

### Erysichthon handout

“No less power had the wife of Autolycus, Erysichthon’s daughter. This Erysichthon was a man who scorned the gods and burnt no sacrifice on their altars. He, so the story goes, once violated the sacred grove of Ceres with the axe and profaned those ancient trees with steel. There stood among these a mighty oak with strength matured by centuries of growth, itself a grove. Round about it hung woollen fillets, votive tablets, and wreaths of flowers, witnesses of granted prayers. Often beneath this tree dryads held their festival dances; often with hand linked to hand in line they would encircle the great tree whose mighty girth was full fifteen ells. It towered as high above other trees as they were higher than the grass that grew beneath. Yet not for this did Triopas’ son withhold his axe, as he bade his slaves cut down the sacred oak. But when he saw that they shrank back, the wretch snatched an axe from one of them and said: ‘Though this be not only the tree that the goddess loves, but even the goddess herself, now shall its leafy top touch the ground.’ He spoke; and while he poised his axe for the slanting stroke, the oak of Deo trembled and gave forth a groan; at the same time its leaves and its acorns grew pale, its long branches took on a pallid hue. But when that impious stroke cut into the trunk, blood came streaming forth from the severed bark, even as when a huge sacrificial bull has fallen at the altar, and from his smitten neck the blood pours forth. All were astonished, and one, bolder than the rest, tried to stop his wicked deed and stay his cruel axe. But the Thessalian looked at him and said: ‘Take that to pay you for your pious thought!’ and, turning the axe from the tree against the man, lopped off his head. Then, as he struck the oak blow after blow, from within the tree a voice was heard: ‘I, a nymph most dear to Ceres, dwell within this wood, and I prophesy with my dying breath, and find my death’s solace in it, that punishment is at hand for what you do.’ But he accomplished his crime; and at length the tree, weakened by countless blows and drawn down by ropes, fell and with its weight laid low a wide stretch of woods around.” (*Met.* 8.737-776> Tree nymphs ask Ceres for help. Ceres goes to Scythia and asks Famine’s help (she lives there: remember king of Scythians didn’t get agriculture in book 5 as he attempted to murder Triptolemus). Erysichthon becomes so hungry he eventually eats himself)

Q: Why might the felling scene in *Metamorphoses* 8 be evoked?

Lucan 3.399-452

“A grove there was, untouched by men’s hands from ancient times, whose interlacing boughs enclosed a space of darkness and cold shade, and banished the sunlight far above. No rural Pan dwelt there, no Silvanus, ruler of the woods, no Nymphs; but gods were worshipped there with savage rites, the altars were heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human gore. On those boughs—if antiquity, reverential of the gods, deserves any credit—birds feared to perch; in those coverts wild beasts would not lie down; no wind ever bore down upon that wood, nor thunderbolt hurled from black clouds; the trees, even when they spread their leaves to no breeze, rustled of themselves. Water, also, fell there in abundance from dark springs. The images of the gods, grim and rude, were uncouth blocks formed of felled tree-trunks. Their mere antiquity and the ghastly hue of their rotten timber struck terror; men feel less awe of deities worshipped under familiar forms; so much does it increase their sense of fear, not to know the gods whom they dread. Legend also told that often the subterranean hollows quaked and bellowed, that yew-trees fell down and rose again, that the glare of conflagration came from trees that were not on fire, and that serpents twined and glided round the stems. The people never resorted thither to worship at close quarters, but left the place to the gods. For, when the sun is in mid-heaven or dark night fills the sky, the priest himself dreads their approach and fears to surprise the lord of the grove.

This grove was sentenced by Caesar to fall before the stroke of the axe; for it grew near his works. Spared in earlier warfare, it stood there covered with trees among hills already cleared. But strong arms faltered; and the men, awed by the solemnity and terror of the place, believed that, if they aimed a blow at the sacred trunks, their axes would rebound against their own limbs. When Caesar saw that his soldiers were sore hindered and paralysed, he was the first to snatch an axe and swing it, and dared to cleave a towering oak with the steel: driving the blade into the desecrated wood, he cried: "Believe that I am guilty of sacrilege, and thenceforth none of you need fear to cut down the trees." Then all the men obeyed his bidding; they were not easy in their minds, nor had their fears been removed; but they had weighed Caesar's wrath against the wrath of heaven. Ash trees were felled, gnarled holmoaks overthrown; Dodona's oak, the alder that suits the sea, the cypress that bears witness to a monarch's grief,<sup>1</sup> all lost their leaves for the first time; robbed of their foliage, they let in the daylight; and the toppling wood, when smitten, supported itself by the close growth of its timber. The peoples of Gaul groaned at the sight; but the besieged men rejoiced; for who could have supposed that the injury to the gods would go unpunished? But Fortune often guards the guilty, and the gods must reserve their wrath for the unlucky. When wood enough was felled, waggons were sought through the countryside to convey it; and the husbandmen, robbed of their oxen, mourned for the harvest of the soil left untouched by the crooked plough." (tr., Duff loeb)

Q: why might the scene depicting the deforestation of a sacred Druidic grove in Lucan's 'Civil War' (3.399-452) be evoked (as argued by Leigh, M. 2010. 'Lucan's Caesar and the Sacred Grove. Deforestation and Enlightenment in Antiquity' in *Lucan: Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* volume ed. C. Tesoriero, 201-38)?