

Weaving a Narrative on a Patriarchal Society: The Injustice Between Mortals and  
Immortals in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book Six lines 1-145

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The fifteen books comprising the *Metamorphoses* can be grouped according to several distinct themes. The first five and a half books recount the relationships between gods and mortals, primarily highlighting the theme of divine rape. At the beginning of Book 6 Ovid recounts an interaction between the goddess Athena and the mortal Arachne; highlighting issues of gender and the enormous inequality that exists between mortal and immortal. This story is an important addition to the theme of relationships between gods and mortals. Through a close reading of the text, I argue that Athena represents and supports the patriarchal society in which she resides, while Arachne rebels and, in turn, is punished.

### **A Look at Ovid**

Before Ovid presented *Metamorphoses* to the masses, he had a more traditional professional trajectory. Ovid was the second son of an equestrian family of high standing in the community who was expected to pursue a career in public service.<sup>1</sup> Ovid did in fact pursue this career path, even holding a seat among the “*decemviri stlitibus iudicandis* (‘Board of Ten for Judging Lawsuits’)”,<sup>2</sup> which was a widely-recognized position that often led to becoming a part of the senate. But this traditional path did not hold Ovid’s interest for long. Before his eventual exile, Ovid produced his most famous works, *Metamorphoses*.

Virgil, Horace, Tibullus and Propertius produced their writings in times of great upheaval or immediately following times of societal unrest. Their works reflect a time of struggle and fear. Ovid on the other hand, wrote in the time of the early Empire, a time that was primarily characterized by domestic peace.<sup>3</sup> Peter Knox claims of Ovid: “The great matters treated in his

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<sup>1</sup> Knox, 2009, 5

<sup>2</sup> Knox, 2009, 5

<sup>3</sup> Knox, 2009, 5

works are affairs of the heart and of character, rather than the state”.<sup>4</sup> Ovid did not write about political turmoil, he chose to explore relationships and the powerful emotions and dynamics of power therein in order to look at the world around him, that includes men and women and mortals and immortals.

One recurring theme in Ovid’s poetry is the sexualization of the vulnerable female body. In *Amores*, as the amator, Ovid explicitly describes the body of his lover, Corinna. His description is “one of the fullest and most carnal accounts of a mistress’s naked body on offer in Latin elegy”.<sup>5</sup> For example, in elegy 1.5, the Amator describes himself staring at a naked Corinna and describes the allure of every body part but her face. To be fair, Ovid also describes male bodies. But the way he chooses to illustrate the male body differs greatly from the way he described Corinna’s. His description of a male body is filled with innuendo and lacks explicit description in contrast to that for Corinna with her “smooth stomach beneath the faultless bosom”.<sup>6</sup> Ovid’s description of the male body is not nearly as explicit as his description of the female. This shows a difference in gaze. When describing the female, it is meant to be arousing, whereas when the male form is presented it is not meant to please and arouse. In Ovid’s writing, women are often sexualized figures. In Book 1 lines 473-503 Ovid describes Daphne whose loveliness opposes her prayer to remain a virgin. Later when Daphne attempts to flee the pursuit of Apollo in fear, she continues to be sexualized: “The winds bared her body, the opposing breezes in her way fluttered her clothes, the light airs threw her streaming hair behind her, her beauty enhanced by the flight.”<sup>7</sup> Even after Daphne prays for help and is turned into a tree,

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<sup>4</sup> Knox, 2009, 5

<sup>5</sup> Keith, 2009, 357

<sup>6</sup> Keith, 2009, 357

<sup>7</sup> Kline, 2017

Apollo continues to pursue her and her tree-like body is sexualized: “Placing his hand against the trunk, he felt her heart still quivering under the new bark. He clasped the branches as if they were parts of human arms, and kissed the wood”.<sup>8</sup> By sexualizing women, Ovid creates a hierarchy, where women are consistently vulnerable bodies, sexualized objects, and at the mercy of men’s desires. This behavior and imagery is exhibited countless times throughout the *Metamorphoses*, and the inequality is confronted in the story of Athena and Arachne.

Ovid claims in *Amores* that “many women want to be celebrated in his amatory verse”<sup>9</sup> as though this would be a position to strive for. While Ovid often describes women in a sexual manner<sup>10</sup>, he does in some way provide a voice for these females. Many of his poems bring forth the perspective of a woman and what she may be thinking. Unlike many other poets, Ovid enables the female a voice, even if it is ultimately through the writings of a man. In *Metamorphoses* Ovid provides many examples of women speaking their minds. To touch on the Daphne story again, prior to being pursued by Apollo, Daphne speaks her mind by begging her father to remain a virgin forever. Ovid also allows insight to Daphne’s emotions when she cries out for help in the midst of being pursued: “Help me father! If your streams have divine powers change me, destroy this beauty that pleases too well!”<sup>11</sup> Ovid depicts Daphne’s fear and her attempt to save herself from Apollo. Another stark example that allows for insight to a woman’s feelings is the story of Io. After Zeus transforms Io into a heifer Ovid highlights the loneliness

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<sup>8</sup> Kline, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Keith, 2009, 365

<sup>10</sup> Ovid also gendered catastrophes (such as the flood in Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*). He describes this flood as having feminine traits. The flood fertilizes the earth and regenerates the animal kingdom, which hints at a child-bearing female. Notably, this flood before regenerating life, wipes out an entire race. This is not necessarily a positive trait to be associated with the female. This idea is an interesting point to consider in conjunction with Ovid’s tendency to sexualize women, but not a point I will fully develop in this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Kline, 2017

and pain that Io feels. Io begins to follow her family and upon interacting with her father, “[Io] licked her father’s hand and kissed his palm, could not hold back her tears, and if only words could have come she would have begged for help, telling her name and her distress. With letters drawn in the dust with her hoof, instead of words, she traced the sad story of her changed form”.<sup>12</sup> Io has lost the ability to communicate, but Ovid allows readers the chance to understand her pain through his words. Other female characters in the *Metamorphoses* speak of their emotional and ethical dilemmas as well, such as Medea, Myrrha, Byblis and Athena and Arachne.

In the story of Athena and Arachne, Ovid highlights the inequality that exists between mortals and immortals and the existence of a patriarchal society. Ovid uses language in *Metamorphoses* to exhibit the inequality that exists between gods and goddesses, and immortals and mortals. E.J. Kenney wrote: “Few of the gods who figure in the *Metamorphoses* are presented in a dignified light. They more often than not behave cruelly and arbitrarily, and they, no less than the human beings whose destinies they purport and control, are subject to violent and irrational passions”.<sup>13</sup> In *Metamorphoses* Ovid displays many gods in undignified lights and the effects the god’s actions have on mortals (the rape of Io, Europa, Callisto, the imprisonment of Io through Hera, Hera’s punishment of Semele leading to her death, Athena’s ruling in the Muses favor, leaving the Pierides as birds, etc.) showing the inequality that exists between the two. In Ovid’s text about Athena and Arachne, his descriptions effectively highlight and confront this exact dichotomy while, in addition, making claims about the dichotomy between male and female.

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<sup>12</sup> Kline, 2017

<sup>13</sup> Kenney, 2009, 151

### Translation and Analytic Thought

I begin my analysis of the Arachne episode with a translation of the text and brief commentary, analyzing the word choices Ovid makes and following in the main body of my thesis. I will then connect these arguments to several points made by Ovidian scholars.

