Illustrating Ekphrasis: Arachne's Tapestry in Visual Media

The only extant version of the myth of Arachne (Ov. *Met*. 6.1-145) contains two expert instances of ekphrasis, detailed descriptions of first Minerva's tapestry (70-102), then Arachne's (103-128). These impossibly complex weavings prove challenging to illustrators and authors who strive to adapt them in the visual media of picturebooks and graphic novels. Arachne's tapestry, in particular, has proved challenging for children's book illustrators because they must find a suitable way to present its sexual content as well as grappling with its surplus of material. This paper will examine some of the techniques that illustrators have used to depict Ovid's undepictable image.

Ovid describes twenty-one divine sexual escapades in the space of 26 lines, all enclosed within an entwined ivy border (6.103-128). He creates a frenetic impression, rushing through so many myths with so few words, vivacious and fluid, without any underling organizing principle (Leach 1974). As vivid as this picture is, the overall impression is of too much material to be contained in a single image, however large the tapestry. An overabundance of images is a feature of the type scene since the shield of Achilles (*Il*. 18.478–608, Becker 1995), but Ovid adds a layer of complexity to his descriptions of mortal tapestries by using them as metonymy for metapoetic creation and feminine storytelling (Salzman-Mitchell 2005). The result Arachne's case is an example of "unreal" ekphrasis, a description of a work of art that cannot exist in the real world.

The approaches taken by picturebook and graphic novel illustrators to Ovid's challenge tend to follow different patterns depending on the age of the intended audience. Picturebooks marketed to preschoolers and Early Readers abandon Ovid's swirling images of bestiality in

favor of a small number of images of the gods behaving in a "foolish" manner (Coats and Lewis 2002), while others choose a metaliterary representation of a spider (Singer and Masse 2016, Pirotta and Lewis 1988).

Other Early Readers intended for school aged children preserve Ovid's subject matter but choose a central image to be the focal point, supplemented with two or three additional images drawn from Ovid's text (Hart and Martin 2008, Espeland and Kennedy 1980). In both books surveyed in the category, the composition of the illustrated tapestry reflects Ovid's frenetic description, but the text on the page deviates from Ovid's text. The authors carefully describe the scenes as trickery rather than sexual encounters.

Finally, books marketed at older consumers, ages ten and above, do not try to depict Arachne's tapestry as a single work of art. Instead, they select a limited number of scenes and illustrate each scene within its own panel (O'Connor 2010, Hovey and Drawson 2000). The effect gives the sense of a visual work that is too complex to be depicted as a single whole, as Ovid's description of Arachne's tapestry is, yet at the same time it obliterates the hectic, frenetic energy of Ovid's description entirely.

Ironically, the closer the illustrations surveyed come to Ovid's original description, the less true to they are to his authorial intent. That is not to say that any of the illustrators are unsuccessful; all who attempted to depict Arachne's tapestry clearly demonstrate their indebtedness to Ovid's text through their composition, image choice, or both. In a true Ovidian twist, the only possible way to illustrate Ovid's myth of Arachne and Minerva is to create a new, unique work of art.

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