



Erysichthon of Thessaly and Mestra

Classical Greece

Erysichthon, King of Thessaly, had never felt the slightest respect for the gods. What is more, he even despised them in public. For him, there was only the world of men, which was a world that he dominated and knew well.

One day, he had the idea of building a large banqueting hall in which to show off his power and dominance. Not knowing where to obtain beams thick enough to support the ceiling of such a large room, Erysichthon came up with the idea of cutting down the sacred grove of the goddess Demeter. The thick evergreen oaks of the goddess forest had been planted by the Pelasgians, an ancient and primitive people who had inhabited the lands of Greece before the arrival of the Hellenes.

‘Yes,’ Erysichthon thought, ‘those old trees will provide me with the beams I need.’

He gathered about twenty of his strongest men, ordered them to get axes and saws, and they set off for the sacred forest. Seeing their arrival, the dryads of the grove were alarmed because the axes didn’t look as though they were going to bring any good with them.

Each oak was in the care of one of these dryad nymphs, and their intimate connections with their trees were so deep and so deep that the death of the trees would also cause the death of the nymph taking care of it.

Erysichthon dismounted and entered the grove with an axe, and at that moment a strange silence fell over the entire region, and only a

faint and mysterious breeze stirred the leaves of the trees. The King of Thessaly's men cowered at what they felt was a bad omen, and dare not enter. However, Erysichthon, seeing them fearful of the gods, flew into a rage and, uttering curses, grabbed the toughest of them by their straps and forced them to enter the sacred space. It was at that moment, with the noise of his curses, that the old priestess of the grove, Nicipe, came out to meet Erysichthon.

'Why on earth are you cursing, Sir?' Nicipe asked recognising the king of Thessaly. 'Do you want to offend the goddess with your shouts in this sacred place?'

Enraged, Erysichthon turned to the priestess and said: 'Who fears your goddess?' He snapped with contempt and announced to her, 'We have come to cut down and take away the trees of this useless sanctuary, in order to give them usefulness in the roof of my new banqueting hall. So stay away and do not bother.'

'You would not dare do something like that!' Nicipe shouted, deeply confused. 'You will offend the goddess! She will curse you!'

'With her curses we will cook a stew for my guests the day I open my hall!' Erysichthon answered with a grimace.

Without saying another word, he went to the oldest and largest oak in the grove and, without remorse, stuck the axe deeply into the thickest part of the trunk.

A sound not unlike a scream was heard throughout the region, and the soldiers of the King of Thessaly cringed in fear, thinking they were accomplices to a sacrilegious act. But Erysichthon was not daunted by this mysterious cry. On the contrary, it seemed to incite him to remove the axe with a wild pull and strike it deeply again, more furiously than before.

Blood began to spurt from the old sacred evergreen oak, while Nicipe shouted in horror and the king returned to his men to force them to enter the place and cut down all the trees of the sacred place.

'Stupid man! The priestess finally rebuked him, losing her fear. 'How dare you to do this? Who do you think you are? Compared to the goddess, you are nothing more than a weakling, an unarmed puppet.'

There are kingdoms that you do not know, kingdoms to which you will cause terrible damage, and Demeter will never forgive you ...’

‘Shut up now!’ Erysichthon shouted as he knocked her down with a brutal blow. ‘Enter at once and start cutting down the trees!’ He ordered his men, now mad with rage.

The soldiers, fearing their king’s immediate anger more than the bad omens and a future curse, folded under his mandate.

Within a few days, the sacred grove of Demeter was nothing more than a field of sad and dramatic stumps. For the nymphs, only the pain of a suddenly severed centuries-old existence remained.

Erysichthon finally built his banqueting hall, and boasted before his guests that he had cut down the sacred grove of Demeter.

‘The goddess, if she exists, would not dare to touch me,’ he said as he raised his cup of wine, ‘because she already knows that true ruler of Thessaly is me.’

And the truth is that, furious as she was, Demeter could not put the curse on him that, according to her, he deserved for his sacrilegious act. Demeter thought of punishing him with an insatiable hunger because of his banqueting hall, but she was the goddess who provides sustenance to human beings, and she should not, and could not, do anything contrary to her nature.

However, Erysichthon’s arrogance had not gone unnoticed among the community of gods and goddesses, and the skeletal Limos, daimon of hunger and famine –and spawn of Eris, the goddess of discord– came to Demeter’s aid. One night, Limos entered in the bedroom of Erysichthon and got into the bowels of the king of Thessaly while he slept.

Finally, the curse had fallen on Erysichthon, who, from then on, would never feel satiated again, no matter how much he ate.

That same night, Erysichthon woke up hungry and went down to the kitchens of his palace to gorge himself on the first thing he found. But the more he ate, the hungrier he felt. Thus, his life became a nightmare by continually trying to placate his hunger, and his desire to

gobble up everything that fell into his hands led him, over time, to squander his wealth and lose his crown.

In the end, this insatiable hunger that corroded his intestines and had brought misery and despair upon him, caused him to sell his own daughter, Mestra, as a slave, purely to have money to buy food.

The young woman, while waiting to embark on a ship for a distant slave market, invoked the god Poseidon, lord of the seas, begging him to free her from her sad fate. The sea god took pity on her and, by moving the waves near the dock, indicated that he granted her the power to change shape at will, so that she could slip away from the slave trader.

