

Theatre training and performance workshop
Directed by Sam Kerson

Las Téoulères, France
June 26 to July 26, 2009

Dragon Dance Theatre
exploring visual and performing arts since 1976

This is the myth we are proposing to work from

Title: The Metamorphoses of Ovid
Literally Translated into English Prose, with Copious Notes
and Explanations

Author: Publius Ovidius Naso

Translator: Henry Thomas Riley

BOOK THE EIGHTH.

FABLE VII. [VIII.738-884]

Acheloüs continues his narrative with the story of Metra, the daughter of Erisichthon, who is attacked with insatiable hunger, for having cut down an oak, in one of the groves of Ceres. Metra begs of Neptune, who was formerly in love with her, the power of transforming herself into different shapes; that she may be enabled, if possible, to satisfy the voracious appetite of her father. By these means, Erisichthon, being obliged to expose her for sale, in order to purchase himself food, always recovers her again; until, by his repeated sale of her, the fraud is discovered. He at last becomes the avenger of his own impiety, by devouring his own limbs.

“Nor has the wife of Autolycus,[91] the daughter of Erisichthon, less privileges {than he}. Her father was one who despised the majesty of the Gods; and he offered them no honours on their altars. He is likewise said to have profaned with an axe a grove of Ceres, and to have violated her ancient woods with the iron. In these there was standing an oak with an ancient trunk, a wood {in itself} alone, fillets and tablets, {as} memorials,[92] and garlands, proofs of wishes that had been granted,

surrounded the middle of it. Often, beneath this {tree}, did the Dryads lead up the festive dance; often, too, with hands joined in order, did they go round the compass of its trunk; and the girth of the oak made up three times five ells. The rest of the wood, too, lay as much under this oak as the grass lay beneath the whole of the wood. Yet not on that account {even} did the son of Triopas[93] withhold the axe from it; and he ordered his servants to cut down the sacred oak; and when he saw them hesitate, {thus} ordered, the wicked {wretch}, snatching from one of them an axe, uttered these words: 'Were it not only beloved by a Goddess, but even were it a Goddess itself, it should now touch the ground with its leafy top.' {Thus} he said; and while he was poising his weapon for a side stroke, the Deoian oak[94] shuddered, and uttered a groan; and at once, its green leaves, and, with them, its acorns began to turn pale; and the long branches to be moistened with sweat. As soon as his impious hand had made an incision in its trunk, the blood flowed from the severed bark no otherwise than, as, at the time when the bull, a large victim, falls before the altars, the blood pours forth from his divided neck. All were amazed and one of the number attempted to hinder the wicked design, and to restrain the cruel axe. The Thessalian eyes him, and says, 'Take the reward of thy pious intentions,' and turns the axe from the tree upon the man, and hews off his head; and {then} hacks at the oak again; when such words as these are uttered from the middle of the oak: 'I, a Nymph,[95] most pleasing to Ceres, am beneath this wood; I, {now} dying, foretell to thee that the punishment of thy deeds, the solace of my death, is at hand.'

"He pursued his wicked design; and, at last, weakened by numberless blows, and pulled downward with ropes, the tree fell down, and with its weight levelled a great part of the wood. All her sisters, the Dryads, being shocked at the loss of the grove and their own, in their grief repaired to Ceres, in black array,[96] and requested the punishment of Erisichthon. She assented to their {request}, and the most beautiful Goddess, with the nodding of her head, shook the fields loaded with the heavy crops; and contrived {for him} a kind of punishment, lamentable, if he had not, for his crimes, been deserving of the sympathy of none, {namely}, to torment him with deadly Famine. And since that Goddess could not be approached by herself (for the Destinies do not allow Ceres and Famine to come together), in such words as these she addressed rustic Oreas, one of the mountain Deities: 'There is an icy region in the extreme part of Scythia, a dreary soil, a land, desolate, without corn {and} without trees; there dwell drowsy Cold, and Paleness, and Trembling, and famishing Hunger; order her to bury herself in the breast

of this sacrilegious {wretch}. Let no abundance of provisions overcome her; and let her surpass my powers in the contest. And that the length of the road may not alarm thee, take my chariot, take the dragons, which thou mayst guide aloft with the reins;’ and {then} she gave them to her.

“She, borne through the air on the chariot {thus} granted, arrived in Scythia; and, on the top of a steep mountain (they call it Caucasus), she unyoked the neck of the dragons, and beheld Famine, whom she was seeking, in a stony field, tearing up herbs, growing here and there, with her nails and with her teeth. Rough was her hair, her eyes hollow, paleness on her face, her lips white with scurf,[97] her jaws rough with rustiness; her skin hard, through which her bowels might be seen; her dry bones were projecting beneath her crooked loins; instead of a belly, there was {only} the place for a belly. You would think her breast was hanging, and was only supported from the chine[98] of the back. Leanness had, {to appearance}, increased her joints, and the caps of her knees were stiff, and excrescences projected from her overgrown ankles. Soon as {Oreas} beheld her at a distance (for she did not dare come near her), she delivered the commands of the Goddess; and, staying for so short a time, although she was at a distance from her, {and} although she had just come thither, still did she seem to feel hunger; and, turning the reins, she drove aloft the dragon’s back to Hæmonia.

