

ARACHNE

Translated by Ted Hughes, Reworked and Illustrated by Mr. Rinkevich

1 Minerva, goddess of weavers,
2 Had heard too much of Arachne.
3 She had heard
4 That the weaving of Arachne
5 Equaled her own, or surpassed it.



6 Arachne was humbly born. Her father
7 Labored as a dyer
8 Of Phocaeen purple. Her mother
9 Had been humbly born. But Arachne
10 Was a prodigy. All Lydia marveled at her.

11 The **nymphs** came down from the vines on Tmolus
12 As butterflies to a garden, to flock stunned
13 Around what flowered out of the **warp** and the **weft**
14 Under her fingers.

15 Likewise the **naiads** of Pactolus

16 Left sands of washed gold
17 To dazzle their wonder afresh
18 On her latest. They swooned at all she did.
19 Not only as it lay done, but as each inch crept
20 From under her touches.

21 A grace like Minerva's, unearthly,
22 Moved her hands whether she bundled the fleeces
23 Or teased out the wool, like cirrus,
24 Or spun the yarn, or finally
25 Conjured her images into their places.

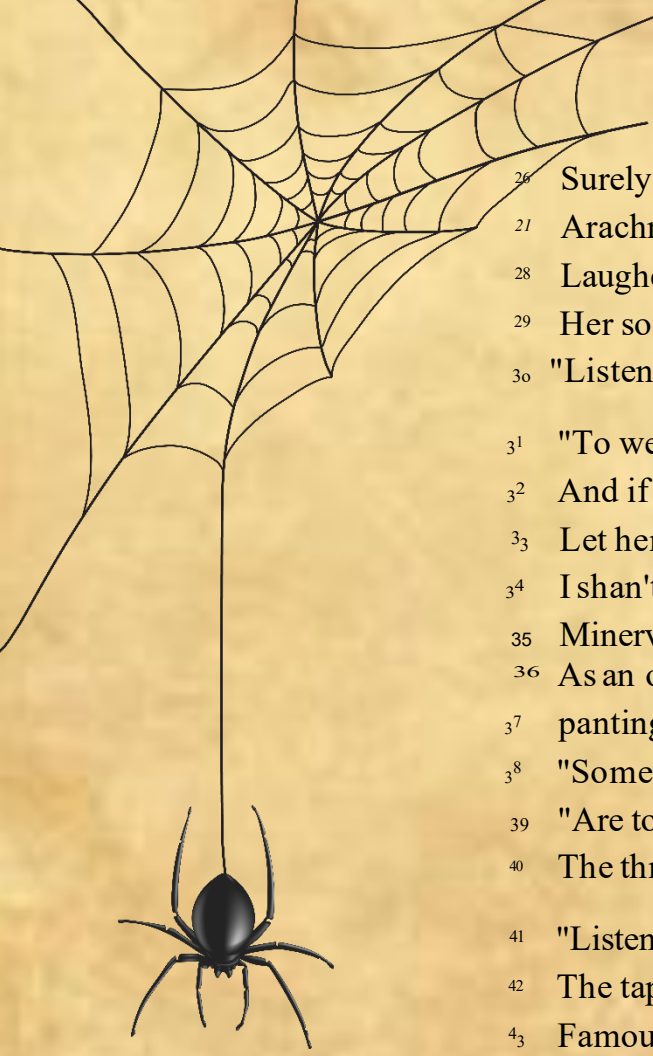
nymphs: nature spirits

warp: cross-wise threads

weft: lengthwise threads

naiads: water spirits

cirrus: a thin feathery cloud



26 Surely, only Minerva could have taught her!
27 Arachne
28 Laughed at the suggestion.
29 Her sole instructor, she claimed, was her inborn skill.
30 "Listen," she cried, "I challenge Minerva
31 "To weave better than I weave,
32 And if she wins
33 Let her do whatever she wants with me,
34 I shan't care."
35 Minerva came to Arachne
36 As an old woman
37 panting and leaning on a stick.
38 "Some things that age brings," she began,
39 "Are to be welcomed. Old experience teaches
40 The thread of consequence cannot be broken.
41 "Listen to my warning. Give to mortals
42 The tapestries that make you
43 Famous and foremost among mortal weavers,
44 But give to the goddess
45 Your gratitude for the gift.
46 "Leave it to her to boast of you, if she wants to,
47 And ask her to forgive you
48 For your reckless remarks
49 Against her.
50 She will hear and she will be merciful."