Praebuerat dictis Tritonia talibus aures	1
carminaque Aonidum iustamque probaverat iram;	
tum secum: 'laudare parum est, laudemur et ipsae	
numina nec sperni sine poena nostra sinamus.'	
Maeoniaeque animum fatis intendit Arachnes,	5
quam sibi lanificae non cedere laudibus artis audierat.	

To such words Tritonian Minerva had offered her ears  
 And she approved the Aeonians' songs and just anger.  
 Then, to herself, "to praise is not enough, let me be praised as well,  
 And not let my divinity be scorned without penalty."  
 Her thoughts turned upon the fate of Arachne, of Maeonia,  
 Whom she had heard would by no means praise her for the skill of weaving.

Line three gives some foreshadowing of the story that is about to unfold between Athena and Arachne. Athena wants to be praised as well and claims that there will be consequences to those who "scorn" her divinity. When speaking of praise that she deserves, her thoughts turn to Arachne. Ovid does not write that Athena had heard Arachne was not giving her credit for teaching her to weave, but that Arachne did not give praise to Athena for Arachne's own abilities. Additionally, Ovid's repetitive use of the word "praise" (*laudibus, laudare, laudemur*) can be correlated to the idea of a goddess' *ira* or pride (line 2). Athena needs this praise to sooth her pride. If that pride is disrupted, she will act out violently as goddesses often do when their *ira* is challenged. In line 2 there is mention of the Aeonians' [the Muses] song and their "just anger" of which Athena approved. Preceding Book 6 Athena serves as a judge to whether the anger of the Muses was just for the punishment they inflicted upon the Pierides. Athena decides the

Muses punishment of turning the Pierides into birds was in fact just and that story serves as a significant foreshadowing for the way she decides to punish Arachne.

non illa loco nec origine gentis  
 clara, sed arte fuit: pater huic Colophonius Idmon  
 Phocaico bibulas tinguebat murice lanas;  
 occiderat mater, sed et haec de plebe suoque 10  
 aequa viro fuerat; Lydas tamen illa per urbes  
 quaesierat studio nomen memorabile, quamvis  
 orta domo parva parvis habitabat Hypaepis.

That girl was not known for her place of birth,  
 Fame, but for her skill: Her father, Idmon of Colophon,  
 Dyed the wool soaked in Phocian purple  
 Her mother had died, Nevertheless, she was a commoner and equal status to her husband  
 Arachne created a name memorable for her skill through the cities of Lydia.  
 Though she was raised in a small house in small Hypaepa

This section highlights that Arachne comes from a humble background. Ovid wants to emphasize that Arachne is revered for her skill alone, not because of her family, wealth or any other factors. He juxtaposes the word *parva* and *parvis* (13) to stress where Arachne comes from. She is a small-town girl with a small house who would not normally receive this amount of attention for her talents because of her origin. This is glaringly different from Athena; whose city is large and temples are large. This dichotomy between Athena and Arachne and their social status is further reinforced later in the story and becomes an even larger issue as it extends to the gulf between immortal and mortal, between the patriarchy and those oppressed by it.

huius ut adspicerent opus admirabile, saepe  
 deseruere sui nymphae vineta Timoli, 15  
 deseruere suas nymphae Pactolides undas.  
 nec factas solum vestes, spectare iuvabat  
 tum quoque, cum fierent: tantus decor adfuit arti,

In order to look at her wonderful work,  
 Often the nymphs of Tmolus would desert their vineyards  
 And the nymphs of Pactolus would desert their waves  
 It was not only pleasant to behold the clothing,  
 But also to be present at the making, so much grace added to art.

To further illuminate Arachne's natural talents Ovid claims that nymphs from all over would *deseruere* (desert) their work just for the chance to see her working, well before the finished product. She is like a spectacle for people to observe, the type of attention that is usually reserved for gods. Arachne is encroaching upon the privileges of being a god/goddess, and as we will see later, Arachne must be punished for this 'transgression'.

sive rudem primos lanam glomerabat in orbes,  
 seu digitis subigebat opus repetitaque longo           20  
 vellera mollibat nebulas aequantia tractu,  
 sive levi teretem versabat pollice fusum,  
 seu pingebat acu; scires a Pallade doctam.

Whether first she was winding the wool into balls  
 If she worked it with fingers, repeatedly,  
 She teased the mist out of wool, softened the fine fleece equally,  
 Either twirling the smooth round spindle with practiced thumb,  
 Or with a needle she embroidered cloth, one could perceive she was taught by Athena.

In this section, Ovid further reinforces this idea that Arachne is so talented that people will be happy to simply watch her wind the wool. He provides vivid detail describing her methods to solidify this image and demonstrate that there is no trick or magic that makes her a good weaver. It is significant that Ovid uses the subjunctive *scires*, which can be translated as "perceive" or "might think". These words indicate it is not a fact that Athena taught Arachne the art of weaving, but she "might have" been, i.e. it is likely Arachne's skills are her own and indicative of her own genius. Thus, a conflict between Athena and Arachne exists because Athena feels like she is not getting credit where credit is due. Ovid seems to suggest that Arachne was not in fact taught by Athena and thus Athena's need to punish Arachne, must stem from a different issue.

quod tamen ipsa negat tantaque offensa magistra  
 'certet' ait 'mecum: nihil est, quod victa recusem!'           25



Yet she herself denied and took offense, offended by the thought of such a teacher,  
 "Contend with me, it's nothing, I will not disagree if I am beaten!"

This is the first moment where we see Arachne welcoming the challenge of Athena. Arachne claims that if she is beaten by Athena fairly, she will concede. Ovid uses the word *offense* (24), implying that Arachne, as most people would be, is "offended" by the notion that someone wants to take credit for her own work, especially one who represents a group which repeatedly takes advantage of not only mortals, but mortal women in particular.

Pallas anum simulat: falsosque in tempora canos  
 addit et infirmos, baculo quos sustinet, artus.  
 tum sic orsa loqui 'non omnia grandior aetas,  
 quae fugiamus, habet: seris venit usus ab annis.

Athena feigned the shape of an old woman,  
 Adding white to her temples and weak joints which she supported with a staff  
 Then she began to speak, "Old age does not have to be shunned,  
 Experience comes with advanced years."

This is the first instance in which we see Athena presenting herself to Arachne in a form that does not represent who she truly is. She attempts to "talk sense" into Arachne by presenting herself as an elderly woman, whose years of living command respect. Interestingly, Athena arrives in disguise as an old woman, not as an old man or young woman; Athena clearly thinks that Arachne will respond best to an older mortal woman. Perhaps since Arachne is trying to shed light on the oppressiveness of being a mortal woman, Athena thinks she will respond best to a woman who has lived that reality.

consilium ne sperne meum: tibi fama petatur 30  
 inter mortales faciendae maxima lanæ;  
 cede deae veniamque tuis, temeraria, dictis  
 supplice voce roga: veniam dabit illa roganti.'

"Do not despise my advice, let the greatest fame be sought  
 By you amongst mortals for weaving wool,  
 But give way to the goddess, ask for her forgiveness, reckless girl,  
 With a suppliant voice, she will forgive (surrender) to you asking."

