

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider

By Ovid

From *Metamorphoses* (Book Vi) • 8 A.D.

*Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.) was a Roman poet well-known for his elaborate prose and fantastical imagery. Ovid was similar to his literary contemporary, Virgil, in that both authors played a part in reinventing classical poetry and mythology for Roman culture. Metamorphoses, one of Ovid's most-read works, consists of a series of short stories and epic poems whose mythological characters undergo transformation in some way or another. As you read, take notes on Ovid's choice of figurative language and imagery.*

- [1] Pallas,<sup>1</sup> attending to the Muse's<sup>2</sup> song,  
 Approv'd the just resentment of their wrong;  
 And thus reflects: While tamely<sup>3</sup> I commend  
 Those who their injur'd deities<sup>4</sup> defend,  
 [5] My own divinity affronted stands,  
 And calls aloud for justice at my hands;  
 Then takes the hint, asham'd to lag behind,  
 And on Arachne' bends her vengeful mind;  
 One at the loom<sup>5</sup>  
 so excellently skill'd,  
 [10] That to the Goddess<sup>6</sup> she refus'd to yield.  
 Low was her birth, and small her native town,  
 She from her art alone obtain'd renown.  
 Idmon, her father, made it his employ,  
 To give the spungy fleece<sup>7</sup>  
 a purple dye:  
 [15] Of vulgar strain her mother, lately dead,  
 With her own rank had been content to wed;  
 Yet she their daughter, tho' her time was spent  
 In a small hamlet,<sup>8</sup>  
 and of mean descent,  
 Thro' the great towns of Lydia gain'd a name,  
 [20] And fill'd the neighb'ring countries with her fame.



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1. Pallas is another name for Minerva (Athena) the goddess of wisdom and the arts (such as weaving).
2. The Muses are the three goddesses of poetic inspiration.
3. **Tamely** (*adverb*): calmly
4. **Deity** (*noun*): god or goddess
5. An instrument used for weaving
6. The Goddess refers to Minerva, also known as the Roman goddess Athena.
7. A sheep's skin
8. A town

Of<sup>9</sup>, to admire the niceness of her skill,  
The Nymphs<sup>10</sup> would quit their fountain, shade, or hill:  
Thither, from green Tymolus,<sup>11</sup> they repair,  
And leave the vineyards, their peculiar care;

- [25] Thither, from fam'd Pactolus' golden stream,<sup>12</sup>  
Drawn by her art, the curious Naiads<sup>13</sup> came.  
Nor would the work, when finish'd, please so much,  
As, while she wrought, to view each graceful touch;  
Whether the shapeless wool in balls she wound,  
[30] Or with quick motion turn'd the spindle round,  
Or with her pencil drew the neat design,  
Pallas her mistress shone in every line.  
This the proud maid with scornful air denies,  
And ev'n the Goddess at her work defies;  
[35] Disowns her heav'nly mistress ev'ry hour,  
Nor asks her aid, nor deprecates<sup>14</sup> her pow'r.  
Let us, she cries, but to a tryal<sup>15</sup> come,  
And, if she conquers, let her fix my doom.

The Goddess then a beldame's<sup>16</sup>  
form put on,

- [40] With silver hairs her hoary<sup>17</sup>  
temples shone;  
Prop'd by a staff, she hobbles in her walk,  
And tott'ring thus begins her old wives' talk.

Young maid attend, nor stubbornly despise  
The admonitions of the old, and wise;

- [45] For age, tho' scorn'd, a ripe experience bears,  
That golden fruit, unknown to blooming years:  
Still may remotest fame your labours crown,  
And mortals your superior genius own;  
But to the Goddess yield, and humbly meek  
[50] A pardon for your bold presumption seek;  
The Goddess will forgive. At this the maid,  
With passion fir'd, her gliding shuttle stay'd;  
And, darting vengeance with an angry look,  
To Pallas in disguise thus fiercely spoke.

