

*Me mihi, se sibi*: Divine Impersonation, Ovid's Arachne, and the Integrity of the Self

In *Metamorphoses* 6, when Minerva in the guise of an old woman warns Arachne to pay better respect to the gods, Arachne's indignant refusal of this advice contains an unusual collocation of words: *consilii satis est in me mihi* ("I've got enough wisdom for myself within myself," *Met.* 6.40). Because the appearance of two distinct oblique forms of the same personal pronoun within a single clause occurs only seven times in the entirety of the *Metamorphoses*, and only once—here—from the mouth of a woman, Arachne's use of this construction is particularly marked.

Though numerous scholars have examined the symbolism of Arachne's tapestry and its ekphrasis (e.g., Leach 1974, Harries 1990, Vincent 1994) and interpreted her iconographic choices as critiques of imperialism, gendered violence, and hierarchies of power (Bömer 1986, Oliensis 2004, Alekou 2022), there has been less attention to the meaningful anticipation of these critiques embedded in her earlier exchange with Minerva. In this paper, I argue that Arachne's pointed use of the phrase *me mihi* activates a series of intratextual references to memorable episodes of divine impersonation earlier in the *Metamorphoses*, and thus anticipates the imagery that she will weave into her tapestry; her use of the construction (in comparison with the six other instances, all spoken by or about men) is furthermore distinctive for its assertion of the integrity, rather than the dissolution, of the self.

I begin by establishing the centrality of the repetitive pronoun construction to programmatic episodes of divine impersonation. It appears most emphatically during Mercury's gleeful revelation to Battus that he has unwittingly tattled to the thief himself: '*me mihi, perfide, prodis, / me mihi prodis?*' ait (" 'Do you betray me to myself, traitor, do you betray me to

myself?’ he says,” *Met.* 2.704-705). Jupiter, earlier in the same book, is likewise amused by his ability to deceive through impersonation: when Callisto, tricked by his disguise as Diana, calls him *maius Iove* (2.429), the narrator reports that Jupiter “rejoices that he is preferred to himself” (*sibi praeferri se gaudet*, 2.430). These episodes of impersonation require the gods to detach themselves from their own identities, and so justify the polyptoton of pronouns; the pattern of dissolution associated with this construction continues even for mortal men, including Marsyas (6.385), Theseus (8.405), and Ajax (13.388), all of whom use the phrase to articulate a separation or sublimation of the self.

Next, I return to the marked affirmation of the integrity of the self that is contained within Arachne’s choice to speak the phrase *me mihi*. Oliensis (2004: 291) has pointed out the uncomfortable alignment of Arachne with Jupiter that is authorized by her prowess in artistic deception. Though her choice to speak the phrase *me mihi* establishes an intratextual affiliation with Jupiter (and Mercury), I demonstrate that the specifics of Arachne’s usage actually reify the distance between them: where *me mihi* emphasizes disconnection from the self for male speakers, Arachne’s feminine voice appropriates the construction as an expression of her independence and unshakeable confidence in her own abilities and ambitions.

Arachne’s subsequent choice to weave into her tapestry scenes of violence accomplished via divine impersonation offers, therefore, an iconographic complement to her bold choice to speak a phrase that had been, so far, reserved for divine impersonators. Though she is notionally in the position of Battus and Callisto, as a mortal conversing with a god in disguise, Arachne is the one to voice the phrase *me mihi*, effectively amending its association with deception and rejection of the self into a declaration of the soundness and integrity of her identity. The later dissolutions, both physical and symbolic, of Marsyas, Theseus, and Ajax serve in retrospect to

underscore the exceptional nature of Arachne's choice of expression and its gendered implications.

#### Works Cited

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