The trader was already heading towards the group of slaves, including Mestra, to force them to board the ship, when the young woman thought of becoming a stevedore in the port ... and her thought became reality. Mestra felt her flesh becoming tight and her skin becoming dry, while her gaze looked for a nearby bundle to carry. And so, carrying a bale of wool on 'his' now strong shoulders, 'he' slipped off the pier and out of the port before the slave trader could understand what had happened to the beautiful girl.

She returned to the humble hut where her father now lived, pitying his unfortunate fate. But the cursed Erysichthon only saw in her the possibility of obtaining more money, selling her again as a slave. In this way, Mestra was coming and going between different slave merchants and her father for months, transforming herself into a different being in order to escape each time ... into a calf, a deer, a bird ... Mestra, always feeling sorry for the man who had given life to her, returned again and again to his side to be sold once more by him to another trader of human beings.

Finally, tired of coming and going between her father and the slave traders, she returned one day to her father in a form unrecognisable to him, only to find him dying. Erysichthon, in the paroxysm of his curse, had ended up devouring himself.

Mestra had him buried in the most dignified way she could, having lost the throne and his fortune; and, above all, after losing the respect of everyone in the city. But the sadness over her father's death

gave way to a deep sense of freedom. Now she could do what she wanted, free of the filial commitment that had enslaved her.

Tired of the world and its people, she decided to take the form of a hind and dive into the woods. A herd of deer welcomed her, and Mestra spent the best years of her life living the simple life of all beings in the natural world.

Thus time passed until, one day, the goddess Artemis, deity of wild animals and pure places where no human dared put their feet, appeared in the territory of her herd. Artemis immediately realised that this hind was not a normal hind, so Mestra was forced to abandon the power granted by Poseidon and present herself before the goddess in her true form. Mestra confessed that she was the daughter of Erysichthon, the one who had destroyed the sacred grove of Demeter; she told her about the curse that had fallen on him and how she had suffered the consequences of that sacrilege.

‘Your filial love and your compassion for your father are commendable,’ the goddess finally said to her. ‘You can stay in the woods as long as you want, but be aware that this is no more than escapism. Someday you must return to the world that is your own, the world of mortal humans, and you will have to reconcile yourself with what your father did.’

However, Mestra still spent a long time in the woods, living with the dryads of the trees, like those who her father had killed by cutting down their sacred trees. She even made friends with three magnificent wolves, with whom she toured the mountains and sang to the moon on summer nights.

But, in the end, Mestra felt that the time had come to return to the world of humans, and her steps led her to the precise place where everything had begun, to what was once the sacred grove of Demeter.

The stumps of the old trees were now half hidden among the bushes and, despite the passed years, an atmosphere of deep sadness hung heavily over the place. Mestra knelt before the stump of what would have been the largest tree in the sanctuary, the one which her father slew wildly, and began to sing a sad and whining song. Inside her, she wept for the ravages that her father had caused, wept for the

sad fate that had brought the curse upon him and wept for the many years of voluntary penance she had spent away from mortal humans, and for being the daughter of the one who had desecrated the sacredness of the Earth. Finally, she asked Demeter for a way to reconcile her lineage with the world, the Earth and Life.

At that very moment she heard footsteps behind her. It was Nicipe, already very old, who had not wanted to move away from the place where the goddess had once lived. Mestra told her who she was, that she was the daughter of the man who had brought death and destruction to that place, and Nicipe explained that she tried to stop Mestra's father, and had felt guilty since then for not knowing how to placate that mad man.

The two women shared their feelings and comforted each other, and Mestra finally decided to stay and live in what had once been the sacred grove, to help Nicipe in her last years of life and to learn the ways of Demeter.

Together they planted new saplings of evergreen oaks in the forest and the sacred grove, and took care of them as they watched them grow, slowly, under the goddess' blessing.

Not many years later, Nicipe left this world to go to meet Demeter in her luminous realm, and Mestra went on to become the priestess of the sacred grove. Thus, the circle was closed, finally overcoming the curse that had fallen on her lineage through her father. She invited the dryads to inhabit the new oaks, and they gladly accepted her offer.

The trees grew, and Mestra aged taking care of them in the company of the dryads, until, finally, one day, the goddess lived again in her sacred grove. The damage caused by her father had finally been restored. The sacrilege of man, destroying the most sacred things of mother nature, had been restored, as if the original transgression had never taken place.

Mestra knew then that her father could now rest in peace. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

This adaptation of the myth of Erysichthon and his daughter Mestra is inspired, in some aspects, by the wonderful adaptation of this story that was written by Mary Oak O’Kane. In this version, Mestra –Metra for O’Kane– tells the story in the first person.

In fact, it was the version by O’Kane that we would have liked to have offered in the Collection, given that it seems to us to be a masterful adaptation which, in addition, is ideal to perform in traditional storytelling environments and artistic plays. However, not for want of trying, we could not contact Mary Oak O’Kane to ask her for permission, which is why we had to configure this personal adaptation as a last resort.

Sources

O’Kane, M.O. (2012). Of Greed and Measure. Spirit of Trees: Educational resources website. Recuperado de: <http://spiritoftrees.org/of-greed-and-measure>.

Ovid (2004). Erysichthon and Mestra. In *Metamorphoses*, Book 8. (David Raeburn, trans.). London: Penguin Books.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 5: Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Earth, Our Home.- The protection of Earth’s vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

Principle 12d: Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