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9. Often

10. Nymphs are mythological woodland fairies.

11. Tymolus refers to a certain mountain.

12. According to myth, Midas rid himself of his golden touch in the Pactolus river.

13. Naiads are mythological water fairies.

14. **Deprecate (verb):** to belittle, slight; in this context, to show humility

15. A trial or challenge

16. Old woman

17. Old and grey

- [55] Thou doating<sup>18</sup>  
thing, whose idle babbling tongue  
But too well shews<sup>19</sup> the plague of living long;  
Hence, and reprove, with this your sage<sup>20</sup> advice,  
Your giddy daughter, or your awkward niece;  
Know, I despise your counsel, and am still
- [60] A woman, ever wedded to my will;  
And, if your skilful Goddess better knows,  
Let her accept the tryal I propose.
- She does, impatient Pallas strait replies,  
And, cloath'd with heavenly light, sprung from her odd disguise.
- [65] The Nymphs, and virgins of the plain adore  
The awful<sup>21</sup> Goddess, and confess her pow'r;  
The maid alone stood unappall'd; yet show'd  
A transient<sup>22</sup> blush, that for a moment glow'd,  
Then disappear'd; as purple streaks adorn
- [70] The opening beauties of the rosy morn;  
Till Phoebus<sup>23</sup> rising prevalently bright,  
Allays the tincture<sup>24</sup>  
with his silver light.  
Yet she persists, and obstinately<sup>25</sup> great,  
In hopes of conquest hurries on her fate.
- [75] The Goddess now the challenge waves no more,  
Nor, kindly good, advises as before.  
Strait to their posts appointed both repair,  
And fix their threaded looms with equal care:  
Around the solid beam the web is ty'd,
- [80] While hollow canes the parting warp divide;<sup>26</sup>  
Thro' which with nimble flight the shuttles play,  
And for the woof prepare a ready way;  
The woof and warp unite, press'd by the toothy slay.

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18. Senile

19. Shows

20. **Sage** (*adjective*): wise; used sarcastically in this case

21. **Awful** (*adjective*): (archaic) inspiring awe

22. **Transient** (*adjective*): momentary or brief

23. Phoebus is another name for the sun god (Apollo in Greek mythology). It is also a term used to refer literally to the sun.

24. Tinge of color

25. **Obstinately** (*adverb*): stubbornly

26. Warp, shuttles, woof, and slay are terms used in weaving; parts of the loom.

- Thus both, their mantles button'd to their breast,  
[85] Their skilful fingers ply with willing haste,  
And work with pleasure; while they chear<sup>27</sup> the eye  
With glowing purple of the Tyrian dye:  
Or, justly intermixing shades with light,  
Their colourings insensibly unite.  
[90] As when a show'r transpierc'd<sup>28</sup>  
with sunny rays,  
Its mighty arch along the heav'n displays;  
From whence a thousand diff'rent colours rise,  
Whose fine transition cheats the clearest eyes;  
So like the intermingled shading seems,  
[95] And only differs in the last extremes.  
Then threads of gold both artfully dispose,  
And, as each part in just proportion rose,  
Some antique fable in their work disclose.
- Pallas in figures wrought the heav'nly Pow'rs,  
[100] And Mars's<sup>29</sup> hill among th' Athenian tow'rs.  
On lofty thrones twice six celestials<sup>30</sup>  
sate,  
Jove<sup>31</sup> in the midst, and held their warm debate;  
The subject weighty, and well-known to fame,  
From whom the city shou'd receive its name.  
[105] Each God by proper features was exprest,  
Jove with majestick mein<sup>32</sup> excell'd the rest.  
His three-fork'd mace the dewy sea-God shook,  
And, looking sternly, smote the ragged rock;  
When from the stone leapt forth a spritely steed,  
[110] And Neptune<sup>33</sup> claims the city for the deed.
- Herself she blazons, with a glitt'ring spear,  
And crested helm that veil'd her braided hair,  
With shield, and scaly breast-plate, implements of war.  
Struck with her pointed lance,<sup>34</sup> the teeming Earth  
[115] Seem'd to produce a new surprizing birth;  
When, from the glebe,<sup>35</sup> the pledge of conquest sprung,  
A tree pale-green with fairest olives hung.

