Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book 6: Arachne and Minerva

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.

**Text and Translation**

*doluit successu flava virago*
the golden-haired goddess felt pain at the outcome

130. **doluit**: *doleo,-ere, dolui, dolitum*: feel pain  
**successu**: *successus, -ūs, m.: outcome; ablative of cause (“at the outcome,” i.e. of the weaving contest)  
**flava**: *flavus, -a, -um*: blonde, golden-haired  
**virago**: *virago, -inis, f.: heroic woman; here, goddess*
et rupit pictas, cælestia crimina, vestes,
and she broke down the embroidered cloth, (depicting) divine crimes,

utque Cytoriaico radium de monte tenebat,
and as she held the shuttle from the Cytorian mountain,

ter quarter Idmoniae frontem percussit Arachnēs.
twelve times Minerva struck the forehead of Idmonian Arachne.

non tulit infelix, laqueoque animosa ligavit
The unlucky (girl) did not suffer (the insult) and with a noose she bound.

131. rupit: rumpo, -ere, rupi, ruptum: break down
    pictas: pictus, -a, -um: painted, embroidered
    cælestia: cælestius, -a, -um: divine
    crimina: crimen, -inis, n.: crime
    vestes: vestis, -is, f.: cloth

132. ut: (conj.) as
    Cytoriaico...de monte: “from the Cytorian mountain,” referring to boxwood, a type of tree which grows in Greece. The shuttle of Athena’s loom is made of boxwood.
    radium: radius, -iï, m.: pointed rod; here, shuttle

133. ter (adv.): three times
    quarter (adv.): four times; with ter, “twelve times”
    Idmoniae: Idmonian, from the family of Idmon; with Arachnēs
    frontem: frons, frontis, f.: forehead
    percussit: percutio, -ere, -cussi, -cussum: strike
    Arachnēs: Arachnē, -ēs, f.: Greek genitive: Arachne, daughter of Idmon

134. tulit: ferō, ferre, tuli, latus: suffer
    infelix: infelix, -icis: unlucky
    laqueo: laqueus, -i, m.: noose
    animosa: animosus, -a, -um: proud
    ligavit: ligō, -are, -avi, -atum: tie
guttura: pendentem Pallas miserata levavit
(her) proud throat: feeling pity, Minerva lifted (her) up, hanging,

atque ita ‘Vive quidem, pende tamen, improba,’ dixit
and said thus: “Live, then! Yet hang, presumptuous (girl)!

‘lexque eadem poenae, ne sis secura futuri,
and let the same condition of penalty, lest you be carefree about the future,

dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto!’
be set for your offspring and distant descendants!”

post ea discedens sucis Hecateidos herbae
After these things, (as she was) departing, she suddenly sprinkled (her)

135. guttura: guttur, -uris, n.: throat; here, plural for singular
pendentem: pendeo, pendere, pependi: hang
Pallas: Pallas Athene: (Greek nominative), equated with the Roman goddess Minerva
miserata: “feeling pity”
levavit: levo, -are, -avi, -atum: lift

136. ita: (adv.) thus
quidem: (conj.) then
tamen: (conj.) yet
improba: improbus, -a, -um: shameless, presumptuous; here, used as a substantive

137. lex: lex, legis, f.: law; here, condition
ne sis: “lest you be”; sis is the present subjunctive second singular of sum
secura: securus, -a, -um: secure, carefree

138. dicta: with esto, said; here, set (+ dative)
generi: here, offspring, family
seris: serus, -a, -um: late(r); here, distant
nepotibus: nepos, -otis, m.: grandson, descendant
esto: let...be! (imperative second person singular of sum)

139. discedens: discedo, -ere, -cessi, -cessum: depart
sucis: sucus, -i, m.: juice, sap
Hecateidos: an adjective based on the Greek name Hecatē, -ēs, f., the moon-goddess and mistress of witch-craft; agrees with herbae. Also referred to as Hell-bane, this poison usually causes death but in Arachne’s case turns her into a spider.
herbae: herba, -ae, f.: herb, plant
sparsit et extemplo tristi medicamine. Tactae
with the juices of an infernal herb and a poisonous drug. Touched,

defluxere comae, cum quis et naris et aures,
(Arachne’s) hair flowed away and with them both (her) nose and ears,

fitque caput minimum, toto quoque corpore parva est:
and (her) head becomes very small, she is also small in her whole body;

in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,
slender fingers clinging on (her) side in place of legs,

cetera venter habet: de quo tamen illa remittit
(her) belly occupies the rest: from which, nevertheless, that (girl) lets out

140. **sparsit**: spargo, -ere, sparsi, sparsum: sprinkle
**extemplo**: (adv.) immediately
**tristi**: tristis, -e: sad; here, “poisonous”
**medicamine**: medicamen, -inis, n.: drug, medicine

141. **defluxere**: = defluxerunt; defluo, -ere, fluxi: flow away
**comae**: coma, -ae, f.: hair
**cum quis**: = quibuscum (defluxere)
**naris**: naris, -is, f. nose
**aures**: auris, -is, f.: ear

142. **fit**: “becomes”; from fio, fieri, factus sum: be made, become
**caput**: caput, capitis, n.: head
**toto...corpore**: lit. “in (respect to her) whole body”; ablative of specification
**quoque**: (adv.) also, too; usually placed after the word it emphasizes

143. **latere**: latus, -eris, n.: side
**exiles**: exilis, -e: slender
**digi**ti: digitus, -i, m.: finger
**pro**: (prep.) in place of ; + ablative
**cruribus**: crus, cruris, n.: leg
**haerent**: haereo, -ere, haesi, haesum: cling

144. **ceteri, -ae, -a**: the rest
**venter**: venter, ventris, m.: belly
**remittit**: remitto, -ere, remisi, remissum: let out
stamen, et antiquas exercet aranea telas.

a thread, and the spider works (her) ancient looms.

145. **stamen**: *stamen, -inis*, n.: warp (of a loom); i.e. the thread hanging from a distaff
**exercet**: *exerceo, -ere, -ui, -itum*: work
**aranea**: *aranea, -ae*, f.: spider
**telas**: *tela, -ae*, f.: web; loom