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"Arachnean Eyes": A Mythological Emblem in the Poetry of George Chapman

Judith Dundas

For George Chapman, classical myth has a significance that makes it a paradigm for the way poetry conveys truth. In his Justification for *Andromeda Liberata*, he states his conviction that poets ever enclose "within the rind some fruit of knowledge howsoever darkened and (by reason of the obscurity) of ambiguous and different construction."[1] Poets, he goes on to say, have the freedom to enlarge or alter "with inventions and dispositions of their owne" the allegory of the fiction they borrow, "to extend it to their present doctrinall and illustrous purposes." A case in point is his treatment of the story of Arachne. As artist, she had a particular significance for Chapman, but instead of relating the whole of her story, he turns it into a richly evocative emblem of the artist's relationship to the divine.

Believing as he does in the ambiguity of poetry, he does not want to spell out the significance of the Arachne myth in the way the moralized Ovids generally do.[2] Yet the story of Arachne's weaving contest with Minerva is one of those obviously intended to rebuke human presumption. Refusing to acknowledge Minerva as the source of her own craftsmanship, she dared to compete with the goddess. Her woven tapestry is itself concerned with vicious appetites, displaying the rapes and adulteries of the gods and their use of deceit to further their desires. Minerva's tapestry, on the other hand, celebrates her victory in her dispute with Neptune over naming the city of Athens. Her gift of the olive tree was adjudged by the gods to be more useful to mortals than the armed horse which Neptune offered: peace is better than war. But Minerva also included in the corners of her tapestry stories of mortals who sought to rival the gods, such as Haemus and Rhodope, who took for themselves the names of Jupiter and Juno and were punished by being turned into mountains. Clearly, this warning reinforces Minerva's initial admonition to Arachne, but it is one to which the mortal is blind

and deaf. Though Minerva could find no fault with her rival's tapstry as a perfect work of art, such presumption could not go unpunished. The goddess struck her with a shuttle, changing her into the spider, which still imitates its former task by making webs. Berchorius, the fourteenth-century Ovidian commentator, favors the application of the story to "presumptuous young clerics who consider themselves better than wise men and seek to argue with them. At last they are changed into spiders because it is shown that they are ignorant and that they gnaw their inner parts out of envy."[3] A more general indictment of the spider appears in the earlier versified *Ovide moralisé*, where the insect represents the devil setting traps for sinners.[4] For the most part, the moralizers seem not to be interested in the story of Arachne as a cautionary tale for artists. Like Niobe, whose story is the next one in the *Metamorphoses*, Arachne's chief importance to them is to underline what happens to a mortal who dares to challenge the gods.

Nearer in spirit to Chapman than these moralizers is Dante. We know that Chapman had read at least some of *The Divine Comedy* because at times he echoes it so closely.[5] One of these parallel passages concerns Arachne. Dante in the *Inferno* describes how the flanks of the figure of fraud, Geryon, are painted with knots and circlets and goes on to say that "Tartars or Turks never made stuffs with more colours in ground and embroidery, nor were such webs laid by Arachne on the loom."[6] Chapman, in his continuation of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, depicts the personification of Dissimulation in terms that almost translate Dante:

> Cloth had neuer die,
> Nor sweeter colours neuer viewed eie,
> In scorching *Turkie*, *Cares*, *Tartarie*,
> Than shinde about this spirit notorious;
> Nor was *Arachnes* web so glorious.
> (4th Sestiad, 298-302)

Here, the ironic praise is the same in both poets. But Dante more directly condemns Arachne in the *Purgatorio* when he shows her image in the pavement where the figures of the proud are displayed. These examples alternate between the Biblical and the classical. Treating pride as the beginning of all sin, Dante sees man exalting himself against God, exactly as Arachne had: "O mad Arachne, so did I see thee already half spider, wretched on the shreds of the web thou wroughtest to thy hurt!"[7] There is nowhere in Chapman quite so direct an interpretation of the Arachne story, but his allusions to her similarly imply her representative role as a great sinner.