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27. Cheer

28. Penetrated

29. Mars is the god of war, also known as the Greek god Ares.

30. Gods

31. Jove is the mythological god of thunder and king of the gods; Roman name for Zeus.

32. **Mein** (*noun*): the outward manifestation of personality or attitude

33. Neptune is the mythological god of the sea, also known as Poseidon in Greek mythology.

34. A lance: a long weapon for thrusting with a wooden shaft and a pointed steel head

35. A "glebe" is a plot of land.

- And then, to let her giddy rival learn  
What just rewards such boldness was to earn,  
[120] Four tryals at each corner had their part,  
Design'd in miniature, and touch'd with art.  
Haemus in one, and Rodope of Thrace  
Transform'd to mountains,<sup>36</sup> fill'd the foremost place;  
Who claim'd the titles of the Gods above,  
[125] And vainly us'd the epithets<sup>37</sup> of Jove.  
Another shew'd, where the Pigmaean dame,<sup>38</sup>  
Profaning Juno's venerable name,  
Turn'd to an airy crane, descends from far,  
And with her Pigmy subjects wages war.  
[130] In a third part, the rage of Heav'n's great queen,  
Display'd on proud Antigone,<sup>39</sup> was seen:  
Who with presumptuous boldness dar'd to vye,  
For beauty with the empress of the sky.  
Ah! what avails her ancient princely race,  
[135] Her sire a king, and Troy her native place:  
Now, to a noisy stork transform'd, she flies,  
And with her whiten'd pinions cleaves the skies.  
And in the last remaining part was drawn  
Poor Cinyras<sup>40</sup> that seem'd to weep in stone;  
[140] Clasp'g the temple steps, he sadly mourn'd  
His lovely daughters, now to marble turn'd.  
With her own tree the finish'd piece is crown'd,  
And wreaths of peaceful olive all the work surround.

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36. In Greek mythology, King Haemus of Thrace compared himself and his wife Rhodope to Zeus and Hera (Jove and Juno). For this arrogance, the gods changed them into mountains.

37. **Epithet (noun):** an adjective or phrase expressing a quality characteristic of the person or thing mentioned

38. Oinoe refused to honor the goddess Hera/Juno and was turned into a crane.

39. Antigone of Troy claimed her hair was more beautiful than Hera/Juno's and was turned into a stork for her arrogance.

40. King Cinyras of Cyprus

- Arachne drew the fam'd intrigues of Jove,  
[145] Chang'd to a bull to gratify his love;  
How thro' the briny tide all foaming hoar,  
Lovely Europa<sup>41</sup> on his back he bore.  
The sea seem'd waving, and the trembling maid  
Shrunk up her tender feet, as if afraid;  
[150] And, looking back on the forsaken strand,  
To her companions wafts her distant hand.  
Next she design'd Asteria's<sup>42</sup> fabled rape,  
When Jove assum'd a soaring eagle's shape:  
And shew'd how Leda<sup>43</sup> lay supinely press'd,  
[155] Whilst the soft snowy swan sate hov'ring o'er her breast,  
How in a satyr's form the God beguil'd,  
When fair Antiope<sup>44</sup> with twins he fill'd.  
Then, like Amphytrion,<sup>45</sup> but a real Jove,  
In fair Alcmena's<sup>46</sup> arms he cool'd his love.  
[160] In fluid gold to Danae's<sup>47</sup> heart he came,  
Aegina<sup>48</sup> felt him in a lambent<sup>49</sup> flame.  
He took Mnemosyne<sup>50</sup> in shepherd's make,  
And for Deois was a speckled snake.

- She made thee, Neptune, like a wanton<sup>51</sup> steer,<sup>52</sup>  
[165] Pacing the meads for love of Arne<sup>53</sup> dear;  
Next like a stream, thy burning flame to slake,  
And like a ram, for fair Bisaltis<sup>54</sup> sake.  
Then Ceres<sup>55</sup> in a steed your vigour try'd,  
Nor cou'd the mare the yellow Goddess hide.  
[170] Next, to a fowl transform'd, you won by force  
The snake-hair'd mother of the winged horse;  
And, in a dolphin's fishy form, subdu'd  
Melantho<sup>56</sup> sweet beneath the oozy flood.

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41. Europa was the mother of King Minos of Crete. Zeus/Jove was enamoured with her and transformed into a bull to abduct her.
  42. Asteria was the daughter of a Titan and desired by Jove/Zeus. She fled from him, but he chased her as an eagle.
  43. Leda was the wife of a Spartan king and seduced by Jove/Zeus in the form of a swan.
  44. Jove/Zeus transformed into a satyr to seduce Antiope. She later gave birth to twins, one of whom was fathered by the god.
  45. Amphytrion was a Thebean general and the son of the Alcaeus.
  46. Alcmena was the mother of the hero Hercules/Heraclides, son of Jove/Zeus.
  47. Danae was the mother of the hero Perseus, son of Jove/Zeus. The god appeared to her in the form of a shower of gold.
  48. Aegina was the mother of the hero king Aeacus, son of Jove/Zeus.
  49. **Lambent (adjective):** glowing, gleaming, or flickering with a soft radiance
  50. Mnemosyne was the personification of memory in Greek mythology, a Titan, and the mother of the Muses by Jove/Zeus.
  51. **Wanton (adjective):** uncontrollable
  52. A steer is an ox.
  53. Arne gave birth to twins sired by Neptune/Poseidon in bull form.
  54. Bisaltis was taken by Neptune/Poseidon in the form of a ram.
  55. Ceres was a goddess of agriculture, a counterpart to the goddess Demeter. She was pursued by Neptune/Poseidon.
  56. Melantho was the daughter of Deucalion and was seduced by Neptune/Poseidon as a dolphin.