“Famine executes the orders of Ceres (although she is ever opposing her operations), and is borne by the winds through the air to the assigned abode, and immediately enters the bedchamber of the sacrilegious {wretch}, and embraces him, sunk in a deep sleep ({for} it is night-time), with her two wings. She breathes herself into the man, and blows upon his jaws, and his breast, and his face; and she scatters hunger through his empty veins. And having {thus} executed her commission, she forsakes the fruitful world, and returns to her famished abode, her wonted fields. Gentle sleep is still soothing[99] Erisichon with its balmy wings. In a vision of his sleep he craves for food, and moves his jaws to no purpose, and tires his teeth {grinding} upon teeth, and wearies his throat deluded with imaginary food; and, instead of victuals, he devours in vain the yielding air. But when sleep is banished, his desire for eating is outrageous, and holds sway over his craving jaws, and his insatiate entrails. And no delay {is there}; he calls what the sea, what the earth, what the air produces, and complains of hunger with the tables set before him, and requires food in {the midst of} food. And what might be enough for {whole} cities, and what

{might be enough} for a {whole} people, is not sufficient for one man. The more, too, he swallows down into his stomach, the more does he desire. And just as the ocean receives rivers from the whole earth, and {yet} is not satiated with water, and drinks up the rivers of distant countries, and as the devouring fire never refuses fuel, and burns up beams of wood without number, and the greater the quantity that is given to it, the more does it crave, and it is the more voracious through the very abundance {of fuel}; so do the jaws of the impious Erisichthon receive all victuals {presented}, and at the same time ask for {more}. In him all food is {only} a ground for {more} food, and there is always room vacant for eating {still more}.

“And now, through his appetite, and the voracity of his capacious stomach, he had diminished his paternal estate; but yet, even then, did his shocking hunger remain undiminished, and the craving of his insatiable appetite continued in full vigour. At last, after he has swallowed down his estate into his paunch,[100] his daughter {alone} is remaining, undeserving of him for a father; her, too, he sells, pressed by want. Born of a noble race, she cannot brook a master; and stretching out her hands, over the neighbouring sea, she says, ‘Deliver me from a master, thou who dost possess the prize of my ravished virginity.’ This {prize} Neptune had {possessed himself of}. He, not despising her prayer, although, the moment before, she has been seen by her master in pursuit of her, both alters her form, and gives her the appearance of a man, and a habit befitting such as catch fish. Looking at her, her master says, ‘O thou manager of the rod, who dost cover the brazen {hook}, as it hangs, with tiny morsels, even so may the sea be smooth {for thee}, even so may the fish in the water be {ever} credulous for thee, and may they perceive no hook till caught; tell me where she is, who this moment was standing upon this shore (for standing on the shore I saw her), with her hair dishevelled, {and} in humble garb; for no further do her footsteps extend.’ She perceives that the favour of the God has turned to good purpose, and, well pleased that she is inquired after of herself, she replies to him, as he inquires, in these words: ‘Whoever thou art, excuse me, {but} I have not turned my eyes on any side from this water, and, busily employed, I have been attending to my pursuit. And that thou mayst the less disbelieve {me}, may the God of the sea so aid this employment of mine, no man has been for some time standing on this shore, myself only excepted, nor has any woman been standing {here}.’ Her master believed her, and, turning his feet {to go away}, he paced the sands, and, {thus} deceived, withdrew. Her own shape was restored to her.

"But when her father found that his {daughter} had a body capable of being transformed, he often sold the grand-daughter of Triopas to {other} masters. But she used to escape, sometimes as a mare, sometimes as a bird, now as a cow, now as a stag; and {so} provided a dishonest maintenance for her hungry parent. Yet, after this violence of his distemper had consumed all his provision, and had added fresh fuel to his dreadful malady: he himself, with mangling bites, began to tear his own limbs, and the miserable {wretch} used to feed his own body by diminishing it. {But} why do I dwell on the instances of others? I, too, O youths,[101] have a power of often changing my body, {though} limited in the number {of those changes}. For, one while, I appear what I now am, another while I am wreathed as a snake; then {as} the leader of a herd, I receive strength in my horns. In my horns, {I say}, so long as I could. Now, one side of my forehead is deprived of its weapons, as thou seest thyself." Sighs followed his words.

[Footnote 91: _Autolycus._--Ver. 738. He was the father of Anticlea, the mother of Ulysses, and was instructed by Mercury in the art of thieving. His wife was Metra, whose transformations are here described by the Poet.]

[Footnote 92: _Tablets as memorials._--Ver. 744. That is, they had inscribed on them the grateful thanks of the parties who placed them there to Ceres, for having granted their wishes.]

[Footnote 93: _Son of Triopas._--Ver. 751. Erisichthon was the son of Triopas.]

[Footnote 94: _Deoian oak._--Ver. 758. Belonging to Ceres. See Book vi. line 114.]

[Footnote 95: _I, a Nymph._--Ver. 771. She was one of the Hamadryads, whose lives terminated with those of the trees which they respectively inhabited.]

[Footnote 96: _In black array._--Ver. 778. The Romans wore mourning for the dead; which seems, in the time of the Republic, to have been black or dark blue for either sex. Under the Empire, the men continued to wear black, but the women wore white. On such occasions all ornaments were laid aside.]

[Footnote 97: _With scurf._--Ver. 802. Clarke gives this translation of 'Labra incana situ:' 'Her lips very white with nasty stuff.']

[Footnote 98: _From the chine._--Ver. 806. 'A spinæ tantummodo crate teneri,' is translated by Clarke, 'Was only supported by the wattling of her backbone.']

[Footnote 99: _Is still soothing._--Ver. 823. Clarke renders the words 'Lenis adhuc somnus--Erisichthona pennis mulcebat;' 'Gentle sleep as yet clapped Erisichthon with her wings.']

[Footnote 100: _Into his paunch._--Ver. 846. Clarke translates 'Tandem, demisso in viscera censu;' 'at last, after he had swallowed down all his estate into his g--ts.']

[Footnote 101: _I too, O youths._--Ver. 880. Acheloüs is addressing Theseus, Pirithoüs, and Lelex. The words, 'Etiam mihi sæpe novandi Corporis, O Juvenes,' is rendered by Clarke, 'I too, gentlemen, have the power of changing my body.']

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