During the Renaissance, writers who were concerned with questions of the morality of art could find a particular lesson in Arachne's fate. A poet whose moral vision Chapman largely shares, Edmund Spenser, made the Arachne story central to his poem *Muiopotmos, or the Fate of the Butterfly*. But now the theme of envy as the scourge of artists is developed, for in his version of the myth, Spenser relates how Arachne was transformed into an insect through her envy of Minerva's crowning achievement—an embroidered butterfly added to the goddess's olive tree in her competition tapestry. In this weaving contest, it is clear that Minerva gets the better of her mortal opponent by superior skill, as well as by moral superiority.[8] Yet the transformed Arachne remains for Spenser a master craftsman:

> Not anie damzell, which her vaunteth most
> In skilfull knitting of soft silken twyne;
> Nor anie weaver, which his worke doth boast
> In dieper, in damaske, or in lyne;
> Nor anie skil'd in workmanship embôst;
> Nor anie skil'd in loupes of fingring fine,
> Might in their divers cunning ever dare,
> With this so curious networke to compare. (361-67)

Elsewhere in Spenser's poetry, the tradition of the moralized Ovids is reflected in the more obvious use of the spider web as a trap for sinners. In the Cave of Mammon in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, Arachne "high did lift / Her cunning web, and spred her subtile nett" (7.28). This passage makes explicit the trap represented by gold in all its appeal to the cupidity of man. The culminating temptation of Book II, the Bower of Bliss, also alludes to Arachne in order to characterize the dangerous appeal of Acrasia's diaphanous dress: "More subtile web Arachne cannot spin, / Nor the fine nets, which oft we woven see / Of scorched dew, do not in th'ayre more lightly flee" (II.12.77). In these passages, the myth of Arachne, which takes the form of narrative in *Muiopotmos*, appears as allusions but allusions of a fairly straightforward kind, compared with the more enigmatic significance Chapman gives to the myth.

But before turning to his poetry, I would mention one of his contemporaries whose Arachne allusions provide an instructive parallel to Chapman's own. It is a fact that the skill of Arachne, regardless of the ends to which she put that skill, continues to make her a byword for the artist. It is not only Spenser who praises her handiwork; Jonson can even class it with Minerva's, without any stigma. If Acrasia's dress reminds Spenser of the transformed Arachne's cunning skill, Jonson

can address the ladies of the court with a more positive use of the same allusion to remind them that the beauty of their dress indicates that they wish, at least secretly, to be admired by men:

> Your dressings do confess
> By what we see, so curious parts
> Of Pallas's and Arachne's art,
> That you could mean no less.[9]

In the decorative context of this masque—*Neptune's Triumph*—Jonson chooses not to remind us of Arachne's sin, and of course he is free to select the connotations of fine workmanship attaching to her name. But in another work of his, *Cynthia's Revels*, we find the adjective "Arachnean" used with the same connotations of moral blindness which it had for Chapman, while the spider's web carries its traditional symbolism of insubstantial and worthless pursuits—here associated with foolish courtiers:

> Then fall they in discourse
> Of tires and fashions . . . if they salute,
> What curtsy they must use: such cobweb stuff
> As would enforce the commonest sense abhor
> The Arachnean workers.

The personification of virtue, Arete, replies to Crites, the judicious courtier who has been thus criticizing the bad courtiers:

> Patience, gentle Crites.
> This knot of spiders will be soon dissolved,
> And all their webs swept out of Cynthia's court,
> When once her glorious deity appears,
> And but presents itself in her full light.[10]

In Chapman's praise of Jonson's play *Sejanus*, Jonson himself is assigned the role of Cynthia, but now, fittingly, the purging beams of light are said to come from Phoebus:

> Our *Phoebus* may, with his exampling Beames,
> Burne out the webs from their *Arachnean* eyes,
> Whose Knowledge (Day-star to all Diadems,)
> Should banish knowledge-hating Policies. (*In Sejanum*, 135-38)

Another allusion to Arachne in this same poem suggests that if Minerva had chosen Jonson's subject—that is, Sejanus--for her competition tapestry, she would have been defeated by him:

> Wherein *Minerua* had been vanquished
> Had she, by it, her sacred Loomes aduanc't,
> And through thy subject wouen her graphicke Thread,
> Contending therein, to be more entranc't. (25-28)

But although Chapman has contrived this compliment to Jonson, he otherwise holds to the conviction that in this world, Minerva must always be defeated, simply because the world prefers the meretricious to the true.