All these the maid with lively features drew,  
[175] And open'd proper landskips to the view.  
There Phoebus, roving like a country swain,  
Attunes<sup>57</sup> his jolly pipe along the plain;  
For lovely Isse's<sup>58</sup> sake in shepherd's weeds,  
O'er pastures green his bleating flock he feeds,  
[180] There Bacchus,<sup>59</sup> imag'd like the clust'ring grape,  
Melting bedrops Erigone's<sup>60</sup> fair lap;  
And there old Saturn,<sup>61</sup> stung with youthful heat,  
Form'd like a stallion, rushes to the feat.  
Fresh flow'rs, which twists of ivy intertwine,  
[185] Mingling a running foliage, close the neat design.

This the bright Goddess passionately mov'd,  
With envy saw, yet inwardly approv'd.  
The scene of heav'nly guilt with haste she tore,  
Nor longer the affront with patience bore;  
[190] A boxen shuttle in her hand she took,  
And more than once Arachne's forehead struck.  
Th' unhappy maid, impatient of the wrong,  
Down from a beam her injur'd person hung,<sup>62</sup>  
When Pallas, pitying her wretched state,  
[195] At once prevented, and pronounc'd her fate:  
Live; but depend, vile wretch, the Goddess cry'd,  
Doom'd in suspense for ever to be ty'd;  
That all your race, to utmost date of time,  
May feel the vengeance, and detest the crime.

[200] Then, going off, she sprinkled her with juice,  
Which leaves of baneful aconite<sup>63</sup> produce.  
Touch'd with the pois'nous drug, her flowing hair  
Fell to the ground, and left her temples bare;  
Her usual features vanish'd from their place,  
[205] Her body lessen'd all, but most her face.  
Her slender fingers, hanging on each side  
With many joynts, the use of legs supply'd:  
A spider's bag the rest, from which she gives  
A thread, and still by constant weaving lives.

*The Transformation of Arachne into a Spider by Ovid is in the public domain.*

57. Harmonizes to

58. Isse, also known as Amphissa, was a lover of Phoebus/Apollo, who first seduced her as a shepherd.

59. Bacchus is the mythological god of wine and revelry, also known as the Greek god Dionysus.

60. Erigone was the daughter of Icarius of Athens. Icarius was cordial to Bacchus/Dionysus but was killed by his drunken shepherds. Erigone, upon finding her father, hanged herself and became the constellation Virgo.

61. Saturn is the mythological god of agriculture and commerce.

62. Arachne hangs herself after Pallas tears her weaving and hits Arachne.

63. Aconite is a type of poisonous root.

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central theme of the text? [RL.2]
  - A. Revenge can drive people to do strange, cruel things.
  - B. Confidence is needed in order to succeed.
  - C. Talent is more innate than from practice.
  - D. Faith is more important than humility.
  
2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
  - A. "That to the Goddess she refus'd to yield. / Low was her birth, and small her native town, / She from her art alone obtain'd renown." (Lines 10-12)
  - B. "Nor would the work, when finish'd, please so much, / As, while she wrought, to view each graceful touch; / Whether the shapeless wool in balls she wound, / Or with quick motion turn'd the spindle round, / Or with her pencil drew the neat design, / Pallas her mistress shone in every line." (Lines 27-32)
  - C. "Yet she persists, and obstinately great, / In hopes of conquest hurries on her fate. / The Goddess now the challenge waves no more, / Nor, kindly good, advises as before." (Lines 73-76)
  - D. "When Pallas, pitying her wretched state, / At once prevented, and pronounc'd her fate: / Live; but depend, vile wretch, the Goddess cry'd, / Doom'd in suspence for ever to be ty'd; / That all your race, to utmost date of time, / May feel the vengeance, and detest the crime." (Lines 194-199)
  
3. PART A: Which of the following best describes why Pallas wants revenge on Arachne? [RL.3]
  - A. Pallas believes Arachne has been claiming Pallas's work as her own.
  - B. Pallas is tired of Arachne's challenges and wants to end their feud.
  - C. Pallas wants revenge because Arachne weaves pictures of the gods' follies rather than their glories.
  - D. Pallas wants revenge because Arachne refuses to acknowledge the Muse's or Pallas's inspiration in her weaving.
  
