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2007

Illumine: Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society

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Original citation:
Grant Schoichet, J. (2007). Warp, weft, and womanly wiles: Weaving as an expression of female power. *Illumine, 6*(1), 23–33.
https://doi.org/10.18357/illumine6120071518

Warp, Weft, and Womanly Wiles: Weaving as an Expression of Female Power
The cases of Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne

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> Like the Fates, they weave and determine destinies, not for others, but for themselves. – *Kruger, 137*

> Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter. – *Heilbrun, 18*

Abstract

This paper considers how weaving—an activity traditionally emblematic of classical feminine virtues such as modesty, chastity, and obedience—is used by Homer and Ovid to symbolize women's resistance to the mores of a social patriarchy. Homer's Penelope and Ovid's Philomela and Arachne all use weaving to redefine themselves and their roles within a limited—and limiting—social environment. The women use this traditional symbol of a woman's domestic role to wield power that has repercussions far beyond the domestic sphere. Not only do Homer and Ovid challenge the conventional idea of womanly virtue in the classical world, but they recast these women as authors of their own destinies, resisting social pressures, challenging patriarchal and Olympic authority, and defying the expectations of those who would exert control over them.

By using weaving as a metaphor for resistance, Ovid and Homer demand that we re-examine our understanding of social power in the classical world. Though their environment and social roles limit their authority within the public sphere, Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne define on their own terms how they will respond to their physical circumstances. Wielding a shuttle is not quite like wielding a sword, but by exercising traditional roles in untraditional ways, Homer and Ovid's female characters still wield extraordinary social power, with profound social consequences.

Introduction

... talibus orsa modis lana sua fila sequente[1]

There is nothing new in our understanding that the "canvas" of a textile may be used to signify meaning beyond the textile's physical capacity to clothe, shelter, prettify, or otherwise serve human beings. Long before the classical poetry of Greece and Rome popularized the rich metaphorical possibilities of weaving, human society—particularly women—wove cultural and personal symbolism into cloth. We can think of the textile as being the ancient ancestor of written text (our own term "text" being derived from the Latin *texere,* meaning "to construct" or "to weave").

But the relationship between weaving and symbolic meaning is much older than the advent of writing. Scholars have pointed out that while the end result of weaving—that is, the textile—is akin to the text on a written page, the *act* of weaving is in many ways analogous to the composition of oral poetry, which has no tactile end-product but is "woven" extemporaneously by the oral poet, using a range of poetic elements stored in his memory.[2] Nor is the

1 Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 4.54: "She begins to spin this tale … as she spins her woollen thread." (English translations of Ovid are by Anthony S. Kline, available at http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Ovhome.htm.)

2 See, for example, discussions throughout Scheid and Svenbro 1996, Rosati 1999, and Kruger 2001. In her studies of Homer's Helen and Penelope, and of Ovid's Arachne and Philomela, Kruger is particularly clear about the distinction between the metaphorical relationship of

weaving metaphor solely the domain of the poet: the historian weaves individual and public histories into a cohesive whole,[3] the rhetorician weaves diverse points into a logical argument,[4] the politician devises solutions to knotty political problems by weaving compromise amongst members of the state.[5] In this capacity, each weaver is in essence a "creator" of something new and, conversely, anyone who creates something new can be likened metaphorically to the weaver who weaves the threads of the weft onto those of the warp, joining separate elements into a single, greater whole.

The Homeric epics and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* both make traditional, yet elegant, use of the "multi-textual" weaving metaphor—as symbolic of the poets' own artistic craftsmanship, for example, and of the complex *textus* of the narrative tale. Yet both poets also invert the weaving metaphor, using an activity traditionally emblematic of feminine virtues (such as modesty, chastity, and obedience) to symbolize female resistance to the mores of a social patriarchy.[6] Homer's Penelope, and Ovid's Philomela and Arachne all use weaving as a tool to redefine themselves and their roles within a limited—and limiting—social environment.[7] The juxtaposition of two such divergent concepts as "weaving woman" and "social activist" serves to make the comparison, and the narrative outcomes, more striking than if either poet had simply recounted tales of female resistance to authority. In all three cases, the weavers use the traditional symbol of a woman's domestic role to wield power that has repercussions far beyond the domestic sphere. In this manner, not only do Homer and Ovid challenge the conventional idea of womanly virtue in the classical world, but they recast women in a role that emphasizes their social influence rather than their deference to authority.