Over and over Chapman declares that "The world is quite inverted, Vertue thrown / At Vice's feet" (*Byron's Tragedy* I.ii.14-15). In another passage he sees the world "inuersed," "that goes upon her head / And with her wanton heeles doth kyck the sky" (*A Coronet* 5). It is little wonder then that, as he says, "Arachne wins from Pallas all good parts, / To take her part, and every part conuerts / His honie into poison . . ." (*A Fragment of the Tears of Peace* 45-47). Arachne won the contest because the world is topsy-turvy. Spenser, on the other hand, preferred, at least in his *Muiopotmos*, to believe that Minerva won by weaving a surpassingly beautiful butterfly, who is really the human soul. Chapman, more pessimistic, sees only the triumph of wickedness in this world and the forsaking of divine wisdom.[11]

For the artist, there is always the particular danger of believing that he is a god. According to Renaissance commentators, such as George Sandys, who follows Natalis Comes, Minerva punished Arachne for daring to compare with her "in that art, which her selfe had taught her."[12] Chapman for his part makes a point of criticizing those who "learne the depth of Arts; and (curious) dare / By them (in Natures counterfaits) compare / Almost with God" (*Euthymiae* 568-69).[13] The pursuit of mimetic art divorced from respect for the gods is fraught with dangers for the human blindness which does not recognize the proper role of the senses in earthly existence. Appearances are all that Arachnean workmanship has to offer, but for most of mankind, that is enough. Chapman's criticism of faulty artists includes not only those who pride themselves on their mimetic skill but those who are like a certain "sharpe-browd Doctor, (English-borne)" who

> In much learn'd Latine Idioms can adorne
> A verse with rare Attraction; yet become

> His English Muse, like an Arachnean Loome,
> Wrought spight of Pallas; and therein bewraies
> More tongue then truth; beggs and adopts his Bayes . . .
> No more Heauen heyring then Earths sonne the Moule.
> (*Epil. to Hymnes* 54-62)

In fact, the good poet will be the very opposite of Arachne: "No Artist," Chapman says, "being so strictly and inextricably confined to all the lawes of learning, wisdome, and truth as a Poet."[14]

Often Chapman refers to Arachnean workmanship in its etymological, rather than mythological, sense as simply spider webs or cobwebs. But the symbolism remains the same. As George Sandys notes, Arachne was changed into a spider "that she might still retaine the art which Minerva had taught her but toile without profit. For useless and worthless labors are expressed by the spider's web: by which the Psalmist presents the infirmity of man and vanity of his actions; which woven with infinite industry and care, in regard of their imbecility are broken through by every occurrent."[15] It is in this sense that Jonson's foolish courtiers are described, in a passage already quoted, as a "knot of spiders" engaged in making "cobweb stuff," or as "Arachnean workers." Chapman too characterizes ignorance and vain pursuits as cobwebs; he does not need to mention Arachne by name—he can simply let her handiwork stand for her sin. Thus men hungry for gold are referred to as "poysoned soules, like Spiders lurking / In sluttish chinckes, in mystes of Cobwebs" (*De Guiana* 79-80). Religion itself in its neglected state appears in his *Eugenia* "All hid in cobwebbs . . . like these / Poore country churches. . . . All full of spiders was her homespun weede, / Where soules like flies hung" (181 ff.). Superficial learning, which neglects truth, is merely "Embroiderie spent on Cobwebs" (*Epil. to Hymnes* 49). Such cobwebs are the reality behind the world's showy appearances, of which Arachne's tapestry is the archetype. With all sorts of ironic overtones, Chapman comments on how the same world (in this "verminous time") considers the work of poets as "worse then the spider's work" (*To the Earle of Somerset, the Hymns* ll. 130, 136).

