

Reviewed by Hedvig von Ehrenheim, FD

Good stories were part of the ancient world just as they are today. We find them occasionally transmitted in the extant sources from Classical Greece and Rome, but too seldom are they the subject of scholarly study. The book by Asplund Ingemark and Ingemark is an in-depth study of a limited number of key texts chosen on the basis of their oral origin, as well as their focus on fear. It analyses the function of these stories using an interdisciplinary approach.
Following the works of William Hansen, a model of the folklore approach in the ancient context, the stories are seen as already ancient at the time of their first record in a literary source, and the texts are thus assumed to be independent realizations of a folkloric tradition. As all the material used by the authors is retold in literature (with the exception of Aesop’s fables), the authors diligently outline their method for identifying and tracing oral stories through the entire corpus of ancient literature (chapters 1-2). As the authors further use a variety of different theoretical influences in their analysis, ranging from folklore studies on contemporary culture to modern cognitive behavioural therapy as exposed by Donald Robertson (The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy), every chapter opens with a theoretical reflection on the previous frameworks that influenced their interpretations of the particular theme of the chapter. This is a welcome approach and the wide range of influences presented is impressive.

The authors, following the outline of their method, provide an extensive backdrop to the by now burgeoning field of Emotion studies, situating their study within this while also noting that fear as an emotion is an understudied category. Fear, as explored in the debates of ancient philosophers (above all, by Aristotle, Epicureans and Stoics), is further covered, relating the themes of the stories to the emotional habits of the ancients (chapters 3-4).

Coming to the analysis proper, chapters 5-7 relate oral stories focusing on threats against the family. Drawing on stories retold by Diodorus Siculus and Ovid and others, child-killing demons, and the envy argued to motivate their actions, are expounded. The authors suggest that these stories served in part to externalise fear connected with infant mortality, much in the way that modern narrative therapy operates. Moving on, themes of negligent nurses, surprisingly tenacious until this day, are explored, analysing the nurse as a ‘sticky object’ in Sara Ahmed’s sense, and tentatively seeing the therapeutic effect of such stories for seeking the logic behind a tragic event.

Introducing the concept of ‘Emotional Topography’ in chapter 8, the authors analyse places in the Roman city associated with fear in narratives by Roman authors of the Late Republic and Empire. The concept is inspired by ‘rhythmanalysis’, developed by Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier, and the authors successfully compare the emotional connotations of places in the city to those of modern cities. By day, the city streets and roads leading up to it, lined with graves and memorials, would have been buzzing with life, giving rise to positive emotions, whereas at night, the same spaces would fill the traveller with the fear of being robbed or of encountering ghosts. In their analysis of Roman taverns and inns, two contrasting sides emerge in a topography of fear. On the one hand, the loathing of Roman elites for the bars and the fear of lonely travellers and merchants who could not stay at friends’ houses and, on the other hand, the popularity of these places where a poor fellow without access to a kitchen of his own might eat a
warm meal and drink with friends. This innovative chapter provides a sense of immediate presence, especially in the well-chosen accounts of Cicero and Horace, among others. Chapter 9 centres on the fear of being left unburied, and of the unburied haunting the place of their demise as ghosts. The chapter leads to a longer discussion on popular beliefs of the afterlife and fear of death. In order to interpret the emotion of fear, verbalised in this case through narratives of ghosts, philosophical discussions concerning death and burial are included as an interpretative device, postulating that the ghost stories offer a therapy quite apart from the philosophical one regarding the fear of death and concern for a proper burial. Oral legends instead provide a model of action, and evaluate the different choices made by the characters in the plot.

The book finishes with the chapter ‘Intruders from the Deep’, a development based on a previous publication which focuses on the ambivalent status of the octopus in Roman legend. The chapter interprets two legends of octopuses stealing salted fish, and one of a killer whale consuming hides, focusing on the gluttonous nature of the animals portrayed in the stories. Interestingly, the authors suggest that one function of the narratives, where the prime goal of the story is to defeat these intemperate creatures, is to serve as narrative therapy for Romans trying themselves to preserve a strong will and moderate their consumption of pleasures such as food.

The main argument, i.e. that stories of fear served a therapeutic function by verbalising the fears of the ancients, is well argued and convincing, especially as many of the stories seem to have generated laughter and entertainment. Interestingly, the authors narrow down the major part of the fear narratives as presenting threats against the family unit (e.g. the story of Lamia), an evident concern when the family in Greco-Roman times constituted the primary unit of a sense of security.

The book is a treasure-trove of oral narratives concerning fear in the Greco-Roman world, from those narrated by ‘old wives’ to those told at the dinner parties of the elite. It is also remarkable in its interdisciplinary approach and open-minded analysis of the emotion of fear in the varying subcultures of the Roman world, and provides meticulous contextualisation of the stories transmitted.

The book is well-produced and includes many relevant indices and ample cross-references connecting the separate chapters. This makes the book a pleasure to read and the overarching argument easy to follow, despite the vast number and variety of sources used. It will certainly form the basis for further studies on the theme.

Hedvig von Ehrenheim, FD
Department of Archaeology and Ancient History
Uppsala University
Box 626, SE-751 26 Uppsala, Sweden
hedvig.vonehrenheim@antiken.uu.se