Masculine Consumption and Consequence in Ovid's Erysichthon Episode

This paper analyzes Ovid's treatment of masculinity in his account of the Thessalian king Erysichthon in *Metamorphoses* 8.738-878. Herein I argue that Erysichthon's masculinity is established as a destructive force, resulting directly in his consumption of every resource around him -- from the natural (Ceres' tree) to the financial (the wealth of his kingdom) to the corporeal (his own body). Ovid reinforces the notion that it is Erysichthon's very masculinity that results in his autophagy by framing his act of felling Ceres' sacred oak tree with language likening it to sexual violation: in describing his mutilation of the oak he uses the verbs *violare* (741), *temerare* (742), and *caedere* (769), as well as the noun *ictus* (775). All of these words can connote violent sexual behavior (Adams). This violation results in the hunger inflicted upon him by Fames at Ceres' behest: a consequence, or perhaps better yet retributive manifestation of, his masculinity. Erysichthon's identity as a masculine agent is thus rendered coterminous with his capacity for sexual assault; his masculinity itself becomes a kind of consumption, swallowing everything around him.

Such an exploration of Ovidian masculinity fits well in a scholarly context concerned with the poet's notoriously complex presentations of gender relations (Richlin, Hallett, et al.). The Erysichthon episode provides fertile ground for the study of Ovidian gender, proving itself particularly fruitful because although some work has been done on the femininity of Erysichthon's daughter (Fantham), such a study has yet to be conducted on Erysichthon's own masculinity. This paper concerns itself with Ovidian natural metaphor as well, particularly of the relationship of trees with bodies, and the permanence of tree desecration in contemporary and earlier Latin literature (Thomas), arguing for the interconnectedness of these elements of Ovid's poetic world.

I require no audio-visual aids for this presentation.

Select bibliography:

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