

## Erysichthon und Mestra

[738] "Now Erysichthon's daughter, Mestra, had that power of Proteus—she was called the wife of deft Autolycus.— Her father spurned the majesty of all the Gods, and gave no honor to their altars. It is said he violated with an impious axe the sacred grove of Ceres, and he cut her trees with iron. Long-standing in her grove there grew an ancient oak tree, spread so wide, alone it seemed a standing forest; and its trunk and branches held memorials, as, fillets, tablets, garlands, witnessing how many prayers the goddess Ceres granted. And underneath it laughing Dryads loved to whirl in festal dances, hand in hand, encircling its enormous trunk, that thrice five ells might measure; and to such a height it towered over all the trees around, as they were higher than the grass beneath.

[751] "But Erysichthon, heedless of all things, ordered his slaves to fell the sacred oak, and as they hesitated, in a rage the wretch snatched from the hand of one an axe, and said, 'If this should be the only oak loved by the goddess of this very grove, or even were the goddess in this tree, I'll level to the ground its leafy head.' So boasted he, and while he swung on high his axe to strike a slanting blow, the oak beloved of Ceres, uttered a deep groan and shuddered. Instantly its dark green leaves turned pale, and all its acorns lost their green, and even its long branches drooped their arms. But when his impious hand had struck the trunk, and cut its bark, red blood poured from the wound,—as when a weighty sacrificial bull has fallen at the altar, streaming blood spouts from his stricken neck. All were amazed. And one of his attendants boldly tried to stay his cruel axe, and hindered him; but Erysichthon, fixing his stern eyes upon him, said, 'Let this, then, be the price of all your pious worship!' So he turned the poised axe from the tree, and clove his head sheer from his body, and again began to chop the hard oak. From the heart of it these words were uttered; 'Covered by the bark of this oak tree I long have dwelt a Nymph, beloved of Ceres, and before my death it has been granted me to prophesy, that I may die contented. Punishment for this vile deed stands waiting at your side.' No warning could avert his wicked arm. Much weakened by his countless blows, the tree, pulled down by straining ropes, gave way at last and leveled with its weight uncounted trees that grew around it.

[777] "Terrified and shocked, the sister-dryads, grieving for the grove and what they lost, put on their sable robes and hastened unto Ceres, whom they prayed, might rightly punish Erysichthon's crime;—the lovely goddess granted their request, and by the gracious movement of her head she shook the fruitful, cultivated fields, then heavy with the harvest; and she planned an unexampled punishment deserved, and not beyond his miserable crimes—the grisly bane of famine; but because it is not in the scope of Destiny, that two such deities should ever meet as Ceres and gaunt Famine,—calling forth from mountain-wilds a rustic Oread, the goddess Ceres, said to her, 'There is an ice-bound wilderness of barren soil in utmost Scythia, desolate and bare of trees and corn, where Torpid-Frost, White-Death and Palsy and Gaunt-Famine, hold their haunts; go there now, and command that Famine flit from there; and let her gnawing-essence pierce the entrails of this sacrilegious wretch, and there be hidden—Let her vanquish me and overcome the utmost power of food. Heed not misgivings of the journey's length, for you will guide my dragon-bridled car through lofty ether.'

[799] "And she gave to her the reins; and so the swiftly carried Nymph arrived in Scythia. There, upon the told of steepy Caucasus, when she had slipped their tight yoke from the dragons' harnessed necks, she searched for Famine in that granite land, and there she found her clutching at scant herbs, with nails and teeth. Beneath her shaggy hair her hollow eyes glared in her ghastly face, her lips were filthy and her throat was rough and blotched,

and all her entrails could be seen, enclosed in nothing but her shriveled skin; her crooked loins were dry uncovered bones, and where her belly should be was a void; her flabby breast was flat against her spine; her lean, emaciated body made her joints appear so large, her knobbed knees seemed large knots, and her swollen ankle-bones protruded.