In this section, Athena claims Arachne should strive for great fame only amongst mortals; she should not try to measure up with the gods. This is one of the first instances highlighting the inequality that exists between mortal and immortal. Athena, by telling Arachne to only gain fame amongst mortal reiterates that mortals and immortals are very distinct. She implies that immortals are superior to mortals and as such, mortals should measure themselves against their own. In their dialogue the goddess begins coolly stating that if Arachne simply asks for forgiveness for not giving credit to a goddess, even if she was not Arachne's teacher, Athena will forgive or surrender. When Arachne does not apologize, this illustrates an instance of a goddess' pride being attacked. Additionally, in both lines 32 and 33 Athena demands Arachne ask for "forgiveness", showcasing her sense of entitlement. She needs this mortal to seek forgiveness, but is Athena deserving of that sentiment?

Because of the patriarchal system with male gods reigning supreme, female goddesses must punish other women (particularly when their pride is wounded) since they are not able to directly attack the source (the males). Ovid provides many examples of this in the *Metamorphoses* including in Book 3 when Hera discovers Zeus has been sleeping with a mortal woman named Semele. In lines 273-315 Hera convinces Semele to demand Zeus sleep with her in all his godly glory, and when he does this, Semele cannot withstand his power and dies. In Book 6, Athena as a female goddess with male traits is in a unique position in that she is a female who does not have all the power of males, but exerts some of the same traits. It is important to recognize this style as one of the early examples of Athena asserting dominance over Arachne through the sharpness of her dialogue. By the end of this section, Athena is hinting that if Arachne does not beg for forgiveness, she will have to punish her in some way. Even if Arachne serves as a

scapegoat for what Athena is really trying to address: The lack of power that she craves as a goddess.

adspicit hanc torvis inceptaque fila relinquit  
 vixque manum retinens confessaque vultibus iram 35  
 talibus obscuram resecuta est Pallada dictis:  
 'mentis inops longaue venis confecta senecta,  
 et nimium vixisse diu nocet. audiat istas,  
 si qua tibi nurus est, si qua est tibi filia, voces;  
 consilii satis est in me mihi, neve monendo 40  
 profecisse putes, eadem est sententia nobis.

She looked piercingly as she abandoned her thread,  
 Scarcely restraining her hands, dark rage in her face,  
 She answered with things said, disguised Athena:  
 “Weak minded and worn out by old age.  
 You come here, and having lived too long inhibits you.  
 Let your daughter in law if you have any, or your daughter if you have any hear your  
 voice,  
 I have knowledge enough of my own, nor should you think your notion is heeded,  
 That is the same feeling I have.

In this section, Ovid illustrates that while Arachne is a talented weaver, she does not act towards others the way society expects her to. She does not respect the gods in the way she is supposed to (based on previous sections that illustrate Arachne disrespecting Athena and her ‘ownership’ over the title of best weaver) and she does not converse with elders in the appropriate way. She *vixque retinens* “scarcely restrains” her hands, insinuating she might physically hurt this elderly woman. Arachne also claims to have *consilii mihi*; she has her own knowledge, knowledge that does not need to come from other people. Arachne in this section is not only disrespecting of Athena in her disguise, but she disrespects an elderly woman. Ovid gives us the opportunity to see Arachne defending herself and advocating for her point of view; she does not need elderly women telling her what to do, nor does she need these patriarchal male gods telling her what to do. She is knowledgeable enough on her own. We will see later that Athena, as someone who

represents the patriarchal system, does not appreciate when Arachne fights back and claims to have knowledge enough herself.

cur non ipsa venit? cur haec certamina vitat?  
 tum dea 'venit!' ait formamque removit anilem  
 Palladaque exhibuit: venerantur numina nymphae  
 Mygdonidesque nurus; sola est non territa virgo, 45

Why does she not come herself? Why does she avoid this contest?"  
 Then the goddess said "She has come!" and withdrew the old woman appearance,  
 Revealing Pallas Athena; the nymphs and women of Mygdonia worshipped the goddess,  
 The maid Arachne alone remained unafraid.

Arachne eventually gets to her main point, asking if the goddess is so upset by Arachne's inability to acknowledge her as a teacher, why does she not just come and challenge her herself. In this line, Arachne is exasperated and simply wants Athena to confront her issues of pride. When she finally does reveal herself, Arachne remains unafraid, *non territa* (45). Arachne has not done anything new to force Athena to reveal herself, so there lies of a question of why Athena could not hold her disguise any longer. I argue that it is her sense of pride or *ira* that prompts her to appear. She cannot stand that Arachne will continue being revered without thanking the goddess for her skills. Athena cannot help but reveal herself because she needs to best Arachne. She needs to keep her pride intact and put this poor, small, mortal woman back in her place. Additionally, this is the first time the word *certamina* is used. Suddenly it is a contest. Contests tend to have winners and losers, so this word foreshadows that Arachne is aware of what she is getting into and possibly her eventual fate. The use of the word contest may be another reason Athena decides to reveal herself. It is also significant that Ovid uses the word *sola* and *non territa*. Arachne is the only one in this group of people who remains unafraid of Athena. It is almost as though Arachne knew whom she might be talking to and therefore is unafraid when Athena finally appears. Or Arachne is confident enough in her ability and her right to stand

up for herself. It could be that Arachne alone hoped Athena would come so she could make a point to her about the injustice of the oppressed.

sed tamen erubuit, subitusque invita notavit  
 ora rubor rursusque evanuit, ut solet aer  
 purpureus fieri, cum primum Aurora movetur,  
 et breve post tempus candescere solis ab ortu.

A sudden redness reluctantly marks her face  
 And again vanished  
 As the purple colored sky does when Aurora first stirs,  
 And after a short time, to whiten at the sun rising from the east.

In this section, it is important to note that Ovid uses the word *invita* (46), which can be translated as reluctant. Arachne did not intend to blush but did so reluctantly and unwillingly. I will argue later that Arachne can be regarded as a rape victim in this situation and the words Ovid uses to describe her reaction to Athena help confirm that argument.

perstat in incepto stolidaeque cupidine palmae  
 in sua fata ruit; neque enim Iove nata recusat  
 nec monet ulterius nec iam certamina differt.  
 haud mora, constituunt diversis partibus ambae  
 et gracili geminas intendunt stamine telas:

She is stubborn in her attempt, rushing into her own fate, wishing for a worthless prize,  
 Nor, in fact, did the daughter of Zeus, either refuse  
 Nor warn nor further delay the contest now.  
 Both without delay station themselves, at separate places,  
 And extend their twin looms with fine warp

In first line of this section Ovid suggests to the reader that Arachne seems to know what she is getting into when she enters this contest with Athena. Ovid first uses the word “persevere” to describe Arachne. Even if she knows what may befall her, her need to persevere bars her from bowing out. The next phrase describes her rushing towards her own destruction. Ovid illustrates that Arachne is fully aware that, although she may win the contest, she is facing destruction and is wishing for a prize that is worthless. Since Ovid describes the prize as “worthless”, we can



in quo diversi niteant cum mille colores, 65  
 transitus ipse tamen spectantia lumina fallit:  
 usque adeo, quod tangit, idem est; tamen ultima distant.  
 illic et lentum filis inmittitur aurum  
 et vetus in tela deducitur argumentum.

