



THE SPINNING CONTEST

IN ancient Greece, it was always considered a wise move to thank the gods for a particular skill or talent that you happened to possess. If you really admired someone, you might go so far as to compare him to the gods. "He sings almost like Apollo," you might say—and you would be careful not to forget the "almost." But were you to claim that you did something as well as or even better than the gods . . . well, that could be very dangerous. In fact it could be lethal.

This is the story of just such a person, a girl by the name of Arachne. She was a young woman of Maeonia. Her family was poor, and she had been born in a tiny cottage in the somewhat decrepit village of Hypaepae. Hypaepae was such a wretched place that the only people who visited invariably turned out to have lost their way, and those who lived in it would really have preferred not to. Hypaepae didn't have a village green. It had a village moldy brown. Although it seldom rained, the main street was always full of puddles, and the whole place smelled of fish.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Arachne soon became famous throughout the country on account of her extraordinary skill at weaving. Then people did start coming to the village, just to admire her work—and it wasn't only the finished product that made it worth the journey. To watch her weave, her fingers dancing over the pattern, was a pleasure in itself. There was an extraordinary elegance in the way she wound yarn. To see her draw a single soft thread out of a great ball of fluff was like watching a magician. Whether she was twirling the spindle with a single flick of her thumb or embroidering the finished material, nobody could take their eyes off her.

You may think that this is all a little exaggerated, but watch any craftsman at work and you will see for yourself. A potter "growing" a vase between his fingers, a glassblower forming crystal bubbles over the flames, a carpenter stroking virgin wood with his chisel . . . there is a type of magic in craftsmanship, and Arachne had plenty of it.

Unfortunately, she was somewhat less well endowed with the virtues of modesty, humility, and generosity. It is often the way that people who are particularly good at something are a little short on human kindness. Arachne had none at all. She was rude to her mother, quick-tempered with her servants, and generally difficult and unfriendly. But it was her arrogance that eventually undid her.

"I am so unbelievably, unusually, and extraordinarily talented," she remarked one day to her mother.

"Yes, dear," her mother said, stifling a yawn. She had heard it all before.

"Even the gods must envy me," she continued.

"Well, dear, I'm not so sure . . ."

"No god can weave as I can. Not even Athene. Compared to me, the so-called goddess of wisdom is just a clodhopper, a fat-fingered fumbler. I bet she's jealous of me. Everybody's jealous of me. But then I'd be jealous of me if I wasn't me. Because I'm so extravagantly talented."

Now this was a doubly foolish thing to say. For Athene was the goddess who had taught Arachne her skill in the first place. And secondly, she tended to react rather severely to insults such as these. In her other role as goddess of war, she had once crushed one of her enemies to death using the entire island of Sicily. Her curses had caused one man to be flayed alive and another—the prophet Tiresias—to go blind. Athene was a kind and caring friend. But she was a terrible enemy.

But Arachne went on regardless.

"I bet Athene would never compete against me," she said. "She'd be too afraid of losing, especially against a supposed mortal. But then, perhaps there is a little goddess in me. What do you think? Don't you think I'm just a teeny-weeny bit divine?"

These words were no sooner out of her mouth than an old woman, who had somehow gotten into the room without anyone hearing her, stepped forward, supporting herself on a gnarled walking stick. She really was very old. Her hair was quite white, her skin hanging in bags, and her eyes dim and blistered.

"Ugh!" Arachne exclaimed. "Who are you, old crone?"

"You shouldn't mock old age," the woman said. "For with it comes experience. Listen now to the voice of experience, Arachne. It is all very well to consider yourself the best mortal spinner. Perhaps you are. But you are wrong to compare yourself to the goddess Athene and should ask her pardon."

"Why should I?"

"Because she will forgive you if you ask. If you do not, who can say what she will do?"

Arachne scowled. She had been weaving when she was interrupted, but now she stopped, got up, and roughly pushed the old woman against the wall.

"You know what your trouble is?" she said. "You're old. You're senile. Your brains have gone. You're like my mother. Don't you have daughters of your own to go and nag? Because don't imagine for a single minute that I care what you say. If Athene was so clever, she'd have come here herself. And even then I wouldn't apologize. I'd weave—and I can tell you, I'd show her a thing or two."

"Very well," the old woman said. "Now is your opportunity."

And suddenly she raised her arm, there was a burst of light, and in an instant she was transformed. Gone were the old clothes, the walking stick, the wrinkles. In their place stood a tall, armored woman carrying a spear in one hand and a shield in the other. A helmet with five spikes surmounted her head, and sheer power seemed to radiate around her.

"You have challenged me," Athene said, for of course it was the goddess herself. "And I have come. Soon you may regret it."

When the transformation had taken place, many of the women in the room had fled, screaming with fear. But Arachne just smiled.

"I don't regret anything!"

And so, while her mother watched, tight-lipped and pale, two



looms were set up on opposite sides of the room. The goddess sat at one, the mortal at the other, back-to-back so that neither could see what the other was doing.

"Speed must count as well as technique," Athene said. "We will stop at sunset. Then we can compare what we have done."