But to move from consideration of the work performed by the metamorphosed Arachne back to her original tapestry is to make another discovery about Chapman's symbolism. He, like Ben Jonson, can, on occasion, still think of Arachne as simply the woman who created marvels of needlework. When he finishes his ekphrasis of the scarf embroidered by Hero, he continues the imagery of needlework, first to stand for virtuous ladies, whose souls show through their flesh like

drawn-work; then to suggest the way their embroidery may serve to remind them of virtue's triumph over the passions:

> O what sweet formes fayre Ladies soules doe shrowd,
> Were they made seen & forced through their blood,
> If through their beauties like rich work through lawn,
> They would set forth their minds with vertues drawn,
> In letting graces from their fingers flie,
> To still their yeasty thoughts with industrie:
> That their plied wits in numbred silks might sing
> Passions huge conquest, and their needels leading
> Affection prisoner through their own-built citties,
> Pinnioned with stories and Arachnean ditties.
> (4th Sestiad, 112-21)

Now the adjective "Arachnean" refers, not to Arachne's moral blindness, but to the fabulous qualities of her workmanship. Other ladies may use the same workmanship, not for her ends and not to illustrate the loves of the gods, but rather to show the opposite, "Passions huge conquest." As they lead affection prisoner in a world of their own creating, they rehearse the lesson they must themselves learn if they are to escape the fate of Hero: that the soul must "with act and art" control "all affects that stray / From their one object; which is to obay / Her Soueraigne Empire" (*Euthymiae* 508-10). Fittingly, Chapman's image of contentment is of a beautiful nymph whose golden wings are bound with purple strings, to signify virtue's control of the affections.[16] Greatly as he can sympathize with the sight-induced passion of a Hero and Leader, he holds that, though eyes are meant to guide bodies, souls are meant to guide eyes.

Against all forms of moral blindness, he opposes poetry, the insight that "illustrates" or illuminates, where "outward brauerie blindes."[17] Against the moral blindness of Arachne and her progeny, he opposes the physical blindness of Homer: "With eyes turned upwards & was outward, blind; / But, inward; past, and future things he saw; / And was to both, and present times, their law" (*Euthymiae* 36-38). One of the poems prefixed to his translation of the *Iliad* proclaims that Homer's "lasting, living, reigning" proves "how firme Truth builds in Poets fayning," while the preface to Homer includes the following lines: "Great Poesie, blind Homer makes all see / Thee capable of all Arts, none of thee."[18]

Related to Homer's symbolic blindness is Chapman's own famous obscurity. It comes into its own in his desire to preserve myth as metaphor, not restricting its significance by defining it, but keeping its richness of suggestion. Unlike the mythographers who often do not hesitate to translate the language of myth into the language of moral precept, he uses his allusions to Arachne to remind the reader of the whole of the story and its moral implications. The poet's true expressiveness, he believes, has an inherent ambiguity in the sense and therefore with that darkness of expression, he will "still labor to be shadowed."[19] For this is his way of putting himself on the side of poetry, which, like the truth, hides itself from the profane world.

In still another illustration of worldly blindness, he borrows from Epictetus to speak of those who are "so dull and blind of soul" that they do not acknowledge "heavenly Mulciber [Vulcan], / To be a famous Artist by his deed, / But they must see him in his working weeds."[20] This is very like Arachne's inability to recognize Minerva when the goddess first appeared to her in the guise of an old woman. But Chapman's concluding prayer sums up exactly where he himself stands:

> God and my deare Redeemer, rescue Me
> From Mens immane, and mad Impietie;
> And by my life and soule, (sole knowne to them)
> Make me of *Palme*, or *Yew*, an Anadem.
> And so, my sole God, the thrice sacred Trine,
> Beare all th'Ascription of all Me and Mine.
> (*Epil. to the Hymns* 82-87)

This, his "daily and nightly prayer," is the exact opposite of Arachne's attitude to the source of her talent. Chapman acknowledges the source of his; he places his poetry and his art under God and the mystery of divine wisdom.

University of Illinois

Notes

[1] *The Poems of George Chapman*, ed. Phyllis Brook Bartlett (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1941), p. 327. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Chapman's works are taken from this text and are noted parenthetically.