Historian Elizabeth Barber suggests three reasons for the symbolic representation of meaning through textile across human history.[8] While the third reason

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weaving to speaking and that of weaving to writing:

> The difference between the weaving of Arachne and Philomela and that of Helen and Penelope constitutes a distinction between the oral and written word .... for Helen and Penelope, process is of primary concern: Their texts imitate the manner of oral poetry, where significance (signification) lies not in product (textile) but in the flow of the story's language, in the whir of the shuttle, or tongue, thrown across the story's warp or plot .... the weaving of Helen and Penelope exists in the service of a larger text, the epic (oral) poem .... Conversely, with its emphasis on product, the stories of Arachne and Philomela represent a culture rooted more deeply in the written tradition, reflecting the storywriter Ovid rather than the story-teller, Homer. (83–84)

This understanding of the oral/literate application of the weaving metaphor is strengthened by the fact that "[t]he only clear reference to writing in Homer" is in the *Iliad* (6.155–97): Proteus, King of Argos, sends orders for Bellerophon's death *written on tablets* to the King of Lycia. (See Marquardt 1993, 154)

3 As Herodotus does in his *Histories*.

4 For example, Scheid and Svenbro (143–45) suggest that Cicero (along with other Roman writers), in his desire to see Roman society infused with the best of Greek culture and custom, wove ideas from ancient Greece with ideas of Rome to create one seamless Roman culture: "[It] was the triumphant acculturation of the Romans that partly explains the encroachment of the metaphor of linguistic and poetic weaving from Cicero's period on (if not earlier). For the metaphor of weaving becomes especially pertinent to someone who is engaged in transposing an entire culture into a new milieu." (144)

5 In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), Lysistratus justifies his "political ... plan ... to correct the muddled affairs of the Athenian empire" with a weaving metaphor: "As we do our thread: when it is tangled, we take it and raise it with our spindles here and there. In the same way we would dissolve this war, if we have our way, untangling the threads by means of ambassadors sent here and there." (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 565–70, discussed in Scheid and Svenbro, 15).

6 Both poets invert the traditional metaphor in other ways as well (see the examples of Circe and Calypso below), but the use of weaving as a tool of female power provides particularly fertile ground for discussion.

7 See Kruger, who compares these three weavers to the Greek *Moi'rai*: "Like the Fates, they weave and determine destinies, not for others, but for themselves." (137)

8 She also gives a very good general summary of the history of weaving in various contexts. For the purposes of this discussion, it is useful to know that indirect evidence (that is, sewing instruments and beaded patterns found intact *in situ*) suggests string and sewing-craft were invented twenty to thirty thousand years ago. The earliest direct evidence for fibre craftsmanship is a piece of spun

she gives—that textiles might be used to divine the future or to solicit good fortune or favour of the gods—is not particularly relevant to this discussion, her first two reasons are. First, a textile can impart information difficult to transmit across time and distance. Symbols painted or tattooed onto a person's body might distinguish his or her social rank, and written information might convey to the reader personal details or the nature of a particular social role, but information cannot be transmitted *continuously* in either way, and each method of transmission has limitations. Body paint must be reapplied frequently, and in colder climates the body is hidden by clothing. Written information is useful to the recipient only if she is able to read it. Textiles, on the other hand, can be "read" in any language, as long as the visual symbology is understood. Textiles can also transmit their message across distance and time—they can be packaged and sent to a recipient (and potentially outlive their human messenger), the original message imparting the same information—in the same tone—that the creator/weaver intended.

In these ways "textile transmission" was efficient and durable in the ancient world where "oral transmission" and writing were less so. Clearly textile transmission had limitations of its own, but weaving enabled the weaver to "voice" a narrative, or deliver a message, in a manner that offered her a greater degree of autonomy and creativity—and the means to reach a wider audience—than she might otherwise have had.[9]

Secondly, suggests Barber, a textile can be used as a mnemonic device to record historical events or other cultural information. Helen's tapestry depiction of the Trojan War,[10] Philomela's woven portrayal of her rape by Tereus,[11] and Arachne's irreverent representation of the gods' amoral conduct[12] all function in this way. The weaver records events *as she wishes to record them*, wielding power not only over which information is told, but how it is told, using artistic persuasion to direct, to some degree, how the information will be received. Such mnemonic devices were not confined to the realm of mythology; historical tapestries were housed in the classical treasuries and frequently brought out for public viewing on special occasions.[13]

For the purposes of this discussion, it is necessary to flesh out Barber's distinctions. The two categories of metaphorical representation above (that is, weaving as representation of cultural information, and weaving as mnemonic device) work on several levels within the context of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Homeric epics.

