

Old Women, Wands, and Potions: The Witchcraft of Ovid's Minerva

Ovid opens Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* with an extended narrative describing the weaving contest between Minerva and Arachne (6.1-145), one of several unequal 'contests' between mortal and immortal artists depicted in the poem (e.g., the poetic competition between the Pierides and Muses in Book 5). While prior readings of the Arachne myth (e.g., Rosati, Feldherr, and Oliensis) focus on the programmatic aspect of the paired *ecphrases* of Minerva's and Arachne's tapestries, in this paper I call attention to a somewhat overlooked aspect of Ovid's narrative: the magical process by which Minerva transforms Arachne into a spider. This unexpected deviation from Minerva's mythological *persona* focuses the reader's attention on her motivations in provoking the confrontation, and exposes the purpose underlying her actions throughout the episode. Three specific aspects of the metamorphic process warrant consideration as indicators of Minerva's witchcraft: her disguise as an old woman (6.26-42), her use of a shuttle to strike Arachne (6.132-133), and the potion that causes the transformation (6.139-140).

Minerva's disguise as an old woman recalls two figures otherwise associated with magic: the nurse figure from tragedy (e.g., Phaedra's nurse in Euripides' *Hippolytus*) and the specifically Roman witches of satire and elegy (e.g., Horace's Canidia or Tibullus' *saga* in 1.2.41-62). Moreover, since elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*, magical capabilities are attributed to old women (e.g., Myrrha's nurse at 10.394-401), Minerva's choice of disguise may signal her later overt use of magic against Arachne. As Segal (10) has previously noted, Minerva's use of a shuttle as a weapon not only resembles her own use of a *πάβδος* to transform (or at least disguise) Odysseus (*Od.* 16.172-176), but also the *baculum* which Circe employs to transform Picus (*Met.* 14.387). Nevertheless, the most obviously magical act in this sequence is Minerva's use of a *medicamen* to transform Arachne (6.140), which should surprise Ovid's readers, who are

by now accustomed to divinities enacting transformations without recourse to the *artes magicae*. Although Tupet subjected lines 6.139-140 to closer scrutiny in a 1985 article, she was primarily concerned with establishing whether or not these lines indicate a clear instance of a magical operation. Those few other interpretations of this episode that do discuss Athena's employment of a potion as the medium for Arachne's transformation (e.g. Oliensis, 289 and Segal, 10-11, also citing 6.132-33) associate the inappropriateness of the goddess's actions specifically with her uncharacteristic loss of poise and Olympian detachment, assimilating the use of magic into the unequal power dynamics of the passage as a whole.

However, these approaches fail to address the core incongruity of Minerva's use of witchcraft in the Arachne episode. The use of a potion implies that Arachne's transformation into a spider is the pre-conceived outcome of the contest and not a spontaneous reaction to it, as the narrative directly surrounding the act suggests (cf. the parallel observation of Hejduk on line 6.25). I therefore argue that Ovid's use of magic in the Arachne narrative is not merely an observable effect of the hyperbolic characterization of Athena's rage, but rather positions this episode, at the beginning of the second pentad, in terms of the increasing prominence of magic within the epic's self-constructed cosmos as an alternative to the direct application of divine power. In the first five books of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid restricts his description of magical operations to two potions, also used by divinities (Hermes and Aphrodite, 4.388; Tisiphone, 4.500-507); however, after Arachne's transformation, his readers encounter an increasingly wide variety of (semi-)human practitioners, including Medea (7), Orpheus (10), Mycale (12.262-264), Glaucus (13.904-965), and Circe (14). In Ovid's metamorphic universe, magic thus emerges as one of a range of potential supernatural forces encountered by characters and readers alike.

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