

Arachne

Duration

7 min 44 sec

Summary

Athena, the goddess who invented weaving, hears rumours of a wonderful weaver called Arachne and wonders why this Arachne has never thanked her for her gift. Disguised as an old woman she visits Arachne's cottage where she is given a warm welcome. But when, even after prompting, Arachne will not admit her debt to the goddess, Athena reveals herself and challenges the mortal to a weaving contest.

Athena's tapestry is flawless but Arachne's exquisitely captures all human emotions. The goddess knows that she is beaten and in her anger strikes Arachne with her shuttle, transforming her into a spider, before returning to Mount Olympus. The next day she returns to find another weaving miracle — the spider has woven the first spider's web using gossamer thread from her own belly.

Starting-points

This story warns of the punishments facing mortals if they challenge or offend the gods. You could explore with the class stories they have already heard which involve mortals being punished by the gods: Midas, Phaethon and Aktaion. Were all their 'crimes' equally serious? Was their punishment justified?

This is also a story about creativity. Is it a gift a person is born with or is it something which can be developed through hard work and application? What is the key to being a successful artist, musician, sportsman or sportswoman?

Pause points

2 min 4 sec: *If I were you, I would thank her, before she decides to turn against you and stop your nimble fingers.*

- What does Athena claim she has invented? (*The loom, the spindle, the shuttle and all the women's arts.*)
- Why does she take on the shape of an old woman to visit Arachne? Which other gods have we seen changing their appearance when visiting mortals? (*Zeus and Hermes in the story of Baukis and Philemon.*)
- What sort of reception does she receive from Arachne?
- How do you think Arachne will react to the old woman's advice? Do you think she would react differently if she knew that the old woman was Athena?

5 min 31 sec: *The immortal goddess saw that she was beaten. She snarled.*

- What had Athena decided should be the theme of their tapestries? (*The changeless power of the gods and the presumption of mortals.*)
- What scenes has Athena depicted on her tapestry? (*Hephaistos making Pandora; Artemis watching Aktaion being savaged by his own hounds; Prometheus' liver being pecked out by Zeus' vultures.*) What do the scenes have in common? (*They show the power of the gods to inflict pain and suffering; two of the three scenes involve Prometheus.*)

- What scenes does Arachne weave? (*Orpheus and Eurydike; Phaethon; Cygnus being transformed into a swan — this happened at Troy as Achilles tried to pull off Cygnus' head on the battlefield.*)
- Why does Athena accept that she has been beaten if her tapestry is 'flawless, masterful, perfect'? (*Arachne has been able to show human feelings in her tapestry — the golden thread of joy and the silver thread of sorrow — whereas Athena has shown only power, cruelty and unkindness.*)
- Why does Athena snarl? Remembering how the gods behave in the stories of Midas and Aktaion, what do you think she is going to do next? (*Think how Midas and Aktaion were transformed, with punishments to match their 'crimes'.*)

Questions for discussion

- You might ask what opinion we form of Athena and Arachne in this story. Are they both in the right? Are they both in the wrong? Is it more complicated than that?
- Why do you think the storyteller uses the adjective 'owl-eyed' three times to describe Athena? (*To emphasise the fact that she is the goddess of wisdom.*) Does she show wisdom in this story?
- What is the difference between having a gift and having a skill? Does success in sport or music or art depend on having a gift or having a skill — or both?
- What does Arachne do wrong in this story? Does she deserve to be transformed into a spider? Is this a just punishment?
- Do you think Athena is remorseful when she sees the spider's exquisite web?

Arachne's behaviour provides an interesting contrast with that of Baukis and Philemon. Both Arachne and Baukis and Philemon give strangers the sort of welcome which Zeus, as the god of hospitality, would expect to be given to strangers. But whereas Baukis and Philemon are humble and deeply respectful of the gods, Arachne is self-assured and self-confident: first, she rejects the old woman's suggestion that her talent at weaving is a gift from Athena; then, completely unaffected by Athena adopting her real form, she sits looking straight at her, uncowed and unbowed, and readily accepts the goddess' challenge. The story suggests that she is punished *not* because her skill at weaving is equal to that of Athena — in fact, Athena accepts that Arachne's tapestry is better than hers — but because of the failure to acknowledge her debt to Athena and because she was so self-confident (*hubris*, as the Greeks called it). This could be an interesting opportunity as part of the discussions above to ask students whether they think being confident like Arachne is a good or bad thing? Should Arachne have been humbler? Or actually is it a good thing to believe in yourself as much as she does?

Athena might also be said to have a great deal of self-confidence and sense of superiority: she snorts with indignation when she hears the rumour about Arachne's skill as a weaver; she is very quick to reveal her true nature when Arachne says she is happy for Athena to come to her cottage; she is a bad loser. In fact, in the end her behaviour perfectly illustrates the theme she chose for the weaving competition; the changeless power of the mighty gods and goddesses. She may be a goddess, but in her conduct there is more than a hint of one very human failing, jealousy. Following on from ideas about self-confidence in relation to Arachne, you may wish to ask if we feel differently about Athena's confidence; as a goddess is it more acceptable from her?

Suggested activities

- Try debating Thomas Edison's view that '*Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration*'.

- Write a dialogue between Athena and Hermes on Mount Olympus in which they discuss their recent visits to mortals. Try to bring out the ways in which their experiences were similar or different.
- Imagine you are one of the spinners in the foreground of [Las Hilanderas](https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-spinners-or-the-fable-of-arachne/3d8e510d-2acf-4efb-af0c-8ffd665acd8d) (The Spinners) by the Spanish painter Velasquez (AD 1599-1660). Using the picture as a source of ideas, describe to a friend 1) what it is like to work as a spinner, and 2) what you saw and heard the day Athena challenged Arachne to a weaving contest. For information on the painting, go to <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-spinners-or-the-fable-of-arachne/3d8e510d-2acf-4efb-af0c-8ffd665acd8d>.