

Arachne, The Weaver

There was a young girl in Greece whose name was Arachne. Her face was pale but fair, and her hair was long and dark. All that she cared to do from morn till noon was to sit in the sun and spin.  
And all that she cared to do from noon till night was to sit in the shade and weave.

And oh, how fine and fair were the things which she wove on her loom! Flax, wool, silk—she worked with them all; and when they came from her hands, the cloth which she had made of them was so thin and soft and bright that people came from all parts of the world to see it.

And they said that cloth so rare could not be made of flax, or wool, or silk, but that the warp was of rays of sunlight and the woof was of threads of gold.

Then as, day by day, the girl sat in the sun and spun, or sat in the shade and wove, she said:  
**"In all the world there is no yarn so fine as mine, and in all the world there is no cloth so soft and smooth, nor silk so bright and rare."**

One afternoon as she sat in the shade weaving and talking with passers by, some one asked of her,  
**"Who taught you to spin and weave so well?"**  
"No one taught me," Arachne replied.  
**"I learned how to do it as I sat in the sun and the shade; but no one showed me."**

**"But it may be that Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, taught you, and you did not know it."**  
"Athena? Bah!" said Arachne.  
**"How could she teach me?  
Can she spin such skeins of yarn as these?  
Can she weave goods like mine?  
I should like to see her try.  
I can likely teach her a thing or two."**

She looked up and saw in the doorway a tall woman wrapped in a long cloak. Her face was fair to see, but stern, oh, so stern! And her grey eyes were so sharp and bright that Arachne could not meet her gaze.

"Arachne," said the woman, **"I am Athena, the Goddess of Craft and Wisdom, and I have heard your boast. Are you certain you still mean to say that you can spin and weave as well as I?"**  
Arachne's cheeks grew pale, but she said:  
**"Yes. I can weave as well as you."**

**"Then let me tell you what we will do,"** said Athena.  
**"Three days from now we will both weave; you on your loom, and I on mine.  
We will ask all who wish to come and see us; and great Zeus, who sits in the clouds, shall be the judge.  
And if your work is best, then I will weave no more so long as the world shall last;  
but if my work is best, then you shall never use loom or spindle.  
Do you agree to this?"**  
"I agree," said Arachne.  
"Very well," said Athena. And she was gone.

When the time came for the contest in weaving, hundreds were there to see it and great Zeus sat among the clouds and looked on.

Arachne took her skeins of finest silk and began to weave. And she wove a web of marvelous beauty, so thin and light that it would float in the air, and yet so strong that it could hold a lion in its meshes; and the threads of warp and woof were of many colours, so beautifully arranged and mingled one with another that all who saw were filled with delight.

**"No wonder that the maiden boasted of her skill,"** said the people and Zeus himself nodded.

Then Athena began to weave. And she took of the sunbeams that gilded the mountain top, and of the snowy fleece of the summer clouds, and of the blue ether of the summer sky, and of the bright green of the summer fields, and of the royal purple of the autumn woods,—and what do you suppose she wove?

The web which she wove was full of enchanting pictures of flowers and gardens, and of castles and towers, and of mountain heights, and of men and beasts, and of giants and dwarfs, and of the mighty beings who dwell in the clouds with Zeus.

And those who looked upon it were so filled with wonder and delight, that they forgot all about the beautiful web which Arachne had woven. And Arachne herself was ashamed and afraid when she saw it; and she hid her face in her hands and wept.

**"Oh, how can I live,"** she cried, **"now that I must never again use loom or spindle?"**  
And she kept on weeping and saying,  
**"How can I live?"**

Then, when Athena saw that the poor maiden would never have any joy unless she were allowed to spin and weave, she took pity on her and said...

**"I would free you from your bargain if I could, but that is a thing which no one can do.  
You must hold to your agreement never to touch loom or spindle again.  
And yet, since you will never be happy unless you can spin and weave, I will give you a new form so that you can carry on your work with neither spindle nor loom."**

Then she touched Arachne with the tip of the spear which she sometimes carried; and the maiden was changed at once into a nimble spider, which ran into a shady place in the grass and began merrily to spin and weave a beautiful web.

It is said that all the spiders which have been in the world since then, are the children of Arachne. Perhaps Arachne still lives and spins and weaves; and the very next spider that you see may just be, she herself.