Both made haste, their clothes girded to their breasts  
 Moving their learned arms, their zeal deceiving it to not look like work  
 There, shades of purple, dyed in Tyrian copper vessels, are woven in  
 Diluted colors shading off gradually  
 As when often after a rainstorm the sun ray strikes through the vast sky,  
 Spanned with a bending rainbow, in which a thousand separate colors glisten  
 The threads that border seem the same, but the farthest stand apart  
 Nevertheless, the looker themselves is deceived by the transitions  
 There, inserted, are clinging threads of gold  
 And an ancient tale is described in the web

In this section, Ovid lulls the reader into a sense of safety and peace with the beautiful imagery used to describe the women weaving. For a moment, the reader forgets this is a competition between a goddess whose *ira* has been roused and a mortal woman who is attempting to prove a point to a goddess. The repetitive use of colors and light: *purpura*, *aenum*, *solibus*, *arcus*, and *aurum* creates the feeling of a calm before the storm. The colors and light soon to be put out by heaviness and darkness of the content that will be woven in the women's tapestries.

Cecropia Pallas scopulum Mavortis in arce 70  
 pingit et antiquam de terrae nomine litem.  
 bis sex caelestes medio Iove sedibus altis  
 augusta gravitate sedent; sua quemque deorum  
 inscribit facies: Iovis est regalis imago;  
 stare deum pelagi longoque ferire tridente 75  
 aspera saxa facit, medioque e vulnere saxi  
 exsiluisse fretum, quo pignore vindicet urbem;

Pallas depicts the cliff of Mars, and the citadel of Cecrops  
 And the ancient quarrel about the name of the land  
 The twelve gods sit in great glory, with Zeus in the middle,  
 On their high thrones, she weaves each god to their appearance:  
 The form of Zeus is royal;  
 She composes the god of the sea, standing and striking the hard stones

With his long trident and from the midst of a shattered rock  
The sea springs out, a pledge of his claim to the city

This section contains the first description of the male gods as portrayed by Athena. The adjectives used to describe these gods are overwhelmingly positive, which showcases Athena's support of them. Each god is described as sitting in "great glory," (*altis gravitate*, 72) Zeus alone as "royal" (*regalis*, 74). Athena begins her story illustrating the gods positively by describing how Poseidon laid claim to Athens. But the way it is described supports the idea of male dominance in this society. Poseidon aggressively "strikes" (*ferire*, 75) a "troublesome" (*aspera*, 76) stone and after "shattering" (*vulnere*, 76) this rock claims it is his. Additionally, Poseidon using his trident to strike the rock is inherently phallic. Here is the first example of a male using aggression to acquire his want, and once inflicting this violence, claims it belongs to him. This is similar in theme to what we see later with Athena when she "strikes" Arachne with the phallic looking shuttle and lays claim as the real winner of the competition.

at sibi dat clipeum, dat acutae cuspidis hastam,  
dat galeam capiti, defenditur aegide pectus,  
percussamque sua simulat de cuspide terram                      80  
edere cum bacis fetum canentis olivae;  
mirarique deos: operis Victoria finis.

She gives herself a shield and she gives (herself) a sharp pointed spear,  
She gives (herself) a helmet for her head and an aegis that protects her breast  
She illustrates an olive tree, thick with berries,  
Produced of the earth at the strike of her own spear,  
The gods marveled: And Victory marks the end of her work

After the description of Poseidon claiming the city, Athena begins to weave about her own experience. She first takes care to weave in the detail of the warrior garb she wears. Most female goddesses are not described as wearing battle attire, as many of the male gods are. This is another example where we see Athena portrayed as having masculine tendencies, more about



which I will discuss later. Athena is also described in this section as “striking” (*percussam*, 80) this earth in order for it to produce the olive tree. This imagery is phallic and similar to what Poseidon was described doing previously. This repetitive use of the word *percussam* (80) and *ferire* (75) meaning “to strike”, shows that, as I mentioned, Ovid wants to emphasize how often physical violence is used by the gods to achieve their goal. We will see this word presented again when Athena strikes Arachne with her weaving shuttle. These “strikes” show the god’s unfair power and are often followed with its victim rendered helpless. This story of the competition between Athena and Poseidon is a significant one. Ultimately, a female goddess wins against a male god. Something important to note here is that there is not any description explicitly stating Athena’s victory over a male. Athena simply strikes the earth and “the gods marveled” (82). That is the extent of the description to her victory over a male. So far, inequality between mortals and immortals has been showcased and this is one instance that highlights the inequality between males and females based on the lack of description celebrating Athena’s victory over a man.

ut tamen exemplis intellegat aemula laudis,  
 quod pretium speret pro tam furialibus ausis  
 quattuor in partes certamina quattuor addit,                   85  
 clara colore suo, brevibus distincta sigillis:

Nevertheless so that her rival might realize from the praise worthy examples,  
 What price she might anticipate for her mad boldness  
 She inserts four sections of contests in the four corners,  
 Each with little figures in their own distinguished clear colors

In this section, it is confirmed that Athena has already predicted the outcome of this rivalry. She weaves examples of others so that Arachne will know what is to come because of her behavior. This section, illustrating that Athena wants Arachne to know what will happen to her, proves that Athena does not care if Arachne “wins” the contest. No matter what, Arachne will be punished for her actions. Since Athena places no value on the technical winner, it brings into question

what exactly Athena is punishing Arachne for. It is clear now that she will not be punished for being a weaver that rivals Athena because she has not had a chance to prove that yet. Athena challenged her for an ulterior motive (making an example out of a mortal woman) which I deduce is because Arachne stood up to the gods and, in turn, challenged the patriarchy that reigns over her society. As I mentioned in a previous section, Arachne proves to be a woman who does not seek knowledge from gods. By claiming to have enough knowledge on her own, Arachne is threatening male/god's status as the beings with the most knowledge and therefore power. In this section, we really see that Athena is here to punish her for that reason, not because she is a talented weaver. In lines 83-85 Athena begins to weave claiming, "her rival might realize from the praise-worthy examples what price she might anticipate for her mad boldness". Even before Arachne starts weaving Athena alludes to Arachne's fate. The examples portray mortals being punished for equating themselves with the gods. By this logic, Athena already knows Arachne will be punished preceding Arachne's chances to weave.

Threiciam Rhodopen habet angulus unus et Haemum,  
nunc gelidos montes, mortalia corpora quondam,  
nomina summorum sibi qui tribuere deorum;

One corner has Thracian Mount Rhodope and Mount Haemus  
Now icy mountains, formerly mortal beings,  
Who bestowed the names of the uppermost gods on themselves

This begins Athena's portrayal of what happens to mortals when they try to contend with the gods. She first illustrates Rhodope and Haemus who called themselves Hera and Zeus and were punished for thinking of themselves among the ranks of the gods.

altera Pygmaeae fatum miserabile matris  
pars habet: hanc Iuno victam certamine iussit  
esse gruem populisque suis indicere bellum; 90

The other corner shows the miserable fate of the queen of Pygmies:

How Hera, having defeated her in a contest, ordered her to become a crane  
 And declare a war on her own people

In this section, Athena illustrates the Queen of Pygmies who threatened Hera's *ira* by boasting of her own beauty over Hera's, similar to Arachne boasting of her talents over Athena. A goddess' *ira* has been wounded and so the attacker must be punished. This again illustrates the dichotomy between mortals and immortals and the female goddess' need to lash out at other women since they cannot direct their rage towards the males. Most women that boast of being beautiful or simply are beautiful, end up gaining attention from Zeus (Leto, Callisto, Europa, etc.). Since Hera does not have the option of confronting Zeus himself, she rebels against the women. In this situation, Zeus did not rape the queen of the Pygmies, but Hera reacts the same way she has been forced to in the past because she cannot address the issue she really wants to, which is the oppressiveness from her male god partner. Pointedly, in the text through the use of the word *miserabile* (90), Ovid invites the reader to feel pity or sadness for this queen. He did not describe it as just punishment, but the "miserable fate" of the queen, which is brought on by a goddess who can never confront her husband, the pinnacle of the patriarchal society, so she takes it out on the women that fall subject to his lust.

