

# Greek Weaving or the Feminine in Antithesis

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*"Mother dear, I simply cannot weave my cloth; I'm overpowered by desire for a slender young man—and it's Aphrodite's fault."*<sup>1</sup>

*"The Greeks required a woman to devote herself to the sedentary tranquillity of woolwork."*<sup>2</sup>

Sappho, Xenophon: these two juxtaposed texts, chosen for their dissonant tones, well introduce the Greek representation of weaving as a privileged metaphoric terrain defining the presence and the essence of an imaginary feminine, often expressed in antithetical terms, as a polarized place, with an ever precarious equilibrium. As discourse, weaving is no longer a naturalistic depiction of an edifying occupation of the gynaecium, an answer to the day-to-day reality of household tasks. As a literary object or ritualized activity, the loom appears as a "gendered" space, a place symbolic of feminine activity.

Alone with herself or her companions, the imaginary weaver represents femininity closed in upon itself. As opposed to clothing, a privileged object of exchange,<sup>3</sup> the loom represents the most profound part of the *oikos*, a sort of symbolic barrier between the gynaecium and the outside world.<sup>4</sup> This industrious enclosure forms the center of a polysemy, which bears a different charge depending on the context and literary genre. In the normative discourse of Xenophon—in the text quoted above or in the *Oeconomicus*,<sup>5</sup> weaving appears to be an external sign of prudence and the ability to manage the *oikos*. On the other hand, in the mythic and poetic context, exteriority yields to place of identification; invested with all the polysemy of women as literary object, weaving becomes an integral part of female persons, the metonymic account of their thoughts and fate.<sup>6</sup> This is familiar ter-

ritory for Greek literature, this discreet way to broach the feminine; indeed, to speak of it one has ready recourse to imaged language, in which all that concerns attire—shuttle, sashes, cloth—holds a privileged place.<sup>7</sup> Let us recall Nausicaa in *The Odyssey*, for example, whom Athena invites to the washing pools to wash her clothes, for she *may soon be married*. The washing of clothes pertains to marriage: the young girl goes to ask Alcinous for permission to go out, to *take all the fine clothes ... to the river to wash*, speaking of her father's clothes and those of her brothers. *She spoke in this way because she was too shy to mention marriage to her father, says the poet, But he understood her thoroughly ...* (VI 25-27)

The representations of weaving imply that a woman's life should not go beyond the framework of her loom, and feminine time appears cadenced by the sound of her shuttle.<sup>6</sup> Thus in its normative aspect the activity seems symbolically to absorb the feminine existence, to the point of becoming consubstantial with her. Not conforming to this "loss of self" process,<sup>9</sup> the philosopher Hipparchia, companion to the cynic Crates, became the subject of an anecdote which eloquently illustrates plays of identity and antithesis in the domain of weaving. The philosopher, who shared both public and day-to-day life with Crates, is reproached during a banquet by Theodore, "the Atheist" for having "left [the] shuttle at the loom;"<sup>10</sup> furthermore, he accompanies these reproachful words with a gesture which could not have been more directly aimed at the femininity of the philosopher, publicly inflicting an *anasurma* on her. What the impertinent speaker noticed, in fact, tallied more with weaving than with philosophy. "I passed the time allotted to the loom studying," the unshaken philosopher answered.<sup>11</sup>

Just as in the utopia of Lysistrata, Hipparchia inverted, in her own way and in real life, the old Homeric formula that summarizes the roles of the two sexes in a schematic division: women are to see to "the loom and the distaff ... men must see to the fighting," Hector answers Andromache as she tries to give him military advice (*Iliad*, Book VI, 492). The antithesis has a hard life: a few centuries after Homer another "Andromache,"<sup>12</sup> Aretaphila of Cyrene—whose name means "she who loves virtue"—having liberated the town from the tyrant Nicocratus, is invited by her fellow citizens to take a role in the administration of public affairs.

But the valiant liberatress does not accept to mingle herself in “indiscreet activities; she retired to her gynaeceum and spent the rest of her life weaving” (Plutarch, *On the Virtues of Women*, 19).

