

“The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider” **from *Metamorphoses***

Ovid

Arachne was renowned not for the place of her birth, nor for the origin of her family, but for her skill and art of working in wool. Her father, Idmon, used to dye the soaking wool in purple. Her mother was dead; but she, too, was of the lower rank, and of the same condition with her husband. Yet Arachne, by her skill, had acquired a memorable name throughout the cities of Lydia. Often did the young ladies desert the vineyards of their own Tymolus, that they might look at Arachne’s admirable workmanship. And not only did it give them pleasure to look at the garments when made, but even, too, while they were being made, so much grace was there in her working. Whether it was that she was rolling the rough wool into its first balls, or whether she was unravelling the work with her fingers, and was softening the fleeces worked over again with long drawings out, equalling the mists in their fineness; or whether she was moving the smooth round spindle with her nimble thumb, or was embroidering with the needle, you might perceive that she had been instructed by Pallas.¹ This, however, Arachne used to deny; and, being displeased with a mistress so famed, she said, “Let her contend with me. There is nothing which, if conquered, I should refuse to endure.”

Pallas personates an old woman; she both places false gray hair on her temples, and supports as well her infirm limbs by a staff. Then thus she begins to speak: “Old age has not everything which we should avoid; experience comes from lengthened years. Do not despise my advice; let the greatest fame for working wool be sought by thee among mortals. But yield to the Goddess, and, rash woman, ask pardon for thy speeches with suppliant voice. She will grant pardon at my entreaty.” The other beholds Pallas with scowling eyes, and leaves the threads she has begun; and scarcely restraining her hand, and discovering her anger by her looks, with such words as these does she reply to the disguised Pallas: “Thou comest here bereft of thy understanding, and worn out with prolonged old age; and it is thy misfortune to have lived too long. If thou hast any daughter-in-law, if thou hast any daughter of thy own, let her listen to these remarks. I have sufficient knowledge for myself in myself, and do not imagine that thou hast availed anything by thy advice; my opinion is still the same. Why does not Pallas come herself? Why does she decline this contest?”

Then the Goddess says, “Lo! she is come;” and she casts aside the figure of an old woman, and shows herself as Pallas. Arachne alone is not daunted. But still she blushes, and a sudden flush marks her reluctant features, and again it vanishes. Arachne persists in her

¹ Pallas is another name for the Greek goddess Athena, who is the goddess of wisdom and arts and crafts.

determination, and, from a desire for a foolish victory, she rushes upon her own destruction. Nor, indeed, does the daughter of Jupiter decline it, or advise her any further, nor does she now put off the contest. There is no delay; they both take their stand in different places, and stretch out two webs on the loom with a fine warp. The web is tied around the beam; the sley separates the warp; the woof is inserted in the middle with sharp shuttles, which the fingers hurry along, and being drawn within the warp, the teeth notched in the moving sley strike it. Both hasten on, and girding up their garments to their breasts, they move their skilful arms, their eagerness beguiling their fatigue. There both the purple is being woven. There, too, the pliant gold is mixed with the threads, and ancient subjects are represented on the webs.

Pallas embroiders the rock of Mars in Athens, the citadel of Cecrops, and the old dispute about the name of the country. Twice six celestial gods are sitting on lofty seats in august state, with Jupiter in the midst. The form of Jupiter is that of a monarch. She makes the god of the sea to be standing there, and to be striking the rugged rocks with his long trident, and a wild horse to be springing forth out of the midst of the opening of the rock; by which pledge of his favor he lays claim to the city. But to herself she gives the shield, she gives the lance with its sharp point; she gives the helmet to her head, and her breast is protected by the Ægis. Victory is the end of her work. But that Pallas may learn from precedents what reward to expect for an attempt so mad. She adds, in four different parts, four contests bright in their coloring. One corner contains Thracian Rhodope and Hæmus, now cold mountains, formerly human bodies, who assumed to themselves the names of the supreme Gods. Another part contains the wretched fate of the Pygmæan matron. Her, overcome in a contest, Juno commanded to be a crane, and to wage war against her own people. She depicts, too, Antigone, who once dared to contend with the wife of the great Jupiter; and whom the royal Juno changed into a bird. The only corner that remains, represents the bereft Cinyras; and he, embracing the steps of a temple, once the limbs of his own daughters, and lying upon the stone, appears to be weeping. Pallas surrounds the exterior borders with peaceful olive. That is the close; and with her own tree she puts an end to the work.

Arachne delineates Europa, deceived by the form of the bull; and you would think it a real bull, and real sea. She herself seems to be looking upon the land which she has left, and to be crying out to her companions, and to be in dread of the touch of the dashing waters, and to be drawing up her timid feet. She drew also Asterie, seized by the struggling eagle; and made Leda, reclining beneath the wings of the swan. She depicted Neptune, too, changed into a fierce bull, with the virgin daughter of Æolus. To all these did she give their own likeness, and the real appearance of the various localities. There was Phœbus, under the form of a rustic; and how, besides, he was wearing the wings of a hawk at one time, at another the skin of a lion; how, too, as a shepherd, he deceived Isse, the daughter of

Macareus. The extreme part of the web, being enclosed in a fine border, had flowers interwoven with the twining ivy.

Pallas could not blame that work, nor could Envy censure it. The yellow-haired Pallas grieved at Arachne's success, and tore the web embroidered with the criminal acts of the gods of heaven. And as she was holding her shuttle made of boxwood from Mount Cytorus, three or four times did she strike the forehead of Arachne, the daughter of Idmon. The unhappy Arachne could not endure it; and she tied up her throat in a halter. Pallas, taking compassion, bore her up as she hung; and thus she said: "Live on indeed, wicked one, but still hang; and let the same decree of punishment be pronounced against thy race, and against thy latest posterity, that thou mayst not be free from care in time to come." After that, as she departed, she sprinkled her with the juices of an Hecatean herb; and immediately her hair, touched by the noxious drug, fell off, and together with it her nose and ears. The head of herself, now small as well throughout her whole body, becomes very small. Her slender fingers cleave to her sides as legs; her belly takes possession of the rest of her; but out of this she gives forth a thread; and as a spider, she works at her web as she did before.

This text is in the public domain.