

The Story of Arachne, Nature's Weaver

Adapted by B.P. Skinner from the Greek myth

Before she dried up and withered, before her straight limbs grew gray and crooked and wiry, and before her smooth white arms were no more, before others were loath to look at her—before she morphed—she was Arachne, a poor, simple country girl.

She was the daughter of Idmon, a dyer of sheep's wool from Colophon, Lydia in the Ancient Kingdom of Anatolia.¹ Arachne surpassed all others in Lydia in two ways: weaving and arrogance. Under her creative needle and onto the growing web across which her darting fingers spanned, she created cloth wonders. Just watching Arachne's fly through the yarn was a pleasure enough to draw nymphs² from the golden river Pactolus and from the vineyards of Tymolus. Men and women traveled for miles to see Arachne weaving at her loom and paid many silver pieces for a even the smallest length of the cloth that she spun. Never, though, is a person with so much talent not envied by someone.

That someone was none other than Athena³, the goddess of craftsmen. She got word that there was a weaver in Lydia whose artistry surpassed all mortals, and claimed to rival the gods. Disguised as an old woman, Athena went to see for herself this marvelous young weaver. Sure enough, Athena found that Arachne's talent was as great as the stories had claimed. Her blood boiled with envy.

¹Anatolia is a region between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, it is in the modern-day country of Turkey.

²In Greek mythology, a nymph is a minor female deity, similar to a fairy. Unlike gods, nymphs are divine spirits usually depicted as beautiful, young women.

³Athena is the goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, just warfare, mathematics, strength, strategy, the arts, crafts, and skill.

"You must not let your ambition soar too high, or boast that your work exceeds that of the gods," the hunched and hobbling old woman told Arachne. "If you dream that one day you might equal Athena, the greatest of all craftswomen, you have committed a punishable crime!"

Arachne fixed scornful eyes on the old woman and laughed. "Did you say *equal* Athena? You must live with the goats in the far-off hills, Old Woman. Otherwise, you would not speak of my work *equaling* the work of Athena, but of *surpassing* it!" Arachne dismissed the old woman as a fool and returned to her work, a colorful cloth tapestry that grew longer and longer under her slender white fingers.

Athena was furious and replied, "Take heed, arrogant one, for anyone who deigns to make themselves higher than the gods shall be punished."

Arachne was not impressed. She laughed and mocked the strange old woman. "Let Athena enter a contest with me, then. I have no doubt that I am a finer craftswoman than she."

The nymphs, who stood by, fidgeted in fear of the wrath that the young weaver's daring words would incite.

Athena threw off her disguise and revealed her godly radiance. She blazed with anger and insulted pride. "Lo, Athena has come," she announced. The small crowd of villagers that had gathered to observe the scene gasped and fell to their knees at Athena's feet.

All but Arachne. She, though trembling inside, appeared unabashed.

"I have spoken the truth," Arachne stated in a firm voice. "No woman or goddess can rival my work. I will stand by what I said. If you want to enter a contest with me, you are free to do so." Arachne's pride in her work was exceeded only by that of Athena's. The goddess, without hesitation took her place at a loom by Arachne's side. The two women, one mortal one immortal, went to work and wove through the long night.

Athena's fingers produced pictures in the thread so life-like and so perfect that the astonished onlookers couldn't distinguish her art from real life. Each scene she wove depicted the omnipotence⁴ of the gods and the doom the mortals would face if they cursed them.

Athena glanced over at Arachne's loom. Arachne's fingers never slowed. With arrogant daring, and to the horror of the bystanders, Arachne wove her tapestry with tales that showed the weakness of the gods.

When the sun rose, yards of the finest cloth billowed out from each loom. Between the mortal and the goddess, the contest was too close to call. The color, form, and exquisite detail of the woven pictures were equal.

Unable to contain her anger any longer, Athena threw aside her boxwood shuttle⁵ and ripped Arachne's gorgeous cloth to shreds. The terrified bystanders scattered. Athena, rising up to her full height from the tangle of destroyed fabric proclaimed icily, "For evermore, Arachne, you and your descendants shall live only to weave."

By this curse, the fair mortal of Lydia morphed into an eight-legged spider, doomed to weave delicate and beautiful wonders, unmatched by any, for all eternity.

⁴ Omnipotence means almighty, all-powerful, or all-knowing.

⁵ A shuttle is the part in a loom used to move yarn from one side to the other.