[2] Chapman, influenced by the views of the Florentine Neoplatonists, holds that truth and poetry are one; hence the significance of pagan myths goes beyond a point-by-point translation into moral terms. On Chapman's relationship to these Neoplatonists, see F. L. Schoell, *Etudes sur l'humanisme continental en Angleterre à la fin de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1926), chapters 1 and 2 and Appendix 1. Cf. E. H. Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae," in his *Symbolic Images* (New York: Phaidon, 1972), pp. 123-95.

[3] William Donald Reynolds, *The Ovidius Moralizatus of Petrus Berchorius: An Introduction and Translation*, Diss. University of Illinois 1971, p. 248.

[4] *Ovide Moralise*, ed. C. De Boer (Amsterdam: Johannes Muller, 1920), II.6.933-67.

[5] See Jean Jacquot, *George Chapman* (Paris: Annales de L'Universite de Lyon, 1951), p. 70n21. See also p. 74, on the apparition of Homer to Chapman. D. J. Gordon, in his essay "Chapman's Jelero and Leander'," (*English Miscellany*, 5, 1954, 46-47) qualifies what Jacquot says by citing mythographers, espècially Cartari, as possible alternative sources for Chapman's Dissimulation passage. However, the parallel between Homer's apparition to Chapman (*Euthymiae*, 33-99) and Virgil's to Dante makes it plausible that Chapman had read the *Divina Commedia*.

[6] Dante, *Inferno*, 17. 16-18, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961). The original reads:

> con più color, sommesse e sopraposte
> non fer mai drappi Tartarie ne Turchi,
> nè fuor tai tele per Aragne imposte.

[7] *Purgatorio*, 12.43-45, trans. Sinclair. The original reads:

> O folle Aragne, sì vedea io te
> già mezza ragna, trista in su li stracci
> dell'opera che mal per te si fè.

[8] For further discussion, see my article "*Muiopotmos*: A World of Art," *Yearbook of English Studies* 5 (1975), 30-38.

[9] *Neptune's Triumph*, ll. 320-23.

[10] *Cynthia's Revels*, in *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G. A. Wilkes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981, II), III.iv.80-91.

[11] Some of Erasmus's comments on the difference between the follower of the world and the follower of Christ resemble Chapman's criticism. See, for example, Erasmus's discussion of *Festina Lente*: "And so we get this utterly reversed estimate of things; what we should particularly honour passes without a word and what we should strive for with all our might is regarded with contempt... the mask is preferred to the truth, the shadow to the reality, the counterfeit to the genuine, the fleeting to the substantial, the momentary to the eternal" (Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus on his Times* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967], p. 84).

[12] George Sandys, *Ovids Metamorphosis* (1632), ed. Karl K. Hulley and Stanley T. Vandersall (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 285.

[13] On the *deus artifex*, and its relation to the human artist, see, for example, Vasari's Preface to *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 25.

[14] "Prefaces to his Translation of Homer," in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford: rpt. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1957), p. 68.

[15] Sandys, p. 291. Cf. *Les Metamorphoses*, trans. N. Renouard (Paris, 1614), p. 153. On the relationship between the ideas of Sandys and those of Chapman, see Lee T. Pearcy, *The Mediated Muse: English Translations of Ovid 1560-1700* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984), pp. 63-66.

[16] See *Hymnus in Cynthiam*, ll. 214-17.

[17] *Hymnus in Cynthiam*, l. 443.

[18] "Prefaces to his Translation of Homer," p. 67. This passage may be construed as an answer to Plato's tactical criticism of Homer in *The Ian* and *The Republic* (Book X), as not an expert in any of the arts he describes.

[19] Prefatory epistle to *Ovids Banquet of Sence*, in Bartlett, p. 49.

[20] *To Young Imaginaries in Knowledge*, ll. 86-88. On Chapman's borrowing from Epictetus, see F. L. Schoell, *Etudes sur l'Humanisme continental en Angleterre a la fin de la Renaissance*, p. 261. The relevant passage is from Epictetus, *Discourses*, IV.viii.