

Book Review

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in Antiquity

Felton (D.) (ed.) Volume I. Pp. xvi+239, ill.

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Cased, £75.

Darren Lester 

University of Reading, Reading, UK
mrlestersocials@gmail.com



Debbie Felton's *A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in Antiquity* is the inaugural volume in the six-part series *A Cultural History of Fairy Tales*, which spans from antiquity to the modern age. This work situates itself at the intersection of cultural history, folklore studies, and classical studies, offering readers a nuanced exploration of the fairy tale as a cultural artifact in the ancient world. With contributions from a diverse array of scholars, the volume provides a comprehensive overview of how

the narratives, themes, and functions of fairy tales manifested in ancient societies and their broader cultural milieus.

Structure and Content

The book is organised thematically rather than chronologically, with each chapter addressing a specific cultural facet of fairy tales in antiquity. Topics include the societal roles of storytelling, the interplay between oral and written traditions, gender dynamics, and the moral and educational purposes of these narratives. Felton's introduction lays a solid foundation by discussing the methodological challenges of identifying and analysing fairy tales in ancient texts, given the absence of a direct ancient counterpart to the modern concept of the fairy tale.

Amongst the standout chapters is Juli Doroszewska and Janet Kucharski's examination of space in ancient folktales, which deftly considers how myth and folktale alike make use of liminal spaces such as beaches and forests so that they are simultaneously set everywhere and nowhere.

Across all eight chapters, the contributors effectively argue that while myths and fairy tales often overlap in theme and structure, they diverge in their purposes and narrative scopes – myths tending towards the sacred and etiological, whereas fairy tales lean into the personal and fantastical. Another compelling chapter explores the representation of women in ancient fairy tales, highlighting how these stories reflected and sometimes subverted contemporary gender norms.

Methodological Approaches

The volume employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from literary analysis, archaeology, and comparative folklore studies. This breadth allows the contributors to address both the textual elements of ancient fairy tales and their material culture, such as the depiction of fairy tale motifs in art and artifacts. The book's use of intertextual analysis is particularly effective in tracing the evolution of specific motifs, such as the “Cinderella” archetype, through ancient Greek and Roman literature.

Consideration

One of the book's key strengths is its ability to demonstrate the universality and adaptability of fairy tale motifs across different ancient cultures. By situating these stories within their historical and social contexts, the contributors reveal the ways in which they were used to negotiate issues such as morality, power, and human relationships. The inclusion of lesser-known texts alongside canonical works expands the reader's understanding of the diversity of ancient storytelling.

Another notable strength is the editor's emphasis on the fluid boundaries between oral and written traditions. This focus enriches the discussion by highlighting how fairy tales were shaped by and responded to the evolving literary cultures of antiquity. Furthermore, the volume includes a dedicated chapter on Asian antiquity, which is often overlooked under the umbrella term “classics.” This chapter broadens the scope of the discussion and provides valuable insights into storytelling traditions beyond the Greco–Roman world, offering a more inclusive perspective.

The use of primary sources throughout the volume is another significant strength. Contributors ground their arguments in direct textual evidence, drawing from ancient literary works, inscriptions, and artifacts to support their claims. This rigorous engagement with primary materials not only lends credibility to the analyses, but also provides readers with a clear sense of how fairy tale motifs were embedded in the cultural and material realities of antiquity. By juxtaposing these sources with modern theoretical frameworks, the book effectively bridges ancient and contemporary understandings of storytelling.

Despite its many strengths, the book occasionally suffers from unevenness in the depth of analysis across chapters. While some contributions delve deeply into their topics, others provide more surface-level overviews that leave questions unanswered. Additionally, the volume places significant emphasis on the “Cupid and Psyche” myth, often using it as a primary lens through which to analyse ancient fairy tales. While this

myth undoubtedly holds importance, its overuse risks overshadowing other narratives that could offer equally valuable insights. The repeated focus on “Cupid and Psyche” limits the exploration of alternative fairy tale traditions and potentially narrows the reader’s understanding of the variety and complexity of ancient storytelling.

Conclusion

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in Antiquity is a valuable resource for scholars and students interested in the intersections

of folklore, cultural history, and classical studies. The volume’s innovative approach and rich interdisciplinary insights make it a significant contribution to the study of fairy tales and their enduring relevance. Debbie Felton and her contributors have succeeded in shedding light on a formative period in the history of fairy tales, setting the stage for further research in this fascinating field.

doi:[10.1017/S2058631025000029](https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025000029)