This is also the way—if we choose to believe the scant information we have about her—Erinna must have spent her life, this poetess who died so young, and whose verses were the equal of Homer and Sappho. Smitten with poetry, she was nevertheless obliged, “out of fear of her mother,” to engage in textile-related occupations. The title of her poem, “The Distaff,” bears the stamp of the feminine time naturally devoted to the woolwork; in the reconstruction of fragments that have come down to us, M.L. West traces the story of a young girl who lives with her eyes fixed on the distaff, and complains of never having crossed the threshold of marriage. The image of this short existence devoted to the loom is corroborated by an anonymous epigram in the *Palatine Anthology*, “her three hundred lines were the equal of Homer, even if she was forced, out of fear of her mother, to devote herself to the spindle and the loom, she, the servant of the Muses.”<sup>13</sup>

The fate of a young girl whose youth is imprisoned in the repetitive activity of the gynaeceum: as sophisticated as it might be, the story of Erinna—fiction or authentic biography<sup>14</sup>—calls to mind a tradition established long before “The Distaff,” which closely associates working the loom with virginity. For weaving is “undeniably woman’s work—but in the mythic imaginary, it is more specifically the work of a young girl.”<sup>15</sup>

## The Disciples of Athena

“Men to war, women to weaving”: there is a divine figure who unites these spheres of activities emblematic of the two sexes; Athena, *Parthenos* (Virgin), Weaver, and Warrior, whose distaff, like her lance, expresses the idea of an inviolable virginity, corresponding to the “untamed”<sup>16</sup> female age: “she doesn’t like the things that Aphrodite does, the things that the golden one does,” and she is “the one who teaches soft-skinned young ladies the decorative arts.”<sup>17</sup> Weaving is the incontestable appanage of Athena, whence its frequent association with virginity. Indeed, the

condition of maidenhood is often expressed through the image of the loom: in *Ion*, Euripides has Creusa call the swaddling clothes, which allow her to recognize her once abandoned son, *παρθένευμα*, *girlish ornaments*.<sup>18</sup> Iphigenia, then priestess of Artemis at Tauris, hears Orestes evoke her past as a young girl through a fine cloth on which she worked when still in the paternal palace (81iff.) In *The Epithalamium of Helen*, Theocritus represents her companions of own her age singing with regret, before her nuptial chamber, of the virginal loom that Helen knew so well how to handle (V.32-34). For the young girl, a disciple of Athena, must one day quit the site of initiation by negation, the virginal loom, and accept to marry, endless weaving being the sign of incompleteness and unhappiness.

Endless weavings, abandoned and unfinished: the most famous instance of this theme is, of course, Penelope, simultaneously the most famous and the most obscure weaver in Greek mythology. Her work is an example of coded writing, for within the tales of her tapestry are inscribed all the major themes of *The Odyssey*: marriage/death, memory/forgetfulness, ruse. Condensing an entire aspect of the action in *The Odyssey* around the Queen of Ithaca, Homer for the most part uses textile activity to express Penelope's role and thoughts. As indicated in the first tale of her tapestry, which abounds in expressions of the intellect,<sup>19</sup> her artful work is a manifestation of a peerless spirit that distinguishes Penelope from all other women (II, 118-122).

Indeed, the insidious weaving tells of tenacious memory and exceptional trickery, which have marked time in Ithaca.<sup>20</sup> For this unusual work fulfills an important poetic function: its duration coincides exactly with the presence of the suitors in Penelope's life. Indeed, under pressure to remarry, the queen gives the following answer:

*I should be grateful to you young lords who are courting me, now that King Odysseus is dead, if you could restrain your ardor for my hand til I have done this work, so that the threads I have spun may not be utterly wasted. It is a winding sheet for Lord Laertes (II, 87ff).*

Nights follow days and the work is not finished. For, as the suitors have understood *in extremis*, it is not a funereal weaving; to counter the pressure of her entourage Penelope uses her loom as if

she were still a maiden, “devoted to the service of Athena.” Indeed, the formulaic lines, which “unmask” Penelope’s ruse before the assembly of Ithaca, take on their full meaning when one compares them to the description of virginal weaving patronized by Athena, given in the “Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite.” The work of the queen stems from a mind turned toward Athena’s gifts: “skill in fine handicraft, her excellent brain, and that genius she has for getting her way ... “ (II 116-117). To sum up Penelope’s attitude, Antinous uses a play on words: her fixation on thoughts and the service of Athena makes a sham virgin of Penelope. It is in this sense that the scholiast interprets Penelope’s subterfuge: “requests for marriage are not permissible as long as the loom is set up.”<sup>21</sup>

