Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Book 6. 1-145 : Arachne and Minerva

Summary of the Story

Minerva, the Roman embodiment of Athena the Greek goddess of war and wisdom, was the inventor and patron deity of weaving and embroidery, skills which women in classical antiquity learned and practiced in the home. As a goddess, she expected the usual adoration and devotion from those who worshiped her, especially those gifted in her own spinner’s art. Arachne, a poor country girl, was known far and wide as a wondrous weaver. However, she was also boastful, claiming even that she was superior to Minerva. Offended, the goddess dressed up as an old hag and went to Arachne to warn her against her hubris (immoderate pride). Nothing fazed this girl who only slightly blushed when Minerva revealed herself. Far from giving credit to the goddess as the source of her skill, and unmindful of the danger posed by the presence of an angry deity so close by, the foolish girl challenged Minerva to a yarn duel, a looming Olympics.

In Ovid’s tale, when both are finished with their furious fabricating, Arachne has indeed won the contest—non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor / possit opus (“Not Pallas, not Envy could pluck out a flaw in that work”), says Ovid—having flawlessly detailed the gods and their improprieties with mortal women, a thinly-veiled ironic affront. Minerva, on the other hand, had spun pictures of puny mortals turned into various creatures after defying the gods’ warning, an admonition literally woven into every corner. As Ovid heads into the following passage, the question that lingers in the reader’s mind is what web of retribution has the arrogant Arachne spun for herself.

Translation of Parts Not Being Translated

BkVI:1-25 Arachne rejects Minerva

Tritonian Minerva had listened to every word, and approved of the Aonian Muses’ song, and their justifiable indignation. Then she said, to herself, ‘To give praise is not enough, let me be praised as well, and not allow my divine powers to be scorned without inflicting punishment.’ Her thoughts turned to Arachne, of Maeonia, whom she had heard would not give her due credit, in the art of spinning. The girl was not known for her place of birth, or family, but for her skill. Her father, Idmon of Colophon, dyed the absorbent wool purple, with Phocean murex. Her mother was dead. She too had been of humble birth, and the father the same. Nevertheless, though she lived in a modest home, in little Hypaepa, Arachne had gained a name for artistry, throughout the cities of Lydia.

Often the nymphs of Mount Tmolus deserted their vine-covered slopes, and the nymphs of the River Pactolus deserted their waves, to examine her wonderful workmanship. It was not only a joy to see the finished cloths, but also to watch them made: so much beauty added to art. Whether at first she was winding the rough yarn into a new ball, or working the stuff with her fingers, teasing out the clouds of wool, repeatedly, drawing them into long equal threads, twirling the slender spindle with practised thumb, or embroidering with her needle, you could see she was taught by Pallas. Yet she denied it, and took offence at the idea of such a teacher. ‘Contend with me’ she said ‘I will not disagree at all if I am beaten’.

Bk VI:26-69 Pallas Minerva challenges Arachne

Pallas Minerva took the shape of an old woman: adding grey hair to her temples, and ageing her limbs, which she supported with a stick. Then she spoke, to the girl, as follows. ‘Not everything old age has is to be shunned: knowledge comes with advancing years. Do not reject my advice: seek great fame amongst mortals for your skill in weaving, but give way to the goddess, and ask her forgiveness, rash girl, with a humble voice: she will forgive if you will ask.’ Arachne looked fiercely at her and left the work she was on: scarcely restraining her hands, and with dark anger in her face. Pallas, disguised it is true, received this answer. ‘Weak-minded and worn out by tedious old age, you come here, and having lived too long destroys you. Let your daughter-in-law if you have one, let your daughter if you have one, listen to your voice. I have wisdom enough of my own. You think your advice is never heeded: that is my feeling too. Why does she not come herself? Why does she shirk this contest?’