4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
  - A. "Oft, to admire the niceness of her skill, / The Nymphs would quit their fountain, shade, or hill: / Thither, from green Tymolus, they repair, / And leave the vineyards, their peculiar care" (Lines 21-24)
  - B. "Pallas her mistress shone in every line. / This the proud maid with scornful air denies, / And ev'n the Goddess at her work defies; / Disowns her heav'nly mistress ev'ry hour, / Nor asks her aid, nor deprecates her pow'r." (Lines 32-36)
  - C. "Let us, she cries, but to a tryal come, / And, if she conquers, let her fix my doom." (Lines 37-38)
  - D. "This the bright Goddess passionately mov'd, / With envy saw, yet inwardly approv'd. / The scene of heav'nly guilt with haste she tore, / Nor longer the affront with patience bore" (Lines 186-189)

5. PART A: Why does Pallas most likely present herself to Arachne as she does? [RL.3]
- A. Pallas disguises herself as an old woman to see how young Arachne treats her elders.
  - B. Pallas disguises herself as an old woman to give Arachne a chance to yield to the goddess and ask for forgiveness.
  - C. Pallas disguises herself to trick Arachne into thinking she is a harmless old woman so she has the element of surprise.
  - D. Pallas disguises herself to trick Arachne into insulting the gods, not knowing that she was actually a goddess.
6. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
- A. "The Goddess then a beldame's form put on, / With silver hairs her hoary temples shone" (Lines 39-40)
  - B. "Young maid attend, nor stubbornly despise / The admonitions of the old, and wise" (Lines 43-44)
  - C. "But to the Goddess yield, and humbly meek / A pardon for your bold presumption seek; / The Goddess will forgive." (Lines 49-51)
  - D. "And, if your skilful Goddess better knows, / Let her accept the trial I propose. / She does, impatient Pallas strait replies, / And, cloath'd with heavenly light, sprung from her odd disguise." (Lines 61-64)
7. PART A: In stanza 7, to what does the speaker compare Pallas and Arachne's works? [RL.4]
- A. Glowing light in many different forms
  - B. The formation of a rainbow
  - C. Quick strikes of lightning
  - D. The emergence of the sun from a storm
8. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
- A. "Thus both, their mantles button'd to their breast, / Their skilful fingers ply with willing haste, / And work with pleasure; while they chear the eye / With glowing purple of the Tyrian dye" (Lines 84-87)
  - B. "Or, justly intermixing shades with light, / Their colourings insensibly unite" (Lines 88-89)
  - C. "As when a show'r transpierc'd with sunny rays, / Its mighty arch along the heav'n displays; / From whence a thousand diff'rent colours rise" (Lines 90-92)
  - D. "Then threads of gold both artfully dispose, / And, as each part in just proportion rose, / Some antique fable in their work disclose." (Lines 96-98)

9. Compare the imagery both Pallas and Arachne weave into their work. How do these images develop the myth's overall meaning? Cite evidence in your answer. [RL.4] [RL.1]

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10. Which of the following best summarizes the culmination of Pallas' revenge? [RL.3]
- A. Pallas accuses Arachne of cheating, and for this Pallas decides to turn her into a venomous spider.
  - B. Pallas declares herself the winner, even though Arachne clearly won; to make sure Arachne does not challenge her again, Pallas turns her into a spider.
  - C. Arachne wins the challenge and Pallas, bitter over losing, offers her a gift for her weaving; Arachne accepts and is turned into a spider, so that she may spin thread forever.
  - D. Arachne hangs herself in response to Pallas's envy and abuse, but pitying her Pallas keeps her alive; Pallas then transforms her into a spider to complete her vengeance.

## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Transformation is a theme that constantly recurs in mythology from all different cultures. What might be significant about the theme of transformation?
2. Can you think of modern-day stories that involve transformation or disguise as a central theme?
3. How are the gods portrayed in Greek and Roman mythology? What can we learn about ourselves from these portrayals? Do you believe they reflect human beings?
4. Consider the way Ovid portrayed Minerva (Athena) and Arachne. Whose side is he on?
5. It is clear that, throughout time, human beings have been drawn to mythological portrayals. Some have suggested that humans used mythology to explain scientific phenomena beyond our grasp. Why else are we drawn to mythology? What can we learn about ourselves from our attraction to mythology?
6. In your opinion, was Minerva's act of revenge justified? Why or why not? When -- if ever -- is revenge justified? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.