First, the weaver herself may intentionally weave social information into her "text," or intend her weaving to be understood by other characters as a mnemonic device. For example, Helen's woven account of the Trojan War recounts historical events for posterity, arguably working as both a representation of cultural information and a mnemonic device.[14]

Second, the poet (Homer, in the case of Penelope, and Ovid in the cases of Philomela and Arachne) may wish to impart cultural information to his audience aside from the obvious narrative tale, and may intend his own weaving of the narrative or the material woven by his character to be understood as a mnemonic

cordage (resembling modern-day nylon rope), fossilized in one of the painted caves of Lascaux, France (ca. 15,000 BCE). The earliest examples of woven material come from Neolithic Iraq (6000–7000 BCE) (see especially Barber, 149–63).

9 Even today textiles act as metaphorical representations of cultural meaning, arming the creator or user with the power to make a social statement without making a verbal or written one. A necktie marks the businessman, a wedding dress the bride; the team jersey enables players to distinguish friend from foe, serving a function similar to that of the private-school uniform; an observant Jew's *kittel* (a white ceremonial garment) lends solemnity to religious occasions. In Rome (and elsewhere throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages), colour, too, conveyed social information: purple, for example, was generally used only by the social elite, the manufacture of the dye being a time-consuming and expensive process.

10 Homer, *Iliad,* 3.125–28.

11 Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 6.571–86.

12 *Ibid.*, lines 103–28.

13 Barber 1994, 153.

14 Kruger notes that Homer's depiction of Helen "weaving history" in this way (aside from whatever parallels the reader sees between Homer's woven tale and Helen's woven tapestry) is suggestive of "not only the popularity of such cloths, but their importance as historical and political documents ..." (78)

device. For example, Ovid and Homer both reaffirm the idea of weaving as symbolic of womanly virtue, domestic skill, feminine grace, and modesty. Where the poets associate weaving-craft with undesirable "feminine" qualities, such as infidelity, sexual promiscuity, and deception, rather than weakening the "weaving equals a good woman" metaphor, these examples highlight the discongruity of the relationship between the women and their "unvirtuous" behaviour. For example, the fact that the enchantresses Circe and Calypso in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are both introduced at their loom makes their subsequent deception and abuse of Odysseus all the more distasteful: a women who weaves just shouldn't *do* those things![15] The fact that Helen, the Greek epitome of the unfaithful woman, spends much of the *Iliad* weaving a tapestry of the Trojan War (an otherwise culturally valuable application of a woman's domestic abilities) seems a gauche mockery of all that is honourable in Greek womanhood. And while Arachne's refusal to acquiesce to Minerva's Olympic authority suggests that "her struggle for power, from a position of weakness, is ... a heroic one,"[16] the fact that she challenges the goddess to a weaving contest (when weaving is the quintessential symbol of feminine modesty and obedience in Roman society[17]) serves to highlight her immodest claims as absurd, and to underscore the aptness of her punishment: to exist as a spider forever doomed to weave in circles, without meaning, without power.

On a third level, the audience may understand aspects of the weaving metaphor of which the poet himself is unaware: that is, "meta-metaphors," or metaphors so imbedded within the poet's environmental context that they function as a cultural "underlay," visible only to one who systematically sets out to deconstruct the narrative and examine each element in light of its metaphorical meaning. Today, for example, the weaving metaphor is such an integral part of how we view creative invention that much of the time we are not aware of how it shapes our understanding of relationships and events: a good plot is "well woven"; a poorly told narrative doesn't "hang together." We speak of someone being "well suited" to the task. The solution to a crime must "fit" the evidence. *Et quae filum deducit, et poeta carminem deducit*; thus do we "spin a tale" and "lead on" our listener. Weaving metaphors have become part of our cultural "fabric." When we consider the works of Ovid and Homer in light of possible meta-metaphors, we heighten our sensitivity to the poet's perspective, to what might be conscious inclusions in his poetry, and to what may be unconscious.

