

Flower Gathering

Edith Hall, Review in *Literary Review* of

The Book of Greek & Roman Folktales, Legends & Myths

Edited and translated by William Hansen

(Princeton University Press 549pp £24.95)

At a time when fewer people than ever before are learning Latin and ancient Greek, stories first told in the ancient Mediterranean world are, paradoxically, enjoying a boom. It is not just that diverse children's versions of *The Odyssey* and Aesop's *Fables* remain some of the bestselling books of all time. Computer games such as *Rise of the Argonauts* and the *God of War* franchise have become the main point of access to classical antiquity for countless teenagers; Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* books for young adults and their film adaptations constitute a multi-million dollar industry. Classical stories have proved just as appealing to writers in more elevated literary genres and those designed for more mature age groups. Alice Oswald's 2011 *Memorial* is the best poem responding to Homer's *Iliad* for decades. Gary Owen's one-woman tragedy *Iphigenia in Splott*, which last year updated Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* to a Welsh housing estate, won deserved acclaim and a transfer to the National Theatre. Ali Smith's 'Brexit' novel *Autumn* (2016) was a multilayered response to the Roman poet Ovid. Colm Tóibín's new *House of Names* turns the story told in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* into an exquisite new novel. No self-respecting reader or writer can afford to neglect their classical authors.

Fortunately, the major Greek tragedians and Ovid are available in standard mass-market translations published by Penguin or Oxford World's Classics. But with most of classical literature, a treasure trove of storytelling, the problem is where to start. There are dozens of canonical classical authors who worked between the eighth century BC and the fifth century AD. They are mostly included in the authoritative, bilingual Loeb Classical Library, which runs to over five hundred volumes, but these are often inaccessible or prosaic, and include technical apparatus that makes them seem off-putting. Even classical scholars struggle to read everything written by story-rich authors as prolific as Plutarch and Lucian, let alone ancient writers who can scarcely claim to be household names such as Stobaeus, Aelian and Proclus the Neoplatonist. The challenge facing the literary layperson is correspondingly even more enormous. And this is where William Hansen's enchanting collection of Greek and Roman folktales, legends and myths will prove indispensable.

The book is really an anthology, a word literally meaning 'a flower-gathering' or 'collection by bees of pollen from flowers', but used metaphorically by Byzantine scholars to mean a collection of choice

literary extracts. It contains an astonishing 369 excerpts from ancient authors, translated by Hansen himself with just sufficient editing to clarify obscure references or omit details irrelevant to the main narrative. After a lifetime of teaching ancient literature and mythology, Hansen, who is now Professor Emeritus of Classical Studies and Folklore at Indiana University, is in a position to point his reader to an exceptional range and variety of ancient stories. At least a quarter of them were entirely new even to me, since he has looked not only at 'canonical' authors but also at ancient joke books, medical treatises, collections of proverbs, obscure Byzantine encyclopedias and biographies, and early Christian writers who were as interested in the byways of the pagan classical imagination as he is. There are even stories reproduced from ancient monumental inscriptions, such as the lachrymose account by the husband of a woman who died in a Roman province of Algeria in the early second century AD. A legionary tribune, he believed that Ennia Fructuosa, an estimable matron, had been put under a malevolent spell by sorcerers: 'She lay in bed for a long time cursed by spells until her spirit was forcibly wrenched out of her and returned to nature.' This tragic narrative records his wife's decline and slow demise, and was inscribed on her tombstone partly in order to ensure that the spirits of the Underworld did not forget her suffering and would one day avenge it.

Hansen's masterstroke is his decision to arrange the stories thematically, as did the ancient anthologists, dream interpreters and writers of massive treatises rich with embedded short stories such as Athenaeus in his multivolume *Scholars at Dinner*. Most collections in the past have used taxonomies dependent on genre (for example, stories from epic, stories from the stage) or chronology, taking us from the Bronze Age to the triumph of Christianity. Thematic organisation, on the other hand, allows stories on similar topics but culled from quite different sources, whether 'real-world' or fictional, to illuminate one another by juxtaposition. Some of the stories of miracle-working, for example, grew up around the early Christians (both Mark's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles feature in the volume), but since they are placed alongside stories of miracle-working by pagans, their narrative form is shown to emerge from a much more ancient Mediterranean tradition. Other chapters include 'Kings and Princesses', 'Gods and Ghosts', 'Magicians and Witches', 'Tricksters and Lovers' and groups of tales united by their focus on, for example, children, animals, friends and marvellous hybrid creatures such as satyrs and biological curiosities including people who change sex midlife.

Surprises are in store on almost every page. The high-minded Republican orator Cicero, usually associated with his elevated rhetoric, turns out to have had a penchant for tales of the strange and supernatural. We encounter Greek and Roman prototypes of numerous elements of fairy tale that most of us associate with the Nordic and Germanic traditions of Märchen: a glass sarcophagus and magical rings of invisibility; a sorcerer's apprentice and stories of the capture of 'real-life' wondrous

beasts – werewolves and mermaids. There is a prototype of the story of Cinderella, elegant missing footwear and all. The ancients enjoyed accounts of boys who cross the oceans riding dolphins, women who give birth to monkeys, ghosts, revenants, ghouls and a remarkable variety of female bogey figures, used by ancient nursemaids and mothers to frighten children into good behaviour. The august philosophical sect of Pythagoreans, who studied mathematics and harmonics, were also believers in metempsychosis; their school produced a seam of stories about people who had been bears or monkeys in previous lives. My own personal favourite in the whole collection is the tale of the Tirynthians and their (unsuccessful) attempts to cure an epidemic of unquenchable laughter.

In antiquity, performances by acting troupes or travelling bards were often rare treats. Few people could afford papyrus books, even if they were literate. So imaginations needed endless live storytelling for stimulus and recreation. These stories were told at children's bedtime, adult drinking parties, around military campfires, when women wove together and in humble slave dormitories. This book, by contrast, can be read straight through or dipped into at will. The erudite and theoretically sophisticated introduction offers intelligent distinctions between different categories of story – historical legend, religious explanations for cult and ritual, fable, wonder tale, personal narrative, and so on. It includes user-friendly explanations of the sometimes obscurantist technical language employed by scholars, such as 'aretalogy' (a narration of a miracle performed by a god). Taken as a whole, the collection is as appealing to the advanced scholar as to a teenager first falling in love with the classics or to an aspiring author. There are exquisite line drawings by Glynnis Fawkes, a detailed index, an up-to-date bibliography and an appendix explaining how to access the original sources in a library. Hansen has succeeded in conveying to the reader his own love of and fascination with ancient storytelling, and his enthusiasm is infectious. The book is perfect reading for a summer holiday under Mediterranean skies. I cannot recommend it highly enough.