

Unraveling the Web: Arachne's Artistic Agency in *Metamorphoses* Book VI

Resolving the tension of whether Arachne retains artistic agency and voice in her metamorphosis carries implications for reading Ovid's frequent presentations of violence. Many stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, including that of Arachne, focus on the central theme of an aggressor's violence removing the victims' power of speech, often framed in poetic terms. In the opening of the Arachne narrative, Minerva, disguised as an aged woman, attempts to control Arachne's speech after Arachne's verbal hubris and commands, "with supplicating voice ask [Minerva's] pardon for your words" (Ovid, VI.32-33). When Arachne refuses, they begin a weaving contest, rich with "voice" imagery. By the end of their competition, Minerva transforms Arachne into a spider. This may seem to remove her voice and identity entirely, a pessimistic reading that many scholars, including Amy Richlin, Michael Vincent, and Eleanor Leach, propound. However, other moments within the narrative push back on this reading of the Arachne story. I argue, building on the work of Ellen Oliensis, Patricia Klindienst, Alessandro Barchiesi, and Byron Harries, that a closer reading of the Arachne story indicates a stronger, lasting artistic voice and identity for Arachne. Ovid writes about the "teeth" of Arachne's loom and, in ekphrasis, presents the "speeches" spoken by the opposing "arguments" of the tapestries, creating an analogy between the artistry of weaving and the artistry of poetry. Examining these *argumenta* reveals a dynamic conversation on poetic agency, and its ability to construct or deconstruct identity, within Arachne and Minerva's tapestries. While Arachne's arachnid form risks painting her as dehumanized, if one reads Arachne's transformation in dialogue with Minerva and Arachne's tapestries, her metamorphosis communicates a continuity of her voice and humanity. Together, Minerva and Arachne's tapestries reflect Ovid's poetic metamorphosis

of power dynamics, demonstrating that Ovid presents enduring artistic voice as a means to subvert abusive authority.

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