

A review of
**A Cultural
History of
Fairy Tales:
Vol. I: A Cultural
History of
Fairy Tales in Antiquity**

B.C. Kennedy

Cultural *History of Fairy Tales*, part of Bloomsbury's 'Cultural Histories' series, seeks to deepen our appreciation for, and knowledge about, a type of text that is often taken for granted due to its association with children's literature, old wives' tales, and oral peasant culture.

The six volumes foreground how fairy tales were deployed in different historical periods and geographical locations for all kinds of cultural, social, and political ends that cross categories of class, age, gender and ethnicity. This volume, the first in the series, covers the historical period 500 BCE – 800 CE.

Debbie Felton uses her introduction to highlight the ongoing disagreement among scholars of folktales, fairy tales and classical literature as to whether fairy tales existed in classical literature. Certainly, the existence of this volume would seem to presuppose that fairy tales did indeed exist in antiquity, but no such consensus exists; many folklore scholars prefer to consider fairy tales as a separate genre. However, there can be no doubt that early analogues of modern fairy tales existed in the ancient world.

In Chapter One the preeminent scholar on fairy tales in the ancient world, Graham Anderson, examines the concept of 'the marvellous' in antiquity. The Greeks and Romans, he argues, held a fascination with the marvellous, as demonstrated in Pliny the Elder's encyclopaedic work, *Naturalis historia*. However, a key notion of 'the marvellous' is that it has a strong element of the extraordinary about it. No single phenomenon embraces the wide range of the marvellous but, Anderson suggests, the same materials and motifs surface repeatedly. He draws a distinction between the marvellous of the 'wonders of nature' as factual wonders, and the invented marvels of fantasy. The

literature of antiquity accommodates a substantial cross-section of marvellous material but is most marked on the outer fringes of the known world as read in voyage narratives. In the context of a cultural history, Anderson demonstrates how the marvellous operated on various levels from low culture to the salons of the educated sophisticates.

This is followed by a chapter on adaptation, that is, the transmission, translation and diffusion of ancient tales, by Emanuele Lelli. From its origins in the Greek and Roman tradition, the fable has been one of the principal types of folklore to undergo highly significant adaption through translations, reworking, reductions and allusions. This adaptability, the author suggests, is due to the fable's popular origins and the simplicity of the values it represents. However, across the ancient world, the fable is never presented as a literature of escape for children; it always had an explicitly educational function. Its transformability has proven useful in widely differing fields, such as politics, law, philosophy, history, literature and sociology because it lends itself so well to rhetorical and theoretical discussions.

In Chapter Three, Serinity Young discusses gender and sexuality, 'Reading Females, Males, and Other in Asian Folktales'. Like other cultures, Asian folktales serve to instruct while they entertain. For the most part, females are presented as undependable; women can shapeshift into animals (swans and foxes), goddesses and witches. Being is fluid in ancient Asia: animals, divinities and humans may not be what they appear to be. The voracious sexuality of women contrasts sharply with the vulnerability of masculinity – as if women are the repository of sexuality and most things evil, which would seem to justify their subjugation by virtuous men. All this contradicts texts such as the *Kama Sutra* that celebrate sexuality as well as contradicting the proliferation of voluptuous women and goddesses in iconography. Young argues that this reveals male anxieties about the potential for decline in masculinity, in a world where gender is fluid, femininity is powerful, and masculinity is mutable.

In his chapter entitled 'Human and Non-Human: The Animal in Greek and Roman Fable', Kenneth Kitchell examines the substantial prominence of animals in ancient fables, questioning whether the moral instructions of these tales could have been made with fictional or mythical human characters instead. He challenges the theory that the use of animals provides a buffer between the intent of the fable and their real targets, arguing that the genre of fable is too broad to attach any one interpretation to the presence of animals in so many stories. He suggests that ancient fabulists such as Aesop used animals to show the good as well as the bad in humans, in addition to making their stories entertaining, while simultaneously showing the complexity of relationships between animals and humans in Greco-Roman society.

Debbie Felton's chapter 'Monsters and the Monstrous: Ancient Expressions of Cultural Anxiety' considers what the concept of 'monster' might have meant in the ancient world, and then examines what tales from antiquity survive that incorporated

monsters, what kind of monster predominates in these tales and, finally, what the presence and roles of monsters in the tales might have meant.