In this way of creating the character through displacement, weaving serves to designate the feminine in antithesis, thereby representing a more general characteristic of the poetics of *The Odyssey*: the apparitions and the interventions of Penelope in the action are marked by the sign of discord or disagreement.<sup>22</sup> Beginning already in the first rhapsody, where she appears suffering in the middle of a banquet during which her suitors and her son amuse themselves in listening to Phemius, the royal bard of Ithaca, who sings of the disaster of the Achaeans forever deprived of their *nostos* (their return) by the wrath of Athena. Resounding in the palace of long-absent Odysseus, this song of mourning is inauspicious. Penelope tries to stop him, but comes up against the reaction of Telemachus, who criticizes his mother:

surely it is not the poets that are responsible for what happens, *muthos*,<sup>23</sup> but Zeus himself, who deals with each of us toilers on earth as he sees fit? ... Odysseus is not the only one who has never returned from Troy ... So go to your quarters now and attend to your work, the loom and spindle ... Talking must be the men’s concern ... (I, 345-359).<sup>24</sup>

Between talking and weaving, the antithesis is delineated clearly in young Telemachus’ words. Here we see the limits of Penelope’s actions: indeed she does not intervene in the development of events through the direct articulation of her thoughts, but through indirect means. In other words, to take away speech from the queen of Ithaca and to send her to her quarters, is at odds with the image of other great Homeric women, such as Helen or Arete, who are not excluded from the banquet and speak without hesita-

tion. But here we have an entirely different situation: the queen of Ithaca appears in the text of *The Odyssey* as a figure of ambiguous status, for her status as wife has been put into question. The people of Ithaca believe that King Odysseus is dead. Thus, by an interesting poetic formalism, Penelope, demanded in marriage, borrows the traits of a virgin. Thus she leaves her quarters veiled and always accompanied by two handmaidens;<sup>25</sup> this is the way she transforms her work into endless weaving, a trait which the Greek imagination equates with a refusal or the impossibility of marriage, into the excessive prolonging of virginity. The cloth made explicit by Antinous' play on words marvelously underscores Penelope's poetic essence, the constant rift between being and seeming, which allows her insidiously to dominate the "other half" of the poem, *The Odyssey* of the absence of Odysseus.

Thus, speech and war are the concerns of men, and weaving of women, going as far back as *The Iliad* (VI, 492), and this opposition comes up in other great texts of Greek literature in different literary genres. If in *The Iliad*, Hector's reprimand has the effect of distancing Andromache from public affairs, in *The Odyssey*, sending Penelope back into her industrious retreat, as Telemachus does, creates a fine textual ruse, for, while saving appearances, the queen of Ithaca transgresses the proverbial sharing of roles.

Several centuries later, Lysistrata will say out loud what Penelope dissimulates with the language of deceit: to use purely feminine means to influence the affairs of men. Indeed, Penelope and Lysistrata represent a similar logic: removing themselves from circulation, becoming sexually "unavailable," in order to shape the course of events outside their usual scope. Between Homer and Aristophanes, the same symbolic operation is at work; in placing them under the protection of the poliad goddess, far from any conjugal exchange, the comic poet makes virgins of the Athenian women: "As guests of Athena, the women are under the sign of purity. They are chaste. And more than chaste. I would say that they are virgins ... on the Acropolis and to serve the needs of Aphrodite."<sup>26</sup> Barricaded in the Citadel, the last refuge of a people in times of aggression, Lysistrata's companions effect a backward turn by playing on all the attributes of Athena: they are chaste, the war becomes "their affair" and they are, obviously,

weavers. Among themselves and under the protection of Athena, the occupants of the Acropolis announce their intentions to work wool, with art and patience, no longer to “weave tyranny (630),” as the old men gathered around the Propylaea fear, but to show the men that one can govern the city the way one works wool, with weaving serving not only as the example of order, but also as a metaphor of the feminine way of being and thinking.

“Ye WOMEN must WIVE ye warre!” the comic use of this line from *The Iliad* does not lie only in an inversion aiming to trick the commissioner come to quell the revolt into silence (529 ff.)—the “ideal attire for women.”<sup>27</sup> Armed with their spindles (567), the comic weavers intend to shape the course of events using only their feminine attributes, and hence the long development of the paradigmatic use of the spindle and the loom (567-586). From that point on one can see, behind the utopian city of Lysistrata, the no less utopian Ithaca of the weaving queen, and that Aristophanes’ passage has its roots in a symbolism subtly developed by the poet of *The Odyssey*. The Athenians, Lysistrata suggests, no longer have any real men<sup>28</sup> capable of managing the city; the same goes for Penelope’s suitors, who represent a world adrift, a void of power taken up with the obscure projects of the weaving queen.