pinxit et Antigonem, ausam contendere quondam  
 cum magni consorte Iovis, quam regia Iuno  
 in volucrem vertit, nec profuit Ilion illi                                95  
 Laomedone pater, sumptis quin candida pennis  
 ipsa sibi plaudat crepitante ciconia rostro;

And she depicts Antigone, whom Queen Hera turned into a bird  
 For having dared to contend with great Zeus's consort  
 Neither her father Laomedon, nor her city of Ilium were of any use  
 But taking wing as a shining white stork  
 She applauds herself with her clattering beak

In the third corner, we are introduced to the story of Antigone. It is crucial to note that Ovid uses the word *consorte* (94) in a possessive form to describe Hera in relation to Zeus. She is not

portrayed as an equal to Zeus, but a possession—his great consort/wife, not his great equal. She must be described in terms of Zeus because he is the pinnacle and she is not.

qui superest solus, Cinyran habet angulus orbum;  
isque gradus templi, natarum membra suarum,  
amplectens saxoque iacens lacrimare videtur.                   100  
circuit extremas oleis pacalibus oras  
(is modus est) operisque sua facit arbore finem.

The remaining corner has Cinyras mourning,  
He is seen weeping, embracing the stone steps of the temple  
That once were the limbs of his own daughters.  
Athena surrounded the outermost borders with peaceful olive  
And she made end to her work with emblems of her own tree (this was the last part)

Lastly, Athena illustrates Cinyras who is mourning the death of his daughters. Ovid explicitly describes Cinyras' daughters whose limbs now serve as steps to a temple. This particular story is not widely known. In fact, even modern scholars have not discovered any other report of Cinyras and his misfortune.<sup>14</sup> The general consensus is that the daughters of Cinyras boasted of their beauty over a certain goddess, possibly in her temple and consequently their limbs became the steps that led to this particular goddess's temple.<sup>15</sup> That serves as a stark example of what happens to mortal women who step out of their assigned place. Athena depicts all these violent scenes, yet she decorates the border with "peaceful olive" and emblems of her own tree. The olive branch supposedly represents peace, yet her tapestry only illustrates violence and conflict.

Maeonis elusam designat imagine tauri  
Europam: verum taurum, freta vera putares;  
ipsa videbatur terras spectare relictas                   105  
et comites clamare suas tactumque vereri  
adsilientis aquae timidisque reducere plantas.

The Maeonian girl, [Arachne] describes Europa,

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<sup>14</sup> Anderson, 1972, 164

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, 1972, 164

Deceived by the image of the bull, you would have believed it was a real bull and real waves  
She herself is seen gazing at the land she left  
And crying out to the friends, displaying fear to the touch of rushing water,  
And drawing back her fearful feet

Arachne begins to weave her web and the imagery she begins with is one of the most famous stories of rape and abduction. The words Ovid uses to describe this story resonates with rejection and fear. Europa is “crying” (*clamare*, 106) out, “displaying fear” (*vereri*, 106) and pulling away “fearful feet” (*timidasque plantas*, 107). Arachne is beginning to show that while some mortals offended the gods and were punished, many were just the unlucky victims of a god’s *amor* and sexual violence. There is also no mention of anyone coming to save Europa (and other women described next) or complaining of the injustice afterwards. Arachne shows Europa “crying out” for her friends. Notice there is no description of those friends calling back. It is safe to assume that once picked by a god to be abducted and raped, no one will or even can call that behavior into question.

fecit et Asterien aquila luctante teneri,  
fecit olorinis Ledam recubare sub alis;  
addidit, ut satyri celatus imagine pulchram                      110  
Iuppiter inplerit gemino Nycteida fetu,  
Amphitryon fuerit, cum te, Tirynthia, cepit,  
aureus ut Danaen, Asopida luserit ignis,  
Mnemosynen pastor, varius Deoida serpens

Also [Arachne] shows Asterie, grasped by the eagle, struggling  
And Leda lying underneath the swan’s wings  
She inserted Jupiter, who concealed in likeness of a satyr, filled beautiful Antiope,  
daughter of Nycteus, with twin offspring,  
As Amphitryon, when he took you daughter of Tiryns, as golden fire he played around  
with Danae the daughter of Asopus,  
As a shepherd [he played with] Mnemosyne, as a spotted snake Persephone

Arachne then goes on to display numerous examples of the women who were deceived by the gods and subsequently raped, which often led to pregnancy. Arachne showcases the occurrences

when gods transformed for their own gain, without the consent of these unsuspecting mortals. She is directly contradicting Athena's ideas that gods only punish these mortals who ask for it or challenge gods. It is also important that all these male gods are seeking out defenseless mortal women; the sheer number of examples Arachne provides makes clear that these gods believe "having" these women are their right. Additionally, we just watched Athena disguise herself in order to get into this contest. Athena also took advantage of appearing like another person to gain something she wanted.

te quoque mutatum torvo, Neptune, iuvenco	115
virgine in Aeolia posuit; tu visus Enipeus	
gignis Aloidas, aries Bisaltida fallis,	
et te flava comas frugum mitissima mater	
sensit equum, sensit volucrem crinita colubris	
mater equi volucris, sensit delphina Melantho:	120

She [Arachne] put in you also, Poseidon,  
 Shifting to a wild bull, with the young daughter [Canace] in Aeolia,  
 In Enipeus's appearance, you begot Aloidae and deceived [Theophane] as a ram  
 The golden haired, soothing, mother of cornfields, saw you as a horse  
 The snake haired mother of the winged horse perceived you as a bird  
 Melantho knew you as a dolphin

In this section, we move from Zeus's rapes to Poseidon's. This section proves that it is not just the almighty Zeus who can get away with heinous acts, but other gods as well. Ovid repeatedly uses the word *fallo* (60,117) which means deceive. None of these gods is surprising women in a positive way. The use of the word "deceive" indicates not only that this practice is unwanted trickery, but by using the word deceive we can also infer that the gods on some level know that what they are doing is wrong. That such deceptions occur repeatedly makes them almost normal and acceptable, but because the gods have to deceive these women, they must know that they if they arrived as they are, the mortal woman may not in fact chose to go with them willingly.

omnibus his faciemque suam faciemque locorum  
 reddidit. est illic agrestis imagine Phoebus,

utque modo accipitris pennas, modo terga leonis  
 gesserit, ut pastor Macareida luserit Issen,  
 Liber ut Erigonen falsa deceperit uva, 125  
 ut Saturnus equo geminum Chirona crearit.

She delivered all these in their own shape, and the shape of the place.  
 There is Apollo, imitating a countryman,  
 And now with the wings of a hawk, and now in the skin of a lion,  
 And now as a shepherd he tricks Macareus's daughter, Isse.  
 Arachne showed how [Bacchus] deceived Erigone with fictitious grapes  
 And how Saturn as the twin of a horse begot Chiron.