The background of the page is a light beige or cream color. It is decorated with numerous small, black spiders of various sizes. These spiders are positioned at different heights and are connected to thin, vertical black lines that extend from the top of the page towards the bottom. The overall effect is reminiscent of a spider web or a decorative hanging ornament.

5¹ Arachne turned from her loom.
5² She reared like a cobra, scowling,
5³ And came near to striking the old woman,
5⁴ Her eyes hard with fury.
5⁵ As she spat at her: "Your brain totters
5⁶ "Like your **decrepit** body.
5⁷ You have lived too long.
5⁸ If you possess daughters or granddaughters
5⁹ Waste your babble on them.
6⁰ I am not such a fool
6¹ "To be frightened by an owl-face and a few screeches.
6² I make up my own mind,
6³ And I think as I always did.
6⁴ If the goddess dare practice what she preaches
6⁵ Why doesn't she take up my challenge?
6⁶ "Why doesn't she come for a contest?"
6⁷ As Arachne spoke, the old woman
6⁸ Seemed to flare up
6⁹ To twice her height, crying: "She has come."
7⁰ All the nymphs fell **prostrate**.
7¹ The women of Mygdonia bowed and hid
7² Their faces in terror.
7³ Only Arachne brazenly
7⁴ Defied the goddess, with a glare. She flushed deep red
7⁵ In the rush of her anger, then paled-
7⁶ As the dawn crimsons then pales.
7⁷ But she stuck to her challenge. Too eager
7⁸ For the greater glory now to be won,
7⁹ She plunged with all her giddy vanity
8⁰ Into destruction.
8¹ Minerva bent to the contest
8² Without another word. She rigged up her loom.
8³ The shuttles began to fly.
8⁴ Both rolled their upper garments down
8⁵ Under their breasts to give their arms freedom

decrepit: old and weak

prostrate: lying down

86 For every inspiration.
87 So concentrated on the outcome
88 Neither was aware how hard she was working
89 Feeding the cloth with colors
90 That glowed every **gradation**
91 Of tints in the rainbow
92 Where the sun shines through a shower
93 And each hue dissolves
94 Into its neighbor too subtly
95 For human eye to detect it.
96 Minerva portrayed the divine
97 History of her city, Athens,
98 And how it came to be named.
99 There were the twelve high gods surrounding Jove.
100 She characterized each one:
101 Jove in his majesty and thunders,
102 Neptune splitting a crag
103 With his trident, and the ocean
104 Gushing from the **crevasse**-
105 By which he claimed the city.
106 And herself, with a shield and a long spear,
107 The high-ridged helmet on her head
108 And over her breasts the **aegis**.
109 And, where she speared the earth, silvery olives
110 Springing up, with berries.
111 The gods gazed astonished. A winged
112 Victory perfected the assembly.
113 Then the goddess
114 Filled each corner with an illustration
115 Of the kind of punishment
116 Arachne could now expect for her impudence.
117 In one corner, two snowy summits,
118 Rhodope and Haemon, had been human
119 Before they assumed for themselves
120 The names of the greatest gods.



¹²¹ In another corner the Queen of the Pygmies
¹²² Who had challenged Juno and lost
¹²³ Had become a crane
¹²⁴ Warring against her own people.
¹²⁵ In the third corner Antigone,



¹²⁶ Who had challenged Juno, cried in vain
¹²⁷ To her father Laomedon and to the city of Troy
¹²⁸ As the goddess turned her into a stork.
¹²⁹ She tries to cheer herself with the white flash
¹³⁰ Of her broad wings and her beak's clatter.