Although having fled the gynaeceum, the comic weavers no less occupy a reserved space which, for the duration of an imaginary revolt, excludes men. In other words, all they want, they say, is to “behave chastely, like maidens (473),” and they refer elsewhere to the rituals which marked their adolescence,<sup>29</sup> intending by this means to demonstrate their ties to the city and to have their words respected. The theme of weaving is well integrated into this regressive logic, nurtured with frequent allusions to ritual: enclosed in the Acropolis and announcing the symbolic preparation of “a cloak to clothe the City of Athens (586),” the momentarily chaste and reclusive weavers recall the *arrephoroi*, the young girls who “set the loom” each year during the Chalkeia, with this other *panathenaic* cloth that is the *peplos* of Athena. Indeed, before becoming the sail of the panathenaic ship, the offering of each city to its poliad goddess, the *peplos* in the making was not only reserved for women, but it called for a solemn begin-

ning centered around two young reclusive maidens each time, which marked a requirement of purity.<sup>30</sup> Thus, during the time of the play, the subversive weavers symbolically recoil into an age and a religious service resolutely incompatible with sexuality, the better to reinforce the tension between their real status and their militant regression.

Woman's work, virgin's work, textile activity, the representation of a site which momentarily excludes exchange,<sup>31</sup> finds itself subordinated to the larger theme of the regressive ability of women, illustrated on a divine level by Persephone who periodically becomes Kore again, and by the goddess herself of marriage, Hera, who —according to an Argive ritual *logos*, called *the inexpressible* by Pausanias (II, 38, 2-3)—each year recovers her virginity after a bath in the river *Kanathos*. The ancestor of all women, Pandora, is not totally foreign to this schema: woman/maiden (*gunê/parthénos*), this original and emblematic being announces a dual feminine nature<sup>32</sup> always susceptible to wavering in denial, drawing inwards, represented, as in the case of Penelope or the women in *Lysistrata*, as a regression toward the autarchy of the virginal state and that age which the Greek language qualifies as “untamed.” It is precisely this logic which prevails in the imaginary elaboration of weaving, the art which Pandora received as a gift from Athena at the time of her creation:<sup>33</sup> from Penelope to Lysistrata, passing through Deianeira, Aedon, and the Minyans,<sup>34</sup> one searches in vain for Xenophon's paradigmatic weaver. Aedon's weaving expresses a situation of antagonism and withdrawal; it is the sign foretelling of the dissolution of her marriage to Polytechnos;<sup>35</sup> the daughters of Minyas will know a tragic fate, for they were distinguished from other women by their excessive attachment to weaving and their refusal to honor Dionysius;<sup>36</sup> Deianeira in the *Trachiniae* focuses her frustrated desire for Heracles on the preparation of a tunic which she will soak in erotic potions: many times (103, 206) this weaver in love, long-standing wife and mother, appears as a *numphê*, returned to the threshold of marriage.<sup>37</sup> Even with regard to married weavers, myth does not make weaving an edifying domestic activity, but a phantasmatic site ever reviving the untamed aspect of a woman, the *parthenos* in the *gunê*.



## Athena the Weaver

Through the consubstantiality between agent and action, weaving, in the form of a latent antithesis, reflects the duality of feminine nature. "The Greeks," Xenophon reminds us, "required a woman to devote herself to the sedentary tranquillity of wool-work."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, in ancient Greece as elsewhere,<sup>39</sup> the life of the woman devoted to work hides the disquieting underside of idleness linked to pleasure. Many times, the myth implies a tendency to this polarization, which places the woman in the service of Athena on one side, the lover devoted to the service of Aphrodite on the other. The game of exclusion begins in the "Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite:" "... she concerns herself with the decorative arts ... she's the one who teaches soft-skinned young ladies the decorative arts, she puts it in the mind of each one."<sup>40</sup>

This problematic relationship between feminine tasks and the pleasures of Aphrodite is well illustrated in a version of the myth of Tiresias recounted by Eustathius and attributed to Sostratus. Tiresias is named judge in a beauty contest between Aphrodite and the Graces and he gives the prize to the Graces; Aphrodite is angered and punishes Tiresias by transforming him into an old spinner, thereby imagining "to have definitively deprived him of sexual pleasure."<sup>41</sup> The weaving patronized by Athena is the "loomwork of a girl,"<sup>42</sup> where the presence of Aphrodite is unwelcome, as Sappho sings so sweetly: "Mother dear, I simply cannot weave my cloth; I'm overpowered by desire for a slender young man—and it's Aphrodite's fault."<sup>43</sup>