In Arachne's final depiction of gods taking advantage of women we see an additional list of rapes and deceptions portrayed. Even Bacchus, less famous than Zeus and Poseidon, takes advantage of his position in the patriarchal society. The fact that Arachne includes a god that is lesser in fame solidifies the point that any male god can take advantage of their position. At this point, both tapestries and the stories depicted on them have been revealed. Arachne depicts a horde of male gods taking advantage of women, while Athena shows both males and females. The goddess by depicting male and female goddess insinuates that they are equal in their quest to put mortals in their place. But when Arachne depicts all those male gods she forces Athena to recognize her own place as a female goddess amongst the gods. That position is not equal. While goddesses have more power than mortals, Arachne forces Athena to confront the fact that most goddesses act out of malice towards mortals because of the oppressive nature of the male gods, not because they have absolute power and privilege, nor because those mortals deserve such wrath.

ultima pars telae, tenui circumdata limbo,  
 nexilibus flores hederis habet intertextos.

Finally, the outer part of the web, surrounded by a slim border  
 Had flowers intertwining with tangled ivy

Athena encircled the edges of her tapestry with olive trees and vines. Olives tend to represent peace (like an olive branch) and so Athena is stating that even though the gods had to punish some mortals who over stepped their boundaries, it is still a time of peace and harmony. She is making a statement that the current society is peaceful and those residing in it are primarily appeased. When Arachne surrounds her tapestry with tangled ivy, however, it makes a very different statement. Ivy is a plant that can grow in the most difficult of environments. By choosing ivy, Arachne suggests not only that the environment is not, in fact, peaceful and nurturing, but that she and others will continue to fight and grow in spite of it.

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,  
 ter quater Idmoniae frontem percussit Arachnes.

Neither Athena nor Envy itself could criticize that work  
 The golden haired warlike goddess was pained by its success  
 And she tore the tapestry, embroidered with sins of the gods  
 And she grasped the boxwood shuttle from Mount Cytorus,  
 She struck Idmonian Arachne, three then four times on the forehead.

Finally, we get proof of Athena's real intentions. Ovid claims that Athena could not criticize the work of Arachne. It was, in fact, better than hers and in her anger over someone who has thwarted her, she reacts with violence (*ira*) in line 134. After Arachne forces Athena to ponder the ill-intentions of her equals, Athena feels there is no choice but to punish her. It is also important that Ovid uses the word *crimina* (131) to describe the acts of the gods. All parties are acknowledging that they are crimes or sinful. Additionally, this is when Athena is portrayed acting aggressively with a phallic weapon in a manner similar to that of Poseidon described earlier when he attempted to lay claim to Athens. The physical beating also mirrors violent and



sexual abuse that has been illustrated in other sections as coming from male gods to female mortals.

non tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligavit  
 guttura: pendentem Pallas miserata levavit                 135  
 atque ita 'vive quidem, pende tamen, improba' dixit,  
 'lexque eadem poenae, ne sis segura futuri,  
 dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto!'

The unfortunate girl could not bear it at all, and full of life tied a noose around her neck  
 Athena, with pity, elevated her as she hung and said:  
 “Live on indeed, however hang, condemned one,  
 If you’re careless in the future, let the same motion be affirmed,  
 Against your descendants, and all generations!”

It is significant here that Arachne is “unfortunate” (*infelix*, 134) and “full of life” (*animosa*, 134). She is not described as wicked or someone who out of guilt hangs herself. She did it still feeling full of life. By depicting her that way it is almost as if she is making a sacrifice to shed light on the points she was trying to make through her tapestry. Perhaps, Arachne found solace in being able to force Athena to confront the injustices of their shared society despite her eventual end.

post ea discedens sucis Hecateidos herbae  
 sparsit: et extemplo tristi medicamine tactae                 140  
 defluxere comae, cum quis et naris et aures,  
 fitque caput minimum; toto quoque corpore parva est:

Leaving after this, she scattered her with juice of Hecate’s herb  
 And immediately at the touch of the drug, Arachne’s hair sadly disappeared  
 With both her nose and ears  
 Her head shrank to the smallest of size and the whole body became small.

This passage depicts Arachne’s transformation into a spider. Through this action, Athena essentially confirms what Arachne accused the gods of doing. Arachne illustrated countless examples of gods presenting themselves in a different form to get their way. The metamorphoses lead to eventual doom. In this situation, Athena does it backwards in that the transformation is the ending punishment instead of the predecessor to the punishment. But by transforming

Arachne against her will, even though Athena sees it as “pity” or a nice thing she did for Arachne, Athena again commits what amounts to a non-consensual interaction that the god/goddess deems acceptable.

in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,  
 cetera venter habet, de quo tamen illa remittit  
 stamen et antiquas exercet aranea telas. 145

Her narrow fingers stuck to her side for legs  
 The rest was belly, from which still she spins thread,  
 And as a spider, weaves an ancient web.

The last visual of Arachne is that of a spider weaving an ancient web for eternity. This story clearly shows an angry Athena, forced to face the sins of her cohorts, effectively silencing the woman who did so, bringing into question Athena’s allegiances and priorities, providing a clearer view into the patriarchal society that existed in this time of antiquity.

### **Gendering Athena: A Goddess Exhibiting Masculine and Feminine Traits**

In this story, we see Athena acting quite rashly, similar to behavior typically exhibited by male gods. In the text examples of male aggression abound, such as Poseidon turning into a bull, ram, horse, and dolphin (115-120) in order to seduce and rape women, or Zeus doing the same as a swan or spotted snake (108-114). Athena is angered by Arachne’s superior weaving abilities and out of frustration she first arrives in disguise, a contest ensues and upon losing, strikes her violently. Many female goddesses conversely are shown to be sly and sneaky in their revenge. For instance, Hera fueled by the rage that Zeus fathered a son (Heracles) with another woman, sent two serpents to kill the child.<sup>16</sup> She did not outwardly attack Heracles herself but crafted ways to antagonize or make him suffer. More of this sort of behavior is exhibited in Book 2 in the story of Callisto. Callisto, as a follower of Artemis, vows to remain a virgin. In lines 417-440

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<sup>16</sup> Hornblower & Spawford, 1999, 684

when Zeus disguises himself as Artemis and leaves Callisto pregnant, not only does Artemis expel Callisto from the group, leaving her abandoned, but Hera's wounded pride leads her to turn Callisto into a bear. Ovid writes that when Callisto's son Arcas is about to shoot her, not recognizing his mother as a bear, but Zeus turns her into a constellation before that can happen.<sup>17</sup> Callisto's story is yet another example of goddesses punishing an innocent party because their pride was wounded. There is no obvious and outward attack as often happens with male gods. But post weaving contest, we see Athena acting aggressively the way Zeus or another male god might act. "Minerva displays that anger in her gesture of tearing apart Arachne's work. One expects such wrath from Juno, perhaps, but not from the sage Minerva".<sup>18</sup> Her aggression is parallel to Zeus'. What does this say about our 'sage Minerva'?