The goddess said ‘She is here!’ and, relinquishing the old woman’s form, revealed Pallas Minerva. The nymphs and the Phrygian women worshipped her godhead: the girl alone remained unafraid, yet she did blush, as the sky is accustomed to redden when Aurora first stirs, and, after a while, to whiten at the sun from the east. She is stubborn in her attempt, and rushes on to her fate, eager for a worthless prize. Now, Jupiter’s daughter does not refuse, and does not give warning, or delay the contest a moment. Immediately they both position themselves, in separate places, and stretch out the fine threads, for the warp, over twin frames. The frame is fastened to the cross-beam; the threads of the warp separated with the reed; the thread of the weft is inserted between, in the pointed shuttles that their fingers have readied; and, drawn through the warp, the threads of the weft are beaten into place, struck by the comb’s notched teeth. They each work quickly, and, with their clothes gathered in tight, under their breasts, apply skillful arms, their zeal not making it seem like work. There, shades of purple, dyed in Tyrian bronze vessels, are woven into the cloth, and also lighter colours, shading off gradually. The threads that touch seem the same, but the extremes are distant, as when, often, after a rainstorm, the expanse of the sky, struck by the sunlight, is stained by a rainbow in one vast arch, in which a thousand separate colours shine, but the eye itself still cannot see the transitions. There, are inserted lasting threads of gold, and an ancient tale is spun in the web.
Bk VI:70-102 Pallas weaves her web
Pallas Athene depicts the hill of Mars, and the court of the Aeropagus, in Cecrops's Athens, and the old dispute between Neptune and herself, as to who had the right to the city and its name. There the twelve gods sit in great majesty, on their high thrones, with Jupiter in the middle. She weaves the gods with their familiar attributes. The image of Jupiter is a royal one. There she portrays the Ocean god, standing and striking the rough stone, with his long trident, and seawater flowing from the centre of the shattered rock, a token of his claim to the city. She gives herself a shield, a sharp pointed spear, and a helmet for her head, while the aegis protects her breast. She shows an olive-tree with pale trunk, thick with fruit, born from the earth at a blow from her spear, the gods marvelling; and Victory crowns the work.

Bk 6:83-102 Minerva weaves punishments inflicted on mortals who challenge the gods

ut tamen exemplis intellegat aemula laudis,

quod pretium speret pro tam furialibus ausis

quattuor in partes certamina quattuor addit,

clara colore suo, brevibus distincta sigillis:

Threiciam Rhodopen habet angulus unus et Haemum,

nunc gelidos montes, mortalia corpora quondam,

nomina summorum sibi qui tribuere deorum;

altera Pygmaeae fatum miserabile matris

pars habet: hanc Iuno victam certamine iussit

esse gruem populisque suis indicere bellum;
pinxit et Antigonen, ausam contendere quondam

cum magni consorte Iovis, quam regia Iuno

in volucrem vertit, nec profuit Ilion illi

Laomedonve pater, sumptis quin candida pennis

ipsa sibi plaudat crepitante ciconia rostro;

qui superest solus, Cinyran habet angulus orbum;

isque gradus templi, natarum membra suarum,

amplectens saxoque iacens lacrimare videtur.

circuit extreimas oleis pacalibus oras

(is modus est) operisque sua facit arbore finem.
Bk VI:103-128 Arachne weaves hers in reply

The Maeonian girl depicts Europa deceived by the form of the bull: you would have thought it a real bull and real waves. She is seen looking back to the shore she has left, and calling to her companions, displaying fear at the touch of the surging water, and drawing up her shrinking feet. Also Arachne showed Asterie, held by the eagle, struggling, and Leda lying beneath the swan’s wings. She added Jupiter who, hidden in the form of a satyr, filled Antiope, daughter of Nycteus with twin offspring; who, as Amphitryon, was charmed by you, Alcmena, of Tiryns; by Danaë, as a golden shower; by Aegina, daughter of Asopus, as a flame; by Mnemosyne, as a shepherd; by Proserpine, Ceres’s daughter, as a spotted snake.