¹³¹ In the fourth corner Cinyras
¹³² Embraced the temple steps-all that remained
¹³³ Of his daughter, his tears
¹³⁴ Splashing the stones.
¹³⁵ Finally



¹³⁶ With an embroidered border of tangled olives-
¹³⁷ Pallas framed her design
¹³⁸ And completed the work
¹³⁹ With her own tree, like a flourish,
¹⁴⁰ The tree of peace, an olive.

¹⁴¹ Arachne's tapestry followed a different theme.
¹⁴² It showed Europa crying from out at sea
¹⁴³ Astride the bull that had deceived her.
¹⁴⁴ The high god Jupiter, in his bull form,
¹⁴⁵ Carrying her off-

¹⁴⁶ And glistening with effort.
¹⁴⁷ You could see her feet recoiling
¹⁴⁸ From the swipe of the waves through which he heaved.
¹⁴⁹ And Asteria was there
¹⁵⁰ Fighting to keep her clothes on

¹⁵¹ Under the storming eagle.
¹⁵² And Leda, bared
¹⁵³ Under the blizzard of the swan.
¹⁵⁴ Across the growing pattern Jupiter
¹⁵⁵ Varied and multiplied



¹⁵⁶ His **amorous** transformations:
¹⁵⁷ A satyr
¹⁵⁸ Planted Antiope with her divine twins.
¹⁵⁹ The lady of Tyrins yielded her body
¹⁶⁰ Only to one she thought Amphytrion.

¹⁶¹ The lap of Danae opened
¹⁶² Only to a shower of gold. Here
¹⁶³ The god has gone into the eye of a candle
¹⁶⁴ To comfort Asopus' daughter.
¹⁶⁵ There he's a shepherd, knowing Mnemosyne

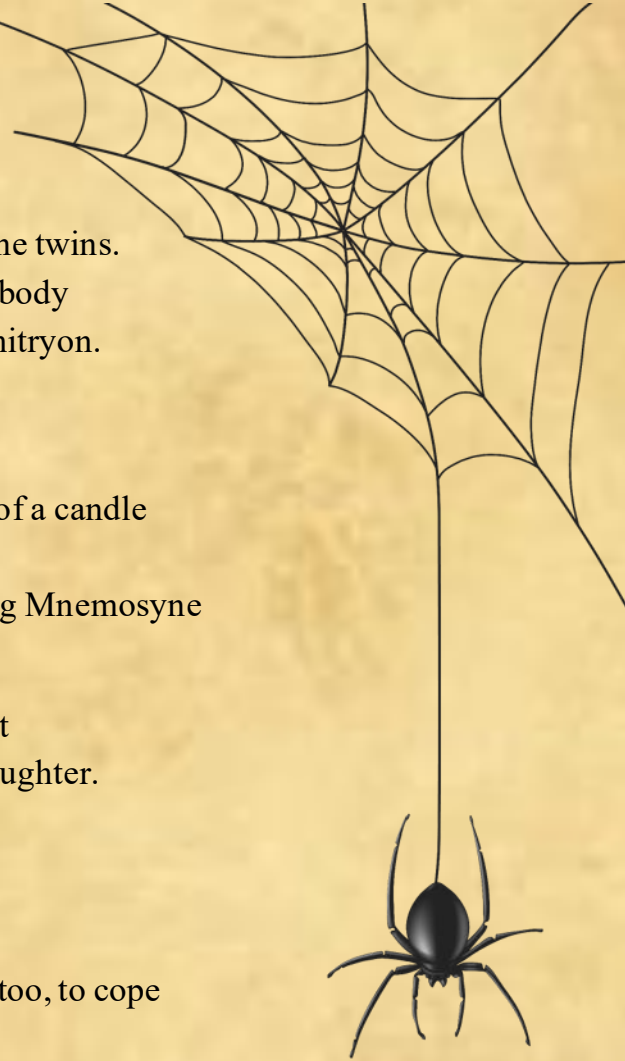
¹⁶⁶ Adores that flute.
¹⁶⁷ And there as a freckled serpent
¹⁶⁸ He has overcome Demeter's daughter.
¹⁶⁹ In each of these Arachne
¹⁷⁰ Gave Jove rich new life.

