

Alcithoë's Rhetorical Loom: the Workshop and Escalation of Storytelling within Book 4 of
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Spinning and poetry have been plied together in the imagination of Greco-Roman writers, but Ovid refines and reweaves the textile metaphor throughout the *Minyeid* scene in Book 4 of the *Metamorphoses* (Rosati, 1991). He matches the progression from simple spinning into complex weaving within the stories told. The sisters tell tales corresponding to their skills. Spinning is the first and most basic task of woolworking, repetitive, but not boring. These first stories are well worn paths: the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe and why the mulberry fruit turns red. Then the second sister Leuconoë recounts the story of Mars' affair with Venus (presumably while spinning), the Hespera forging/spinning the net, Venus' revenge against the room of spinning women, and even more transformations. These stories are full of love, jealous sisters and gods, lost veils, drop spindles, and deep purple dyes. The first two stories are 'spinning a yarn': repetitive retelling, aetiological in nature, exactly what the *Minyids* need to distract themselves from the Bacchic frenzy.

Then, as the plot progresses in complexity and the Bacchic actions escalate 'offscreen' the final sister offers up a complex and novel tale. The production has moved away from spinning, and Alcithoë takes up her shuttle, and weaving her sisters a plot that she promises none of them have heard before. Weaving is the final goal of textile work, a finished piece of cloth, each piece unique and offering unlimited possibilities. The warp and weft intersect, and the final product can't be fully seen before its end. This intersection of threads matches the topic of her novel myth well-an intersection of Salmaccis and unnamed Hermaphroditus-a story that's only realized in full once it's off the metaphorical loom. Hermaphroditus' famous name isn't dropped in the last line: the innovation can only be appreciated in retrospect. The more complex subject

matter is matched with a more complex textile art. If we view this scene through this rhetorical/textile escalation we can view the entire bacchic scene in a more complex lens. Ovid revitalizes and complicates the metaphor of poetry as spinning-his stories aren't just spinning a tale, he and Alcithoë are weaving an entire cloth.

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