She wove you, Neptune, also, changed to a fierce bull for Canace, Aeolus’s daughter. In Enipeus’s form you begot the Aloidæ, and deceived Theophane as a ram. The golden-haired, gentlest, mother of the cornfields, knew you as a horse. The snake-haired mother of the winged horse, knew you as a winged bird. Melantho knew you as a dolphin. She gave all these their own aspects, and the aspects of the place. Here is Phoebus like a countryman, and she shows him now with the wings of a hawk, and now in a lion’s skin, and how as a shepherd he tricked Isse, Macareus’s daughter. She showed how Bacchus ensnared Erigone with delusive grapes, and how Saturn as the double of a horse begot Chiron. The outer edge of the web, surrounded by a narrow border, had flowers interwoven with entangled ivy.

Bk 6:129-145 Arachne is turned into a spider

Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor
possit opus: doluit successu flava virago 130
et rupit pictas, caelestia crimina, vestes,
utque Cytoriaco radium de monte tenebat,
der quater Idmoniae frontem percussit Arachnes.
non tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligavit
guttura: pendentem Pallas miserata levavit 135
atque ita 'vive quidem, pende tamen, inproba' dixit,

'lexque eadem poenae, ne sis secura futuri,

dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto!'

post ea discedens sucis Hecateidos herbae

sparsit: et extemplo tristi medicamine tactae

defluxere comae, cum quis et naris et aures,

fitque caput minimum; toto quoque corpore parva est:

in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,

cetera venter habet, de quo tamen illa remittit

stamen et antiquas exercet aranea telas. 145
Notes for Ovid Metemorphoses Bk 6.83-102 - Minerva’s Woven Warning

83 ut - intro purpose clause,
aemulus/a/um - emulating, rivalling, vying with – here used substantively “a rival”
84 pretium, i n. price, reward
tam + Adj. - so/such
furialis - of the Furies, like the Furies, furious, raging, dreadful, fearful
ausum, i n. - a bold deed, reckless act
85 pars, partis n. parts, i.e. the four corners
certamen, certaminis n. contest
86 clarus/a/um - clear, famous…which one is best here?; sigilla, ae f.- little images, figures
distinguo…distinctus –distinct, decorated; brevis, e – short; angulus, i m. angle, corner
87 Threïcius(of Thrace)-Thrace-A country bordering the Black Sea, Propontis and the northeastern Aegean.

Rhodope - A mountain in Thrace. Supposed to be a mortal turned into a mountain for assuming the name of a great god. [FYI Also the scene of the triennial festival of Bacchus, the trietericus. and the place where Orpheus flees there after losing Eurydice a second time.]

Haemus - A mountain in Thrace. Supposed to be a mortal turned into a mountain for assuming the name of a great god.
88 gelidus - icy cold, very cold, icy, frosty
89 qui - bring to the front fo this line
tribuō uī, ūtus, ere- to assign, impart, allot, bestow, confer, yield, give
90 mater, matris f. mother…here queen

Pygmaeus, Pygmies - A Pigmy, one of the dwarf peoples. The Queen of the Pygmies turned into a crane by Juno and forced to war against her own people.

Ovid, in common with many of the ancient historians, geographers, and naturalists, mentions the Pygmies, of which, from the time of Homer downwards, a nation was supposed to exist, in a state of continual warfare with the Cranes. Aristotle, who believed in their existence, placed them in Æthiopia; Pliny, Solinus, and Philostratus in India, near the source of the Ganges; others again, in Scythia, on the banks of the Danube. while Albertus Magnus supposed that the Pygmies were the monkeys, which are so numerous in the interior of Africa, and which were taken for human beings of diminutive stature. It is most probable, however, that the story was founded upon the diminutive stature of some of the native tribes of the interior of Africa.

11 Pygmaewn matron.]-Ver. 90. According to Ælian, the name of this queen of the Pigmys was Gerane, while other writers call her Pygas. She was worshipped by her subjects as a Goddess, which raised her to such a degree of conceit, that she despised the worship of the Deities, especially of Juno and Diana, on which in their indignation, they changed her into a crane, the most active enemy of the Pygmies. These people were dwarfs, living either in India, Arabia, or Thrace, and they were said not to exceed a cubit in height.

