

Holy Moly

by L.L. Neuru

Who would have thought that planting bulbs in a fall garden would have reminded me of Homer's *Odyssey*, but this is how this article started. I ordered some bulbs by mail, and when I set out to plant them, one of the packets was labeled 'moly'. I hadn't ordered it, and in fact hadn't even known it really existed outside of Homer's imagination. Moly was the magical plant which protected Odysseus against Circe's magic spells.

In Book 10 of the *Odyssey*, the Greeks land on an island; in the middle they find a house with a beautiful woman inside, and all around it are wild animals very curiously tame. Circe invites the Greeks inside, and graciously gives them some wine, also a tap with a magic wand. From wine to swine, they are all turned to pigs but one, who escapes back to the

boat to tell Odysseus what has happened. Being a hero, Odysseus naturally has to go and rescue his men, and sets out. The god Hermes intercepts him and gives him a plant with a white flower and a black root, called moly, which he guarantees will shield him from Circe's magic. It does, of course, and Odysseus not only rescues his men, but is hospitably entertained for awhile thereafter.

Turning the blessed bulb over in my hand, I did not see much resemblance between my moly and Homer's. His moly has been identified with the mandrake (among other things) which has a forked blackish root and a white flower. It is thought to be 'curiously human' in form, the forked roots resembling legs. The whiteness of the flower signifies good, and the blackness of the root signifies evil, according to medieval folklore; both are found in human beings.

The Greeks used the mandrake as an anaesthetic for surgery, and to expel demons from the possessed. It was sometimes worn as an amulet, and was thought to repel misfortune. Mandrake is a rare plant; it is difficult to get the seeds to germinate (although one can actually get them in Canada) and it is hard to find in the wild where it does grow.

Both Theophrastus and Dioscorides claim, however, that what Homer actually meant by moly was a species of wild garlic. This certainly was what I seemed to find in my package: small, white bulbs with a faint garlicky smell which will eventually yield a yellow flower. Garlic is reputed to have as many if not more magic qualities than the mandrake, and was also well known and widely used by the Greeks, the Romans and the entire Mediterranean generally. Garlic repels insects, prevents the common cold if worn around the neck (but probably does this by repelling people who carry the cold...who wants to get close to anyone wearing garlic?), and wards off vampires. It is certainly more popular than the mandrake, easier to grow, and has a wider range of uses. Even if there are no vampires lurking about, garlic is extremely useful in the kitchen. What is pizza without it? Caesar Salad?

Garlic has great popularity among health food buffs because it is thought to lower blood pressure, clean arteries, stimulate the heart and provide an antibiotic cure for many things. It is sold in pills, in powder, in granules and flakes, in juice, in oil, in elixirs and lozenges. There is even a garlic flavoured ice cream sold at the Garlic Festival held in Gilroy, California, a town which boasts being the Garlic Capital of the world.

Garlic is food for lovers and supposed to be an aphrodisiac. I think it must work something like the above-mentioned cold preventative, that is, if the

lovers both eat garlic, they can probably count on being alone, and together, since most won't want to associate with them. Perhaps this is why it worked so well for Odysseus when he visited Circe, if Theophrastus and Dioscorides were right.