Women and Weaving in Greece and Rome

We have much more written evidence from Rome about the relationship of women to weaving than we do from Greece, and the metaphorical parallels between weaving and womanly virtue are drawn with bolder brushstrokes in Rome. Yet we can note similar patterns in the two cultures; arguably we can trace the roots of Roman views on womanhood and domesticity back to classical Greece, especially Athens.

Any examination of the roles of women in the classical world must consider that almost all the extant written material about women from these periods was written by men. In addition, much of the material is in the form of poetry, narrative history, and drama—that is, composed by creators who sought to entertain as well as inform within a social environment that had diverse political and cultural expectations of its citizens, men and women alike. In this study I examine three female characters as seen through the eyes of Homer and Ovid, not through the eyes of the women themselves. On one hand, this perspective affords us a window onto how Ovid and Homer, and perhaps other men of the time, viewed women and women's traditionally appropriate roles (and conversely, how they perceived women might manipulate those roles). On the other hand, though Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne all exercise "voice" and power by weaving their own story with their own hands, their narratives are still mediated by Homer and Ovid, who "reweave" the women's craft into an element of their narratives. This fact compels us to presume that, to some extent,

15 For a description of Circe, see the *Odyssey*, 10.220–24 and 10.251–58; for Calypso, see 5.55–70.

16 Kruger, 65.

17 See the discussion below.

the female characters have been fashioned by the poets "to suit" their objectives.

While this makes our dissection much trickier and perhaps ultimately inconclusive, to undertake this study as if Homer and Ovid's presentation represents an objective "truth" about classical womanhood would certainly lead to a distorted understanding. Our study must therefore take into account the fact that the female characters, and expressions of female power, are mediated not only through the eyes of men but also through the art of the poet.[18] Yet these characters also provide us with "insight into the ideals of behavior that women were to embody" at the same time that they "reveal ... aspects of women's actual societal roles."[19] Hazards duly noted, there is a wealth of evidence—written and visual—from which we can hypothesize about the relationship between women and weaving in the classical world.[20]

Weaving and activities associated with weaving were integral to ancient daily life in a way that is difficult to imagine today. Creating a simple woollen tunic required shearing the wool from the sheep; washing the wool (a hot, physically taxing and smelly business), often with sweet-smelling agents to reduce the musky odour (agents that also had to be sourced); carding the wool to ensure that no foreign objects remained and the wool was free of knots; dying the wool (with dyes that also had to be made) by boiling it, again, with the colour (also a physically demanding job); spinning the wool into yarn—by hand, or with hand tools such as a spindle or wheel; and weaving the wool into cloth (a process that required one to first set the warp (vertical) threads onto the loom, and then weave the weft (horizontal) threads by passing the shuttle through the loom). If the cloth was patterned, many shuttles, each wound with threads of different colours, would be woven separately through the warp. Once a piece of cloth was large enough, it could be used to make the tunic. Needless to say, clothing a household demanded a considerable amount of energy and time.

In classical Greece, women were valued for their beauty, their chastity, their obedience, their fidelity, their modesty, and their ability to manage a household. Attic vases frequently depicted women holding spindles, "which were confused or interchangeable in these portraits with hand-held mirrors"[21] as "both conveyed the same meaning" as representations

18 Walters (1993) has a particularly sceptical view of the value of reading social meaning into literary works in the context of female power within a patriarchal framework:

> One approach has been to speak of Athenian women's power as a resistance to male authority—or even outright rebellion. But the expression of this putative resistance stems from literature ... As a product of the imagination, though drawing on the social and cultural context, literature often imagines situations, quite deliberately, that are the reverse of the norm and the contrary of the possible. Thus, the words and deeds of [female characters in classical literature] are often taken too literally or simplistically. These fictional words and deeds are almost impossible to judge as social commentary not only because they are utterly fictional but also because they are totally and solely the product of ... men. Active or reactive, they articulate a male world view in the dominant language of men. For these and other reasons, the words and deeds of these literary heroines cannot be used to explain social reality. In fact, the reverse is the case. It is first necessary to understand the social reality in order to come to grips with the meaning of dramatic literature. (194)

All well and good, but if we refrain from reading *any* social meaning into representations of female power in literature, we will soon put ourselves out of a job. Though Walters is right to be cautious, we must work with what we have. We do not have a wealth of first-person accounts by women in the classical world, either resisting power or acquiescing to it, and we do not always have the tools to hand to first "understand the social reality." We do, however, have many fictional literary portrayals of women by men. If we assume that these portrayals are rooted in social context, and that the "truth" to be found in them is not a simplistic mirror-image of that context, we can still derive insight into particular historical environments, as Vivante suggests below.