In ancient folktales, such monsters often filled the role of antagonist, to be fought and conquered by heroes such as Heracles and Odysseus in a triumph of civilised man over irrational nature. This chapter discusses how monsters tend to reflect various cultural anxieties; different monsters across various time periods; and how a multitude of settings can represent multifaceted and shifting societal concerns. However, taken all together, the monsters of myth, legend and folklore, Felton suggests, reflect our fears and hopes about the mysteries of the natural world, our place in it, and our ability to control or adapt to our environment. These creatures express our anxieties about the nature of the universe and our existence within it; they compel us to look inward and meditate upon what it means to be human.

Julia Doroszewska and Janek Kucharski provide some insights into the 'grammar' governing the deployment of space and place in the ancient folktale. The manipulation of space in these stories goes hand in hand with time and other categories to comply with the exigencies of the genre to which they are adapted. Uses of space in ancient folktales such as distance, discrete borders and liminality are similar to other literary genres, and these folktales represent, the authors argue, what is universal and common to the human experience of space, place and the life within it.

In the penultimate chapter, Dominic Ingemark and Camilla Asplund Ingemark maintain that storytelling formed a significant part of everyday life in antiquity, filling several different functions including a socialising one, that is, the teaching of commonly held beliefs and customs. A typical feature of storytelling is, they suggest, variation, and the storyteller could adapt a given story to make a specific point. Storytelling was multifunctional, providing a useful means to present a moral point. It is also about social interaction, and the authors demonstrate how fairy tales such as 'Cupid and Psyche' reflect the norms and values of ancient society.

The final chapter considers how power, its acquisition, uses, abuses, and distribution, is manifest in ancient fables. Whereas ancient fables and other fiction relied heavily on metaphor to avoid possible political retributions, authors such as Herodotus were often direct in their criticism. Indeed, the transitory nature of power and greatness is an overarching theme in Herodotus' work. Debbie Felton concludes by suggesting that little has changed regarding attitudes to power since antiquity, as so ably illustrated in this chapter.

This superbly written volume concludes with extensive notes, references, bibliography and index in addition to the lists of illustrations, tables, and abbreviations at the beginning of the volume. With an extensive range of case material, this book illustrates why tales from the ancient world are still relevant today. The cultural history of the fairy tale is a longstanding one, and a look at tales from antiquity demonstrates that the basic

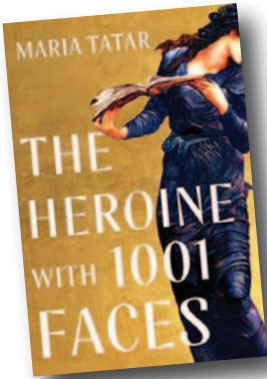
functions of these tales have remained recognisable across the ages. Bringing together international scholars from a diversity of disciplines, this collection challenges many of the preconceptions about fairy tales and aims to offer readers – scholars and enthusiasts alike – a new and fresh understanding of the fairy tale that will enhance their appreciation for a genre that has touched many of us since childhood.

Editor: Debbie Felton.

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A review of
**The Heroine
with 1,001 Faces**

Victoria Leslie

Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) looms large in Maria Tatar's new study exploring heroines in myth, fairy tale and contemporary culture. Campbell used the term 'monomyth' to refer to the narrative pattern specific to a hero's quest, a universal pattern he found congruent in narratives the world over. Departure, Initiation and Return mark the stages of the Hero's Journey, a journey that, thanks to an abbreviated version of Campbell's book, could be mapped and followed, becoming a blueprint for 20th-century writers and filmmakers. In keeping with the tradition of eulogising the deeds and exploits of heroes, the hero's journey in its many iterations continues to be broadcast far and wide. Though Hollywood has fashioned 'new heroines' in accordance with Campbell's template, women are conspicuously absent from the 'pantheon of heroes' in his text, as too are their quests and crusades.

Tatar's book begins with an anecdote concerning Campbell and an encounter he had with a student when teaching comparative mythology at the all-female Sarah Lawrence

College in New York. When asked about the role of women in quest narratives, Campbell provided his stock answer, defining female characters in relation to the male hero, as mothers, protectors or muses. Though acknowledging the presence of 'female heroes' in myth, like Psyche, who sets out to rescue her lover Cupid, Campbell regarded these examples as inversions to the normal narrative pattern. This is due to the emphasis Campbell places upon the hero's *journey*, while women in myth and folklore are denied the means and motive for heroic adventure and more typically confined to the domestic sphere. 'Women don't need to make the journey', Campbell famously stated, since she constitutes 'the place that people are trying to get to.'