Athena is not the typical goddess, she does not always represent the feminine as other goddesses do. In many ways, especially in this story of Arachne, Athena is depicted as being slightly masculine. Even outside Ovid's representation in this story, Athena appears in more masculine ways. Her origin story associates her with the male gender because of her birth from Zeus' head as opposed to a vaginal birth from a woman. Often referred to as the warrior goddess, Athena is rarely depicted without her shield (aegis), helmet and spear. Very few other goddesses are presented this way. Charles Segal confirms the idea that women are usually presented in ways that highlight their beauty, not their skills: "The woman as statue is an object of stupefying beauty; the [male] warrior as statue is arrested in the midst of violent martial acts".<sup>19</sup> Athena, however, is often poised in full protective gear, which further reinforces the idea that she is associated with more masculine tendencies. Because of her origin and general portrayal as

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<sup>17</sup> Hornblower & Spawford, 1999, 278

<sup>18</sup> Segal, 2002, 11

<sup>19</sup> Segal, 1998, 21

masculine, it makes sense that she reacts as many male gods would by aggressively striking Arachne.

But there are also parts of Athena's characterization that are feminine. The aggressive violence typically associated with male behavior is followed up by a stereotypical female feeling of remorse. Unlike the typical behavior of her male counterparts, Athena spares Arachne in the end by turning her into a spider instead of letting her hang. Athena's anger, moreover, originates from a more typically feminine place, even though it presented as masculine. Betty Rose Nagle discusses the difference between a god's motivation from *amor* and goddesses from *ira*. She states, "Ovid generally associates the harm done by male divinities with the satisfaction of *amor* and that done by female divinities with satisfaction of *ira*".<sup>20</sup> Athena is not looking for Arachne's love or affection, she is looking for a way to appease her anger caused by Arachne's lack of respect. Nagle focuses on the point that gods, unlike goddesses, do not take insult to an erotic rejection because they can simply force compliance, where goddess can only punish rejection. Gods will get what they want and someone will get hurt in the process where as goddesses will achieve vengeance by hurting someone for *not* getting what they want/need.<sup>21</sup> Athena can be seen acting as both a god and goddess in this definition. In the beginning, Athena faces rejection from Arachne when Arachne refuses to give her credit for her weaving abilities and again when Arachne refuses to take her advice as an old woman. Instead of immediately punishing Arachne for those actions, Athena forces her compliance to participate in a weaving competition. Upon losing the competition (another form of rejection) Athena acts in the more stereotypically female way. In that moment, she punishes Arachne as most goddesses would and feels the remorse that

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<sup>20</sup> Nagle, 1984, 239

<sup>21</sup> Nagle, 1984, 254

is often associated with females. Nagle explains that “these goddesses can punish rejection, but they cannot force compliance”,<sup>22</sup> implying that Athena could never force Arachne to give her credit for her weaving abilities but she could punish her for that same thing.

These qualities link Athena to exhibiting more typically female traits, which I argue are in no way positive. Athena’s reaction to her rejection can, in some ways, be considered worse than a typical male. Segal states, “Minerva's violent gesture, combined with the anger at losing the contest reduces her to the level of the wrathful female figure (like Circe) who resorts to deadly magic”.<sup>23</sup> It is significant that Segal uses the word “wrathful”, which might seldom be used to describe a man when the wrath comes from a place of pride. I would argue, however, that the violent gesture combined with Athena’s anger is more typically aligned with male behavior. Many males in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* act on the impulse of *amor* as Nagle says, but that *amor* presents as anger or violence. For example, an image portrayed in Arachne’s tapestry is Zeus taking the form of a swan in order to rape the beautiful and already married Leda (line 109). In the form of a swan, Zeus assaults and impregnates Leda against her will. Zeus came to Leda because he felt infatuated by her. He executed this lust or infatuation through rape. So, while Athena acted from the impulse of *ira*, that impulse led to aggressive behavior that can be equated to rape. I argue that Ovid portrays Arachne as a rape victim of Athena’s.

### **Arachne as a Victim of Rape**

To begin, Arachne is a victim of abuse treated with vocabulary and imagery similar to a victim of rape. Europa is deceived by Zeus just as Arachne was deceived by Athena when she first arrives in disguise. Arachne “could not bear it all” after Athena strikes her, just as Semele

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<sup>22</sup> Nagle, 1984, 241

<sup>23</sup> Segal, 2002, 10

could not when Zeus comes to “make love” to her. Segal writes: “When Minerva uses magic against Arachne, the latter's helplessness shows both her victimization and the distance between the goddess and the mortal”.<sup>24</sup> It is important that Segal highlights the “distance” between the two women, because it stresses that one is potentially more privileged and has more access to power than the other. Riddled in the translation of the Latin text are themes highlighting that divide and inequality. For example, the description of the small house and town Arachne grew up in (compared to the big city that Athena belongs to) and eventually the small body Arachne acquires as a spider compared to the magnificent presence that is Athena demonstrates the differences between the two women. Arachne is a small town girl from a small home compared to a big city goddess with a large presence. Besides those, the repetitive examples of gods taking advantage of mortals in Arachne’s weaving highlights that divide.

While Athena’s act of turning Arachne into a spider was a form of remorse, it is important to note that those feelings are presented by Ovid from Athena’s point of view. “When the indignant Olympian makes her shrivel up into the form of a spider, again we have the same technique of externalization: a description of the ugly appearance, but no pathetic narration of what it feels like to be transformed by an offended”.<sup>25</sup> If Ovid were to have interpreted that act from Arachne’s point of view, it is likely she would describe it much differently. “Arachne's transformation is commonly interpreted as a punishment (even though Minerva herself considers her action in part an act of grace)”.<sup>26</sup> Being turned into a spider without her consent in the decision simply because she was a better weaver than Athena would be by no means read as generous in the eyes of Arachne. The description Ovid provides is gruesome and so one can only

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<sup>24</sup> Segal, 2002, 11

<sup>25</sup> Riddehough, 1959, 205

<sup>26</sup> Janan, 1994, 436

assume he did not expect the reader to feel overjoyed by the transformation, and therefore Arachne herself was not pleased by it either. The onlookers in the story blame Arachne for her own fate due to her lack of respect for the goddess, but that can be identified as victim blaming, namely that Arachne was asking for it and she got what she deserved. Comparing Arachne and Philomena (a rape victim of Tereus in Book 6, lines 486-548), Ingrid Holmberg writes, “the disturbing leap made by Arachne and Philomela from real weaving to metaphorical weaving, i.e., narrative, from feminine silence to masculine language, from passivity to resistance, has significant narrative results...the subversive weaver Arachne is punished violently”.<sup>27</sup> Holmberg relates what is demonstrated in the tapestries to Arachne’s fate as a rape victim, and further to the story of Philomena.

The connection is stressed, in addition, by Ellen Oliensis: “Arachne’s “unwilling cheeks” (*subitusque invita notavit / ora rubor*, 46–47) is elsewhere a sign of specifically sexual resistance”.<sup>28</sup> I translate *invita* as “reluctant”, but the point still stands that Arachne is not receiving the act positively. The moment that Arachne blushes is when Athena reveals her true form, after presenting herself as an old woman. This interaction is indicative of those that happen between a disguised male god and a female victim of their imminent rape. Athena lays out these examples in her tapestry of “Apollo imitating a countryman” and then in the skin of a lion, as a shepherd and as the wings of a hawk, to trick women and rape them. Oliensis emphasizes this same point when she claims, “further evidence for the case against Minerva is provided by the simile describing Arachne’s reaction to Minerva’s self-disclosure. This simile aggravates Minerva’s likeness to the divine rapists on Arachne’s tapestry by compounding the element of

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<sup>27</sup> Holmberg, 2003, 4

<sup>28</sup> Oliensis, 2004, 290

deception with a hint of sexual violation”.<sup>29</sup> The actions the women take after the weaving competition reflect those that are portrayed in their tapestries. Oliensis claims that you can read “Arachne’s fate as a parallel instance of sheer force, with Minerva in the role of the rapist. The Minerva-Arachne finds its image, then, not only on Minerva’s tapestry but also on Arachne’s”.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Oliensis describes that when Athena attacks Arachne she is reclaiming the role as the phallic aggressor (by means of a relatively phallic looking weapon), forcing Arachne from the role of potent creator to a rape victim.<sup>31</sup> Athena forcefully transforms Arachne acting out of malice that further reinforces the mistreatment mortals receive from the gods and which Arachne originally portrayed on her tapestry. Arachne, by the end of this story, could be added onto her own tapestry as another female, mortal victim of the gods’ actions and behavior.