19 Vivante 1999, 224–25.

20 There were male weavers in Greece, but weaving remained primarily the realm of women. In classical literature generally, "to depict a male weaving is to feminize him" (Kruger, 54). Hercules weaves as Omphale's slave, for example, and the "cuckolded Hephaistos" weaves a net to catch his adulterous wife.

21 Kruger, 151.

of "feminine grace and charm."[22] Jamin suggests that the value of the female character in Homeric epic is "judged predominantly by the loyalty she demonstrates to both her natal household and later to her husband and his household. Her daily completion of household tasks, her beauty and physical, as well as verbal, demonstrations of modesty are all indicators of her worth."[23] In Herodotus' *Histories*, the assertive Pheretima battles Euelthon's traditional view of women, a view that limits his capacity to view Pheretima as a fellow "statesman":

> Pheretima went to Euelthon's court and asked for an army to put the party she represented back in power at Cyrene; but an army was the one thing Euelthon was unwilling to give her. Other things he gave her generously enough, and each time she accepted a present she said it was a fine one, but not so fine as to give her what she really wanted—an army. As she continued on every occasion to make the same remark, Euelthon ended by sending her a golden spindle and distaff, with wool on it. Pheretima repeated the same words as before, which drew from Euelthon the reply that he had sent her a present which, unlike an army, he thought suitable to her sex.[24]

Women were often married at a young age, and usually the marriage was arranged between the families of the bride and groom or, in the frequent case of marriage to an older man, between the groom himself and the bride's family. In this way, a woman was always under the guardianship of a man—either her father or her husband. A widow whose father was no longer alive would return to her brother or another male relative. A woman generally played no role in the public forum, but this did not necessarily mean she could not own property, and it did not mean she did not wield considerable power within the household. But her power was limited to particular spheres, and any influence she might have had within a more public, social context was generally mediated by the men in her life.[25]

It would not be appropriate, however, to suggest that the women of classical Greece were powerless within the public sphere: though their power, within the home and without, was defined by particular boundaries, their role was essential to the cultural, political, and economic functioning of society. A conversation between Socrates and Ischomachos in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* illustrates the need for a woman to be taught her social role—if not by her mother or father, then by her husband. Ischomachos expresses no surprise that his wife came to him lacking important domestic skills; rather, he seems to take for granted that part of his role as husband is to fill in the gaps of his wife's domestic education:

> "As to what you asked me, Socrates," [Ischomachos] said, "I never spend time indoors. Indeed," he said, "my wife is quite able by herself to manage the things within the house."
>
> "It would please me very much, Ischomachos," I said, "if I might also inquire about this—whether you yourself educated your wife to be the way she ought to be, or whether, when you took her from her mother and father, she already knew how to manage the things that are appropriate to her."
>
> "How, Socrates," he said, "could she have known anything since she came to me when she was not yet fifteen, and had lived previously under diligent supervision in order that she might see and hear as little as possible and ask the fewest possible questions? Doesn't it seem to you that one should be content if she came knowing only how to take the wool and make clothes, and had seen how the spinning work is distributed among the female attendants? For as to matters of the stomach, Socrates," he said, "she came to me very finely educated; and to me, at any rate, that seems to be an education of the greatest important for both a man and a woman."
>
> "It will be necessary," I said [*i.e.*, Ischomachos said to his wife], "for you to

22 Keuls 1983, 21.

23 Jamin 2001, 1.

24 Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4.162.

25 For general discussions of women's roles in classical Greece, see Lefkowitz and Fant 1982, and Vivante.

> remain indoors and to send out those of the servants whose work is outside; as for those whose work is to be done inside, these are to be in your charge; you must receive what is brought in and distribute what needs to be expended, and as for what needs to be set aside, you must use forethought and guard against expending in a month what was intended to last a year. When wool is brought to you, it must be your concern that clothes be made for whoever needs them..."[26]

Social roles differed between city-states, however. Elite Athenian women were not expected to work outside the home, but their craftsmanship within the home had an essential role within the economic sphere. In Sparta, women of the upper classes were not necessarily expected to weave and often delegated such basic tasks to servants.[27] Ionian women prided themselves on weaving ornate fabrics, and there is some evidence to suggest they sometimes did so for profit.[28] In all Greek societies, the extent to which women held power within their own homes is not clear. For the most part, scholars "acknowledge the concept of separate spheres of influence or power held by each gender, and the fact that no gender held complete power in all realms of society."[29]