The distinction that women of myth and folklore undertake 'trials rather than journeys' calls into question whether their actions are less heroic because they do not venture into new territories. Tatar's reading explores the gendered etymology of 'hero' and 'heroine', extending the definition of heroism to include qualities abundantly evident in gynocentric narratives, including ingenuity, care and curiosity. Furthermore, she looks to examples from fairy tales where women as the guardians and tellers of tales presented empathetic female perspectives and bestowed more physical freedom upon their protagonists. Tatar cites 'The Enchanted Pig', a Romanian variant of Apuleius's 'Cupid and Psyche' where the heroine is obligated to wear out three pairs of iron shoes and an iron staff in order to free her husband from a curse. Likewise, in the tale type 'The Search for the Lost Husband', the wife-rescuer readily undertakes a quest and a series of trials that, similar to the iron shoes motif, signify an arduous physical journey. For Tatar it is the objective of their missions, 'marital rather than martial', which sees them eclipsed by their male counterparts.

Though Tatar's heroines do not march off to war or chase glory and immortality, they are in possession of a 'crusading spirit'. Tatar's analysis begins by considering a figure in the shadow of her husband's journey and highlights key themes which echo throughout her text. Homer's *Odyssey* tracks the journey of its hero Odysseus while his wife Penelope is 'confined to the marriage plot', waiting for her husband's return and warding off the advances of suitors. Confined to the home, Penelope is silenced by her son Telemachus and instructed to return to her weaving, her women's work. Weaving a shroud by day, the completion of which would obligate her to marry again, she unpicks the stitches at night. Tatar draws the comparison with another figure of Greek myth, Philomela, who as the victim of sexual assault is silenced by having her tongue removed so she is unable to accuse her attacker. With craft and craftiness Philomela weaves her ordeal into a tapestry, leading to her rescue and revenge. As Tatar points out, the domestic arts and specifically those associated with textile production are charged with feminine power, providing space for female solidarity and discourse, and aligned with the creation of stories.

The thread from silenced women of myth to the #MeToo movement is also made crucially visible and Tatar dedicates a whole chapter to exploring this theme. 'Speaking out'

is inherently dangerous but the heroines of a host of folk and fairy tales use strategies to reveal the truth. The protagonist of 'The Robber Bridegroom', collated in the Brothers Grimm's *Children's Stories and Household Tales*, is one such example, who relates the crimes of her groom under the pretence of recalling a dream. Having gained a platform to speak, she is able to produce evidence – in the form of a severed finger – of her husband's murderous appetites. In other cases, as with 'The Goose Girl' from the same collection, and its variants, the heroine is vindicated when she is overheard confessing her woes in private.

Tatar also highlights the recent trend of reimagining classical myths and giving voice to the characters silenced in these stories. Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* and Pat Baker's *Silence of the Girls* demonstrate the appeal of characters whose qualities and experiences are 'veiled and still' in contrast to the 'percussive' praise heaped upon male cultural heroes. Even heroines who are able to tell their own stories have to navigate patriarchal constraints. Speech and its necessity for survival is epitomised in the figure of Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*, who narrates countless stories to save her life and overturn a royal edict condemning other women to the same fate. Though her stories appear to promulgate the notion of women as seductresses and deceivers, Scheherazade is able to escape the 'narrow domestic space of the bedroom' into an 'expansive' world of story.

The only drawback of such an overt reference to Campbell's work is that readers may be looking for Tatar to identify structural similarities within the stories she has collated, to arrive at a 'marvelously constant story' like Campbell's. Acknowledging the peril of repetition when challenging dominant models and templates, Tatar steers clear of formulating a counter monomyth for the heroines in her book. 'What about the women?' – the question posed by Campbell's student – is instead the driving force behind Tatar's study. In answering this question, Tatar explores countless examples of heroic women from our storied past, indicating that her choice to add an extra digit of 'one' to Campbell's original title signifies the multiplicity and diversity of these figures and their narratives. To adopt imagery more aptly associated with the tales and the tellers Tatar selects, of spinning and weaving – and cognitively of storytelling – Tatar creates not a map of a journey but a sprawling and erudite web of connections, linking the female protagonists of fairy tales, novels, films and television shows through their heroic acts and attributes. The result is a comprehensive, compelling and timely re-evaluation of what it means to be heroic.

Author: Maria Tatar.

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