[809] "When the Nymph, with keen sight, saw the Famine-monster, fearing to draw near she cried aloud the mandate she had brought from fruitful Ceres, and although the time had been but brief, and Famine far away, such hunger seized the Nymph, she had to turn her dragon-steeds, and flee through yielding air and the high clouds;—at Thessaly she stopped.

[814] "Grim Famine hastened to obey the will of Ceres, though their deeds are opposite, and rapidly through ether heights was borne to Erysichthon's home. When she arrived at midnight, slumber was upon the wretch, and as she folded him in her two wings, she breathed her pestilential poison through his mouth and throat and breast, and spread the curse of utmost hunger in his aching veins. When all was done as Ceres had decreed, she left the fertile world for bleak abodes, and her accustomed caves.

[823] "While this was done sweet Sleep with charming pinion soothed the mind of Erysichthon. In a dreamful feast he worked his jaws in vain, and ground his teeth, and swallowed air as his imagined food; till wearied with the effort he awoke to hunger scorching as a fire, which burned his entrails and compelled his raging jaws, so he, demanding all the foods of sea and earth and air, raged of his hunger, while the tables groaned with heaps before him spread; he, banqueting, sought banquets for more food, and as he gorged he always wanted more. The food of cities and a nation failed to satisfy the cravings of one man. The more his stomach gets, the more it needs—even as the ocean takes the streams of earth, although it swallows up great rivers drawn from lands remote, it never can be filled nor satisfied. And as devouring fire its fuel refuses never, but consumes unnumbered beams of wood, and burns for more the more 'tis fed, and from abundance gains increasing famine, so the raving jaws of wretched Erysichthon, ever craved all food in him, was only cause of food, and what he ate made only room for more.

[843] "And after Famine through his gluttony at last had wasted his ancestral wealth his raging hunger suffered no decline, and his insatiate gluttony increased. When all his wealth at last was eaten up, his daughter, worthy of a fate more kind, alone was left to him and her he sold. Descendant of a noble race, the girl refusing to be purchased as a slave, then hastened to the near shore of the sea, and as she stretched her arms above the waves, implored kind Neptune with her tears, 'Oh, you who have deprived me of virginity, deliver me from such a master's power!' Although the master, seeking her, had seen her only at that moment, Neptune changed her quickly from a woman to a man, by giving her the features of a man and garments proper to a fisher-man: and there she stood. He even looked at her and cried out, 'Hey, there! Expert of the rod! While you are casting forth the bit of brass, concealed so deftly in its tiny bait,—gods-willing! let the sea be smooth for you, and let the foolish fishes swimming up, never know danger till they snap the hook! Now tell me where is she, who only now, in tattered garment and wind-twisted hair, was standing on this shore—for I am sure I saw her standing on this shore, although no footstep shows her flight.'" By this assured the favor of the god protected her; delighted to be questioned of herself, she said, "No matter who you are, excuse me. So busy have I been at catching fish, I have not had the time to move my eyes from this pool; and that you may be assured I only tell the truth, may Neptune, God of ocean witness it, I have not seen a man where I am standing on this shore—myself excepted—not a woman has stood here." Her master could not doubt it, and deceived retraced his footsteps from the sandy shore. As soon as he had disappeared, her form unchanged, was given back to her. But when her father knew his daughter could transform her body and escape, he often sold

her first to one and then another—all of whom she cheated—as a mare, bird, a cow, or as a stag she got away; and so brought food, dishonestly, to ease his greed. And so he lived until the growing strength of famine, gnawing at his vitals, had consumed all he could get by selling her: his anguish burned him with increasing heat. He gnawed his own flesh, and he tore his limbs and fed his body all he took from it.

[879] "Ah, why should I dwell on the wondrous deeds of others—Even I, O gathered youths, have such a power I can often change my body till my limit has been reached. A while appearing in my real form, another moment coiled up as a snake, then as a monarch of the herd my strength increases in my horns—my strength increased in my two horns when I had two—but now my forehead, as you see, has lost one horn." And having ended with such words,— he groaned.