Historians generally agree that Roman women "occupied a far stronger position socially, politically, and economically than did their Greek counterparts."[30] Yet in Rome the role of weaving as a metaphor for womanly virtue is even more clearly drawn. Literary and inscriptional sources "associate Roman women of all classes with wool-working, an activity seen as symbolic of women's domestic duties."[31] Perhaps the most compelling pieces of evidence for the widespread cultural understanding of the "weaving equals a good woman" metaphor are funerary tributes, written by widowers in memory of lost wives. Epitaphs praised women in conventional terms for domestic virtue: "for being old-fashioned (*antiqua vita*); content to stay at home (*domiseda*); chaste (*pudicitia*); dutifully obedient (*obsequium*); friendly and amusing (*somitas, sermone lepido*); careful over money (*frugi*); .... Above all a wife was commended for her spinning and weaving (*lanifica, lanam fecit*)."[32] Wives were also remembered for their marital fidelity.[33]

Women in Roman literature are routinely pictured spinning and weaving, in groups or individually within the home, in a room populated primarily by women or in an environment that otherwise highlights domesticity. In the few exceptions to these examples—such as in the cases discussed below—weaving often symbolizes precisely the woman's *rejection* of this predetermined womanly role. In this way, while weaving craft in the classical world is symbolic of feminine virtue, it can also be employed in specific contexts to represent the assertion of feminine autonomy from within the patriarchal framework of classical culture.

Wielding Power with a Distaff

Both Ovid and Homer purposely twist the weaving metaphor to represent female characteristics and qualities quite different from traditional womanly virtues. In the narratives of Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne, the poets' female heroines wield the classical emblem of obedience and passivity in such a manner as to author their own destinies,[34] defying the expectations of those who would exert control over them.

Penelope uses weaving to avoid remarriage to one of her suitors. Social expectations in classical Greece dictated that a young widow remarry in a timely fashion, but Penelope safeguards her precarious

26 *Oeconomicus* 7–10 (4th c. BCE). Translation by T. C. Lord (discussed in Lefkowitz and Fant, 101–2).

27 Vivante, 241.

28 Barber, 281.

29 Vivante, 239.

30 Gold, 279. But Gold also advises caution: while epigraphical evidence suggests that the influence and value of a Roman woman in the public sphere was less frequently conflated with her prowess in the domestic sphere (than was that of her Greek counterpart), the "muse-like image [of the Roman woman] created and manipulated by the poet" (298) is not necessarily representative of the actual social power held by Roman women of the time.

31 Hallett, 264.

32 Balsdon, 207.

33 Hallett, 271.

34 In Kruger's words, "write their own texts of resistance." (57)

position as a wealthy "widow" by using the ruse of Laertes' shroud, which she weaves during the day and unravels at night. Though the suitor Antinoös places the responsibility for this deception solely on the shoulders of Penelope herself, one cannot but hear in his words his grudging respect for a woman who so cunningly uses the traits that make her desirable as a wife, her weaving skill and her seemingly honourable devotion to her father-in-law, to make fools of all the men who would aspire to be her husband:

> And yet you [*i.e.,* Telemachos] have no cause to blame the Achaian suitors, but it is your own dear mother, and she is greatly resourceful[35]

Penelope herself calls attention to her "virtue" to excuse herself from her social duty to remarry and plays with the suitors' sense of honour. If any suitor objects to Penelope's request for more time to weave Laertes' shroud, he will seem to dishonour a war hero:

> ... This is a shroud for the hero Laertes, for when the destructive doom of death which lays men low shall take him, lest any Achaian woman in this neighborhood hold it against me that a man of many conquests lies with no sheet to wind him.[36]