"I'm ready when you are," Arachne said.

"Then we will start."

It was the strangest race that was ever run. First the contestants stretched the threads on their looms. They tied their frames to the crossbeams, separated the warp with their heddles, reached for their shuttles to weave the crossthreads . . . in this way an expert might have described it. But to the onlookers, unskilled in the art of weaving, it was as if the two figures were playing incredibly complicated, multistringed instruments without actually managing to make a single sound. For they worked in silence, their fingers racing back and forth across the frames, plucking and pulling, dipping in and out of the threads, pulling, separating, weaving . . .

And gradually two pictures began to form. First there would be one color. Then another. Then a line of gold. A shape. A hand . . . then an arm. The hands continue their mad pattern and a man springs to life, posing against a background of Tyrian copper. A man? No. The threads had been beaten back by the comb and he has metamorphosed. Below the waist he is a horse. Of course! A centaur . . .



This is what the two contestants wove that day: Arachne wove a tapestry called "The Loves of the Gods." It depicted Zeus no fewer than three times but always in different

guises: as a bull, seducing Europa, as a swan in the arms of Leda, and as a shower of gold coins tumbling into the lap of Danae. But Zeus was not the only god whose wickedness she portrayed. There was Poseidon as a bull, as a ram, and as a river—always as an adulterer. There was Apollo, disguised as a humble shepherd to deceive the simple country girl, Isse. And there was even the drunken god of wine, Bacchus, who had turned himself into a bunch of grapes in order to hang at the lips of the woman he loved. The tapestry was formed out of dozens of radiant colors. It was gaily decorated with a framework of flowers and ivy. But still it showed the gods at their most ignoble.

The theme of Athene's tapestry was very different, for it was as flattering as Arachne's was irreverent. Here again was Zeus, but this time he was revealed in his full glory as king of Olympus, a thunderbolt in his hand and an eagle perched behind his throne. Poseidon stood with his trident, striking a rock to release a sparkling waterfall. Athene herself appeared in her own tapestry, creating a mighty olive tree simply by touching the ground with her spear. The tapestry was called "The Power of the Gods."

But in each of the four corners of her work, the goddess added different scenes: scenes that would have warned Arachne of her terrible danger had she only been able to see it. For they showed punishments that the gods had inflicted on mortals unwise enough to fall into their disfavor. There was Rhodope, changed into an icy mountain. Antigone and the queen of the pygmies, both turned into birds. And Cinyras shedding bitter tears on the limbs of his dead daughters. Athene finished her work by embroidering the edges with olives: the symbols of peace.

The sun set and the contest ended. At last the two opponents stopped and turned around to face each other. Arachne's back was stiff and her fingers were sore and bleeding, but Athene was as fresh as when she had started.

"Now let us compare our work," Athene said.

Coldly, she ran her eye over "The Loves of the Gods."

"Hardly the way a mortal should represent the Olympians,"

she remarked. "But . . ." She pursed her lips. "The work is perfect."

"Of course it is," Arachne said, smugly.

"It is. It's . . ."

"It's better than yours."

Then the goddess of wisdom and of war became angry, because, astonished and disgusted though she was, she could not deny that Arachne was right. The mortal woman had beaten her at her own craft. Seeing Athene so indignant, Arachne broke into laughter, the shrill sound echoing around the room. But her mother trembled, seeing the blood run from Athene's face.

"Better than yours! Better than yours!" Arachne shouted.

"Enough!" the goddess cried.

Raising her shuttle, she struck Arachne hard on the forehead, then again and again and again. Arachne screamed and fell to the floor. But the goddess had not finished yet. Forming a noose out of thread, she slipped it around Arachne's neck, and while the wretched girl gurgled and grunted, drew it tight, pulling her off her feet so that she hung beneath the rafters.

It was then, seeing her daughter slowly strangle, that Arachne's mother threw herself forward, kneeling at the feet of the goddess.

"Great Athene!" she cried. "Forgive my little girl. She didn't know what she was doing. She doesn't mean to offend. It's just . . . well, she's a difficult child . . . I admit it. But you can't kill her. I beg you . . .!"

Then Athene's heart softened. Regarding her foolish opponent, who was now bright red, swaying like a pendulum in the air some six feet above the ground, she sprinkled her with a handful of herbs which had been prepared by the witch Hecate.

"I will spare your life, wretch!" she said. "But this is how you must remain for all eternity. And this is how all your daughters shall be. Such is the punishment for your insolence and vanity."

The moment the poisoned herbs touched Arachne, all her hair fell out, immediately followed by her nose and ears. While her mother fainted dead away, Arachne's head shrank like a

punctured balloon until it was no bigger than a pea. At the same time, her body folded in on itself, trapping her legs and arms, which disappeared completely. Her fingers, which had scuttled so quickly across the threads, became stuck to her sides to serve her as legs. But they were thinner now, and hairy too.

And just as Athene had ordained, that was how Arachne remained. She still hung above the ground. And she still wove beautifully—although in not quite the same way.

For Arachne had been turned into a spider.

