledge while, on the other hand, criticizing forms of superstition.

The king and the knight: In this chapter we will turn our attention to the wide field of the romance of chivalry. The texts that have been selected all show

either the adventures of princes on the way to their predestined kingship, or the relationship between a king (or kings) and a mighty hero, who drastically intervenes in the fate of the empire. The texts are taken from the European, Persian/Urdu, Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, and Malay traditions. They shed light particularly on the ideological premises of royal power and the values and capacities required to preserve it in its pristine form, as it is challenged by a host of inimical external forces. As we will see, although the stories are constructed around the heroic feats of the protagonists, they are steeped in the moral aspects of power and authority.

Kingship and love: In this chapter we select a small corpus of texts that stress the importance of love in the discourse of kingship. Some texts proceed within the generic framework of chivalric romance and gradually transform into a romance of love, set in court circles, such as *The adventures of Brusanus* (Barnabe Riche), *The mirror of princely deeds and knighthood* (Margaret Tyler), and Madame de Lafayette's *Zaïde*. Other romances illustrate the significance of love for the perfection of royal authority and its connection with the forces of fate. These include the stories of 'Sayf al-Muluk and Badi al-Jamal' and 'Qamar al-Zaman and Budur', both from the *Thousand and one nights*, but clearly related to the Hindavi romances *Madumadlati* and the Asian tradition of 'Sayf al-Muluk'. This group shows some interesting developments in the narrative discourses of kingship and some important parallels and differences. But most of all they focus on one of the cornerstones of the whole discourse of kingship: women.

Unrequested counsel: Most of the narratives mentioned above are intended either to instruct the prince or to consolidate and legitimate kingship. In this chapter, we have collected some works that are critical of autocratic and despotic rule, or its effects on the population. Although criticism, of course, has always been expressed in some form or another, within the narrative tradition it appeared especially in periods of enlightenment, in the Ottoman Empire and China in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in Europe in the eighteenth century. In this chapter we will discuss works by Mustafa Ali, Hung Sheng, Montesquieu, Diderot, Wieland, and Radishchev. Together these texts not only give a nice view of the main discontents of autocratic rule; they also show the interesting effects of narrative dialogism and orientalism for the dislodging of established discursive conventions.

All these texts will be analysed primarily from a narratological perspective, evaluating, first, the relationship to generic types, their narrative structure, and their place in the discourse of kingship as fictional texts; second, inventorying the elements and motifs used to construct a vision of power and kingship, such as ceremonies, objects, material culture, documents, functions, etc.;

and, third, analysing narrative strategies, such as the role of fate, the spatial and temporal setting, the configuration of the characters and the relationship between intrigues and power formation, the role of dialogism, etc. In some cases attention will be given to questions of lineage, transmission, and relationships or to connections with the historical contexts. This attention will necessarily be limited, however, to avoid the problems connected with the lack of interpretive and historical frameworks and because it is practically impossible to sketch the historical contexts of all the works discussed. Evidently, the analytical approach will not be rigidly applied to all texts, but will be adapted to the specific peculiarities of each text. This flexibility will give our discussion a rather essayistic bend; it will not be our aim to strive for a comprehensive overview or an exhaustive analysis of all aspects of the texts. Although it is among the aims of this essay to emphasize similarities and shared elements, in Chapter Six we will present a significant divergence from common patterns. In the eighteenth century specific discursive strategies emerged in Europe that were less conspicuous in other parts of Eurasia. As we will see, new types of literature were developed that deviated from a remarkably consistent Eurasian tradition and that reflected new visions of the nature of texts and literature.

Although it is perfectly possible to read the selected works as material reflecting attitudes and discourses in the period between 1300 and 1800, approximately, it should be kept in mind that the corpus is firmly rooted in a substratum of literature from previous periods or previous traditions. The literature of Mughal India, for instance, has partly derived its material from Sanskrit sources and, more specifically, cannot be dissociated from the great narrative cycles of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Kathasaritsagara* of Somadeva. In Persia it was the wisdom literature of the Sassanid era and the *Shahnama* by Firdawsi that contained a repository of narrative material and literary forms emulated later. In the Arabic and Persian worlds it was the early heritage of *adab* humanism and religious texts that shaped intellectual discourse, later combined with various kinds of romances, while in Europe the echoes of Classical Antiquity and the medieval romances of chivalry (Chrétien de Troyes) reverberated at least until the nineteenth century in what can perhaps be seen as a single literary tradition. In China we have the lasting impact of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist texts that to a large extent shaped the literature of later periods, even until the present day. In all these early stages literary conventions and traditions were formed that extended into later periods, although they were not, of course, resistant to change. Some traditions were continued in new, perhaps syncretic forms, while others became obsolete and forgotten.

Similarly, although it is clear that most of the works can be situated within a single tradition, with its successive phases of development, we have to be aware of the alternation/oscillation between phases of introspection and isolation, and phases of mutual contacts and cultural exchange. For example, imperial China witnessed several periods of developing native traditions, the legalism of Han, the intellectual experimentalism and Buddhist expansion of Song, the cultural retrospection and enlightened despotism of Ming and Ching, etc. It also, however, experienced periods of intensified exchange with the outer world, through territorial expansion in the north and the west, establishing contacts with Islam, Persia, and Russia, or through maritime activities in the south, involving traders from India, Southeast Asia, Persia, the Middle East, and Europe. The alternation of these historical phases resulted in periods of absorption and openness, and periods of closure and consolidation, and in the formation of a cultural matrix in which literature evolved. Much of the effects of these alternations, and the linguistic problems involved in cultural change, still await thorough investigation.

Among the important instigators of cultural exchange and interaction were the great waves of expansion, such as the Islamic conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries, which, by the fourteenth century, created a commonwealth of empires and kingdoms ranging from the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa to India and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Russian steppes. This massive cultural realm incorporated disparate elements from Christian, Greek, Egyptian, Persian, Indian, and Turkish traditions in various forms, thus acting as a medium for cultural exchange and continuity/renewal. The Islamic expansion was rivalled in Asia by the enormous campaigns of the Mongols and Turks in Asia, which swamped China and opened new channels of communication throughout Asia and between Asia and the Middle East and Europe, finally resulting in the migration of Turkic tribes to the Middle East. Within all these movements, Persia played a pivotal role, both through its trade and through its tradition of kingship, administration, wisdom and science, and, not least, its language and literature. For many ages, Persia set the standards for civilized culture, rivalled only, perhaps, by China. Finally, after Europe had remained enclosed in its matrix of Christianity during the Middle Ages, during the Crusades, and from the expansion of Asian trade onwards, it was exposed to influences that decisively changed its world view.

These complex shifts in the historical setting and their similarly complex relationships with cultural currents and the shaping of literary patterns make the present study a hazardous undertaking. It is, perhaps paradoxically, by not speculating too much with regard to possible connections and interactions that the most convincing parallels can be suggested. Although, as said above,

political frameworks and cultural patterns are not necessarily congruent, and although we need insight into political frameworks to explain cultural change, it may be possible that a more comprehensive view of cultural interactions will shed new light on political frameworks as well.