The audience, of course, knows that Penelope has no intention of finishing the shroud; thus, her appeal to the suitors' sense of honour comes across as rather dishonourable, and certainly not virtuous. One could suggest that Penelope demonstrates womanly virtue in her fidelity to Odysseus, yet even this argument falls flat. If Penelope is indeed loyal to an Odysseus whom she believes to be alive,[37] then why does she flirt so shamelessly with the suitors? "For she holds out hope to all, and makes promises to each man / sending [them] messages ..."[38] If she believes Odysseus to be dead, why does she refuse remarriage for so long, and in such an indirect manner? Perhaps she leads the suitors on because she knows she is safe as a "widow" only if the very large group of excited men in her foyer believes one of its members will eventually win the queen and the palace. In this way, each suitor acts like a personal bodyguard, protecting Penelope from the others; however, if this is the case, then Penelope is certainly acting in a manner not at all representative of womanly virtue. She is not passive,[39] she is not honest, she is not obedient, she is not demure. She weaves, but she also unravels her weaving, at night, by torchlight, in a wholly duplicitous manner, arguably undoing her womanly virtues as she resists the social role cast for her.

Philomela uses weaving as resistance in two ways, both of which turn the "weaving as womanly virtue" metaphor on its head. First, the process of weaving allows Philomela to denounce Tereus while admitting her loss of virginity and her, albeit unwilling, role in her sexual relationship with Procne's husband (even without a tongue she "speaks"). Second, by sending the tapestry to her sister, Philomela authors her physical escape, and Procne's "reading" of the woven narrative sets in motion the events that eventually lead to Tereus' last, devastating supper:

> Signa deus bis sex acto lustraverat anno.
> Quid faciat Philomela? fugam custodia claudit,
> structa regent solido stabulorum moenia saxo,
> os mutum facti caret indice. Grande doloris
> ingenium est, miserisque venit sollertia rebus.
>
> Stamina barbarica suspendit callida tela
> pupureasque notas filis intexuit albis,
> indicium sceleris; perfecaque tradidit uni,
> utque ferat dominae gestu rogat: illa rogata
> pertulit ad Procnem, nec scit, quid tradat in illis.[40]

35 Homer, *Odyssey,* 2.85–86.

36 *Ibid*., lines 97–100.

37 This is not made wholly clear. To the suitors, at least, she intimates that Odysseus is dead: "Young men, my suitors now that the great Odysseus has perished, / wait, though you are eager to marry me, until I finish / this web ..." (*Odyssey,* 2.94–96).

38 *Ibid*., lines 89–90.

39 Arguably she is passive-aggressive, but this is before Psychology (yet not before *anakhronismos*), so one must be careful.

40 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.571–80: "The sun-god has circled the twelve signs, and a year is past. What can Philomela do? A guard prevents her escape; the thick walls of the building are made of solid stone; her mute mouth can yield no token of the facts. Great trouble is inventive, and ingenuity arises in difficult times. Cleverly,

That Philomela has a loom at all (jailed behind massive stone walls as she is, without a tongue, and with guards preventing her escape) is not only diabolical in a literal sense, but disturbing in a metaphorical one. Here Ovid draws a monstrous caricature of the classical Athenian image of women weaving in the home, away from public view.[41] Tereus has stripped Philomela of her virginity, her dignity, her liberty, her individuality, and her voice—but he leaves her with the traditional symbol of womanhood, essentially saying, "You're a woman: Now weave."

Then Ovid has Philomela weave her story in purple and white.[42] We know the colour purple was generally reserved for the upper classes;[43] white represents purity. As Philomela defies Tereus' attempts to de-womanize her, Ovid suggests that despite her physical circumstances, Philomela is still noble, still pure. In weaving the tale of her violation, she seals her fate and the fate of her sister, and dooms her young nephew to a terrible death, but she also steps out of the role defined for her by Tereus, wielding her loom in much the same way that Tereus wielded his blade when he cut out her tongue, authoring her own destiny with the tools available to her.

Ovid's use of perfeca ("perfect," "finished," or "complete") is particularly important, foreshadowing the sudden and definitive end of the narrative. In contrast, Homer never shows us Helen's completed tapestry. Arguably this absence is symbolic of Helen's uncertain future; as long as the Trojan War rages, her fate is undecided—she is "shuttled" between the Greeks and Trojans as long as the battle (and thus the tapestry) remains incomplete. There is no such hesitancy, however, in Philomela's weaving. She weaves her denouncement of Tereus, and when it is done, she snips the thread, just as the Fates spin, measure, and snip human life.