¹⁷¹ Then moved on to Neptune-
¹⁷² Who had become a great bull, too, to cope
¹⁷³ With the daughter of Aeolus.
¹⁷⁴ And as the god of a river
¹⁷⁵ Sweeps Alocus' wife away in a grasp

¹⁷⁶ That casts her up imprinted with twin sons.
¹⁷⁷ Here a ram
¹⁷⁸ Surprises Bisaltis. There a masterful horse
¹⁷⁹ Circumvents the modesty of Demeter.
¹⁸⁰ A dolphin dives with Melantho. And the curse

¹⁸¹ Of Medusa's grisly beauty
¹⁸² Softens for a bird.
¹⁸³ Arachne captures them all as if she had copied
¹⁸⁴ Each as it happened.
¹⁸⁵ Then she brings on Phoebus-

¹⁸⁶ As a peasant, a falcon, a lion, last as a shepherd
¹⁸⁷ seducing Isse, Macareus' daughter.
¹⁸⁸ Then Bacchus, with a bunch of grapes
¹⁸⁹ That are no grapes, deceiving Erigone.
¹⁹⁰ And there in the glowing weave,





¹⁹¹ Saturn a stallion
¹⁹² Begetting Chiron-half man and half pony.
¹⁹³ Arachne bordered her picture, to close it,
¹⁹⁴ With a sparkling wreath of cunningly knotted
¹⁹⁵ Flowers and ivy. So it was finished.

¹⁹⁶ And neither the goddess
¹⁹⁷ Nor jealousy herself
¹⁹⁸ Could find a stitch in the entire work
¹⁹⁹ That was not perfection. Arachne's triumph
²⁰⁰ Was unbearable.

²⁰¹ Minerva tore from the loom
²⁰² That gallery of divine **indiscretions**
²⁰³ And ripped it to rags.
²⁰⁴ Then, all her power gone
²⁰⁵ Into **exasperation**, struck Arachne

²⁰⁶ With her boxwood shuttle
²⁰⁷ One blow between the eyes, then another,
²⁰⁸ Then a third, and a fourth. Arachne
²⁰⁹ staggered away groaning with indignation.
²¹⁰ She refused to live

²¹¹ With the injustice. Making a noose
²¹² And fitting it round her neck
²¹³ She jumped into air, jerked at the rope's end,
²¹⁴ And dangled, and spun.
²¹⁵ Pity touched Minerva.

²¹⁶ She caught the swinging girl: "You have been wicked
²¹⁷ Enough to dangle there for ever
²¹⁸ And so you shall. But alive,
²¹⁹ And your whole tribe the same through all time
²²⁰ Populating the earth."

²²¹ The goddess
²²² Squeezed onto the dangling Arachne
²²³ Venom from Hecate's deadliest leaf.
²²⁴ Under that **styptic** drop
²²⁵ The poor girl's head shrank to a poppy seed

indiscretions:
improper behavior

exasperation:
extreme
annoyance

styptic: blood-
stopping



226 And her hair fell out.
227 Her eyes, her ears, her nostrils
228 Diminished beyond being. Her body
229 Became a tiny ball.
230 And now she is all belly

231 With a dot of head. She retains
237 Only her slender skillful fingers
233 For legs. And so forever
234 She hangs from the thread that she spins
235 Out of her belly.

236 Or ceaselessly weaves it
237 Into patterned webs
238 On a loom of leaves and grasses -
239 Her touches
240 Deft and swift and light as when they were human.