### **The Divide Between Mortals and Immortals**

Aside from being punished for her superior weaving ability, Arachne is punished because she is disrespectful. Arachne originally comes to Athena’s attention because she has not given the credit to Athena, which Athena believes she deserves. Arachne, upon hearing this complaint from others, does not do anything to rectify the situation. She refuses to be submissive and take the place in her society that is expected of her. In many of Ovid’s stories, gods get away with their crimes while mortals are punished and often killed in the process. For example, the story of Callisto (mentioned previously) exhibits this process as well as the story of Athena and Arachne. “Generally, the human perpetrators are in some way punished, but the gods get away with their crimes, although Ovid sometimes raises the question of divine justice”.<sup>32</sup> Arachne is one of the

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<sup>29</sup> Oliensis, 2004, 289

<sup>30</sup> Oliensis, 2004, 290

<sup>31</sup> Oliensis, 2004, 292

<sup>32</sup> Segal, 1998, 37



few mortals that truly “fights” back when presented with an angry goddess. That is not only an unattractive quality in a mere mortal, but even more so in a female one. Segal claims, “this is a world polarized between those who have absolute power (the gods) and those who are powerless to defend their bodies against force majeure”.<sup>33</sup> Arachne, fully aware of this type of world she is living in, attempts to defend herself in the only way she can—through her weaving. Julia D. Hejduk claims that “Arachne’s *uicta* implies that refusing to compete would mean she is worthless. To chicken out is to be a loser. The girl has, as we say, an attitude”.<sup>34</sup> Arachne does not cower in the face of adversity. But this type of woman cannot be allowed to roam free without punishment from the gods. A mortal who does not accept their place as the oppressed is dangerous in the eyes of the gods. As such, they need to be punished and Athena arrives to do just that. As a member of the divine elite, both having masculine attributes and being a goddess allow Athena to exist with privilege, so long as the mortal females are kept at bay. So, as a supporter of the patriarchy and the divide between god and mortal, Athena must eliminate this woman who attempts to challenge it.

### **Male Gods as the Rulers of Society**

Athena is outraged when she sees Arachne’s tapestry not only because it is better than hers, but because it portrays images that illustrate the many instances in which male gods have taken advantage of their power. In the corners of her tapestry she illustrates the abduction and rape of Europa, Leda, Antiope, and Danae. In each of these stories Zeus used his privilege as a male with powers to take advantage of mortal women. Arachne purposely chooses these images, bringing to light the injustice men bring to the women around them. In doing this, she is also

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<sup>33</sup> Segal, 1998, 39

<sup>34</sup> Hejduk, 2012, 766

reminding Athena that not only is she a part of the world of people who consistently perform heinous acts, but by doing nothing she essentially enables this behavior. With masculine traits, Athena is still a woman, and through the repetitive demonstrations of women being taken advantage of, Arachne may be trying to appeal to the woman in Athena. When Athena chooses to turn Arachne into a spider, we can assume that despite this remorseful act, her desire to be a part of a privileged group in society, remained. In Athena's tapestry, she illustrates male gods (and herself) in moments of glory. In the corners, she depicts four instances when especially female mortals were punished. The Queen of Pygmies, Antigone, Queen Rhodope, and the daughters of Cinyras. It is certainly significant that Athena did not portray instances in which males were punished. Holmberg states, "feminine weaving and language, by revealing abuses endemic to the Olympian and patriarchal power structure, become subversive and dangerous, to be controlled by males".<sup>35</sup> When Arachne reveals her tapestry that clearly demonstrates the abuse inflicted by the pinnacles of the patriarchy, Athena as protector of that way of life must control and eventually silence her.

Athena portrays instances when women were boastful or disrespectful, which serves to challenge the patriarchy and a woman's place within. Arachne then challenges the patriarchy with the images she illustrates on her tapestry. She makes transparent the injustice inflicted by the patriarchy. "Embedded narratives posit the power of [myth] to ensnare sexual fidelity or infidelity and the role of narrative in maintaining (the) patriarchal order through textual fidelity".<sup>36</sup> In Athena's eyes, it was only her duty to maintain order by means of destroying the textual infidelity that Arachne presented.

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<sup>35</sup> Holmberg, 2003 11

<sup>36</sup> Holmberg, 2003, 12

Not only does Arachne challenge the institution and way of thinking that Athena has presented in her weaving, but the tapestry she weaves directly disputes the themes Athena tries to convey. Athena, while reinforcing the patriarchy by portraying women being punished for any retaliation against their patriarchal society, also simply displays the hierarchy that exists between mortal and immortal. Athena makes the point that the hierarchy exists for a reason. These mortal women she illustrates have all offended the gods in some way and to keep order, they must be dealt with. This is the logical response for Athena. To her such punishments are just and excusable. When Arachne presents her tapestry, “Arachne weaves an accelerating episodic sequence of male gods descending into the forms of animals and even plants in order to have their way with women both immortal and mortal; the axis of gender now replaces Minerva’s vertical hierarchy of gods and mortals, and metamorphosis now figures as a toll of divine lust, not a punishment inflicted on badly behaved earthlings”.<sup>37</sup> Arachne inverts Athena’s narrative from mortals who needed punishment, to one where gods simply acted on divine lust and ended up punishing the mortals after completing their rapes. Arachne debunks the point made by Athena’s tapestry and forces the goddess to see the injustice the male gods not only inflict on mortal women, but also immortal. Athena as an immortal is forced to recognize that goddesses may act out in the way they do because of the oppression they feel from their male counterparts. The gods’ motivation comes not from a need to punish, but because they need to get what they desire. Ironically, Athena acts much like a male god would and just as Arachne portrayed them acting in her own tapestry, minus the act of rape. What Athena wants in this moment is to punish the woman that not only challenged her, but brought into question the motivation for every heinous act carried out towards mortals. So, in that moment Athena strikes Arachne. She

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<sup>37</sup> Oliensis, 2004, 287

proceeds to turn Arachne into a spider, which effectively silences her. After her transformation into a spider, Arachne can no longer converse with others to stimulate a conversation about the violence that women endure at the hand of the male gods.

### **Conclusion**

Through my translation of the original Latin and the analysis supported by other scholars, I see Ovid's story of Athena and Arachne as shedding light on the divide between mortal and immortal and more specifically, the mistreatment of women. Athena, upon being challenged by someone of lesser class and status, must deliver a punishment in order to "restore" order to the hierarchal society in which they live. Arachne stands up for herself by refusing the advice of the old woman and creating a tapestry that highlights all the injustices inflicted upon mortal women. Although in the end Arachne is silenced, we can only assume Ovid wants us to feel empathy for this peasant woman, and to recognize the human injustices that were so pervasive in his time.

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