Arachne uses weaving not to resist social pressure and not to defy male power, but to challenge Olympic authority. First she declares that her weaving skill is wholly her own—not inspired by the goddess Minerva, patroness of weaving and domestic arts: *"... quam sibi* [*i.e.*, Minerva] *lanificae non cedere laudibus artis audierat."*[44] Then she challenges the goddess to a weaving "duel" and further provokes Minerva by weaving into her tapestry scenes of the gods' sexual misdemeanors. Arachne's "come what may" attitude[45] suggests that the final outcome of the contest is not as important to her as the act of defiance. When Minerva realizes that Arachne's skill cannot be faulted—regardless of her poor choice of subject-matter—she is enraged. Arachne hangs herself rather than enduring Minerva's wrath, and Ovid once more uses a weaving symbol—that is, the cordage that Arachne uses to fashion the noose—in a scene that highlights female resistance rather than womanly virtue. Minerva's *"pende tamen"* ("yet hang!")[46] takes on new significance: is it only Arachne who is doomed to forever hang (by the instrument of her defiance), or does Ovid also comment here on the reaction of authority to all women who attempt to author their own destiny or wield "womanly" tools in an "unwomanly" manner?

By using weaving as a metaphor for resistance, Ovid and Homer not only up-end the traditional view of women as silent and powerless outside the purely domestic or "womanly" realm but also encourage us to re-examine our understanding of social power in the classical world. Though their social environments and social roles limit their authority within a public sphere, Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne *do not do what is expected of them,* defining on their own terms how they will respond to their physical circumstances. Female power, suggest the poets, comes in many forms.

she fastens her thread to a barbarian's loom, and weaves purple designs on a white background, revealing the crime. She entrusts it, when complete, to a servant, and asks her, by means of gestures, to take it to her mistress. She, as she is asked, takes it to Procne, not knowing what it carries inside." See http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Ovhome.htm.

41 See the discussion above.

42 The text does not clarify whether these are Philomela's personal colour choices, or if they are the only two colours she has with her.

43 See above.

44 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.6–7: "… whom she [Minerva] had heard would not give her due credit … in the art of spinning."

45 *Ibid.*, line 25: *"'certet' ait 'mecum: nihil est, quod victa recusem.'"* ("'Contend with me,' she said[.] 'I will not disagree at all if I am beaten.'")

46 *Ibid.*, line 136.

By exercising traditional roles in untraditional ways, women *do* wield extraordinary social power, often with unexpected and unpredictable consequences.

Conclusion

Arachne's decision to commit suicide (though it is overturned by the goddess) is an appropriate point to conclude this discussion. In classical mythology the actions of spinning and weaving are frequently described as bookending human life. The spinning sisters, or the Greek *Moi'rai* (in Latin, *parcae*, "bringers forth," or *fata*, "fates"), determine the lives of human beings: young Clotho spins the thread of life, older sister Lachesis measures it, and eldest sister Atropos snips the thread, thereby determining the time of a man's death. Thus, in Greek and Roman society, while men traditionally wield the primary political and social power, there is a long literary tradition that links the mystical, unknowable realms of death and destiny with women.[47]

This tradition would seem to suggest that when a woman resists patriarchal or Olympic authority, or reinvents her role within the existing social structure, she becomes suddenly less knowable; as an "author of destiny," she renders the outcome of events suddenly less foreseeable. A woman who resists social norms by defying authority and modifying her physical circumstances becomes, like the Fates, at once threatening and mystifying. She also becomes a much more interesting narrative character: one who *does* as opposed to being *done to* by others; one who creates events rather than suffering those created by others; one who weaves her own narrative rather than merely being a thread in someone else's.

Woe betide the individual who thinks that, as long as his womenfolk are busy doing womanly work, outcomes will be predictably favourable. Ovid and Homer both suggest that even from within their traditional "domestic" roles, women wield tremendous power over individuals and events. Arguably, the poets set out to undermine not only the traditional view of domestic arts as symbolic of "womanly virtue," but the related assumptions that a) one who demonstrates skill in the domestic arts must, *ipso facto*, be virtuous, and b) one whose primary power is in the domestic realm wields little or no power on a public or social level. In the cases of Penelope, Philomela, and Arachne, weaving symbolizes precisely the *opposite* of traditional classical femininity. And while wielding a shuttle is not quite like wielding a sword, when a woman exercises power from within traditional feminine contexts, her actions have profound social consequences.

47 See, for example, both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, in which Homer refers to the destiny of Odysseus as having been "spun" for him from birth by the "heavy[-handed] Spinners." *Odyssey,* 7.196–98; *Iliad,* 20.127–28.

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