92 grus, gruis - crane; large bird; siege engine;
indoico, indicere, indictus declare publicly; proclaim, announce; appoint; summon;
93 Antigoñe.]—Ver. 98. She was the daughter of Laomedon, king of Troy, and was remarkable for the extreme beauty of her hair. Proud of this, she used to boast that she resembled Juno; on which the Goddess, offended at her presumption, changed her hair into serpents. In compassion, the Deities afterwards transformed her into a stork.
This is a semi-deponent verb! What you may ask, is a semi-deponent verb? Semi means “half,” and you will notice that it only has 3 principle parts, though the first one ends in –o. Semi-deponent verbs are verbs that look active in the top half of the chart [present stem things] and look passive in the bottom half of the chart [things using the perfect stem].

Here is a list of some common verbs that fall into this category:

- audere, audere, ausus sum, "dare"
- gaudere, gaudere, gavisus sum, "rejoice"
- solere, solere, solitus sum, "be accustomed to"
- confido, confidere, confisus sum, "trust in" + the dative
- fio, fieri, factus sum, "become, am made"

Like deponent verbs, the present active participial form (e.g. audens) is used for the present active translation, "daring" and the perfect passive participle (e.g. ausus) is used for the perfect active ["deponent] translation, "having dared".

95-96 volucr, volucris, volucre -winged; able to fly; here used substantively -a bird

Laomedon - The king of Troy, son of Ilus, father of Priam, Hesione and Antigone. Father of Antigone of Troy. [FYI He reneges on his agreement to reward Apollo and Neptune for building the walls of Troy. His daughter Hesione is chained to a rock to be taken by a sea-monster. Hercules rescues her and is also denied his reward. He seizes Troy and marries Hesione to Telamon.]

Ilion [Ilium], i.n another name for the city of Troy, named after King Ilus, Laomedon’s father quin conj. -Corroborative, but, indeed, really, verily, of a truth, nay, in fact: In a climax, with etiam or et, yea indeed, nay even sumptis…pennis – AblAbs sūmō, ere, sūmpsī, sūmpstus -to take, take up, take in hand, lay hold of, assume; to take, obtain, get, acquire, receive:

97 plaudo +dat – claps for [Dat]
cicōnia ae, f -a stork; rōstrum i, n, a beak, bill, snout, muzzle, mouth crepitō –, –, āre, [freq.-meaning it’s something that happens again and again]-to rattle, creak, crackle, clatter

98 super-sum or super sum fuī, esse. – Of a remainder, to be left, remain qui solus refers to the angulus, the only one [ie corner] which remains [Ovid’s already described the other 3 corners]

Cinyras - An Assyrian King. His daughters were changed into the stone steps of the temple, for their presumption.

13 Cinyras.]—Ver. 98. Cinyras had several daughters (besides Myrrha), remarkable for their extreme beauty. Growing insolent upon the strength of their good looks, and pretending to surpass even Juno herself in beauty, they incurred the resentment of that Goddess, who changed them into the steps of a temple, and transformed their father into a stone, as he was embracing the steps.

[FYI Another of his daughters, Myrrha, was cursed by the Furies to lust after her father, Cinyras. She got some help from her nurse and secretly seduced him. When he found out, he tried to kill her and chased her out of the country. She was pregnant with Adonis.]

orbus adj., deprived, bereft, esp. of parents or children; [not to be confused with orbis, orbis m. orb, circle, earth…which could never have an “us” ending]

99 gradus ús, m , a step, [DO of amplectans]

100 videtur – the passive of “to see” is often translated “to seem”

101 oras – does it come from os, oris – mouth, face or ora, orae f. shore, edge, margin?
pācālis , e, adj. pax, of or belonging to peace, peaceful olea ae, an olive, olive-berry, olive branch,m olive tree

102 modus i, m - a measure, extent, quantity; a measure, bound, limit, end, restriction opus, operis n. work, job, task…take with finem