A text by Nonnos de Panopolis recounts an Athenian myth<sup>44</sup> which makes this opposition between Athena and Aphrodite even clearer; in Book XXIV of the *Dionysiaca* (239-329), Aphrodite is in love with a spindle. Her *unfamiliar hands* grow tired in an *unsmiling pain*<sup>45</sup> in an *unfamiliar task*. The words referring to the task underscore the laborious nature of weaving, which requires strength along with dexterity. The idea of pain and endurance appear again, moreover, in the semantic origin of the word which means "to work the wool," *ταλσιή* (the root is *ταλ-*, which means "pain"). Athena the weaver is called (*ταλαργος*, 274). The verb *ξαίνω* signifies "to comb, or, to

untangle," but also "to become tired"; ξανᾶν signifies "to have sore wrists from continuously working wool."<sup>46</sup> The laborious nature of weaving is underscored by a technical remark indirectly furnished by Herodotus: as opposed to the Egyptian weaver, the Greek woman worked standing, pushing the weft upwards to the top of a vertical loom.<sup>47</sup> This is Athena's domain, and the intrusion of Aphrodite enrages the industrious goddess. With Aphrodite, unaware of the distribution of tasks by the Moirai, the primordial order of the world is in danger, when she gives herself over to the weaving of the *peplos*. Aphrodite's hands touch a domain foreign to her nature, and the result is expressed, they say, in terms of a stain, in the sense of "a contact contrary to a certain world order which establishes a communication between realities which should remain quite distinct."<sup>48</sup>

In the hands of Aphrodite, the work of Pallas becomes undone (251), the thread becomes as if alive, the cloth swells and breaks (256-258). The effect is felt on a cosmic level; Time (Αἰών) is off schedule, life fades, for marriages are disturbed (266) and reproduction stops.<sup>49</sup> Eros no longer shoots his arrow when he sees that the earth's furrow is not tilled and does not bear fruit.<sup>50</sup> This myth clearly illustrates the incompatibility between the weaving of Athena and the domain of Aphrodite. In the conflict between the goddesses, the reappearance of feminine ages and status has been overturned. It is a matter of the μοῖρα (the portion) or the κληῖρα (the lot) of each god. Instead of the Moirai preparing the thread, it is the Graces; instead of Athena weaving, it is Aphrodite. This tale by Nonnos explains the theological interpretation of Penelope's weaving given by the scolia: "requests for marriage are not permissible as long as the loom is set."<sup>51</sup> Aphrodite should not "touch" girls who weave. In traditional societies, there is no form of initiation into sexuality for young girls other than negation. The goddess of love is excluded from the domain of virginity, which is precisely defined by the absence of love.

## The Work of Maidens

The space of the loom and the back of the house are supposed to protect young girls from *Eros*. "Tucked in the most enclosed area

of the enclosure”<sup>52</sup> the canonical *parthenos* of Hesiod lives next to her mother unaware of the service of golden Aphrodite. The strange echo of Erinna, described as if it were a model, comes a few centuries after Hesiod’s poetry and is based on the antithesis between Aphrodite and Athena which rules feminine existence. For the center of this feminine universe is the loom, the site of the production of textiles for use in the *oikos*, but also the space invested with the symbolic values associated strictly with the figure of Athena.

Born without sexual union and herself unavailable to the exchange between the sexes, *Parthenos* Athena patronizes this craft activity completely. Indeed, on the level of the pantheon, the separation between sexuality and weaving is clear: none of the wife or mother goddesses is associated with weaving. On the contrary, the texts take great care to indicate the split: “Hera the queen does not dispute the gift of the Moirai with Athena,” writes Nonnos (XXIV 282); which is what *The Iliad* already suggests in specifying that the *peplos* of the bride of Zeus was made by Athena (XIV 178-179). The *Moirai*, dreadful weavers of fate, are far-off figures, solitary and without progeny. As for Demeter, she is never associated with the loomwork, as opposed to Persephone who is sometimes depicted weaving at the time of the abduction; once *Kore* has disappeared, the mourning mother will not keep her tools and unfinished work; she gives them to other *korai* to finish, the sixty maidens of the king of Paros.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, several texts tell of weaving with the theme of the abduction of Persephone: Apollodorus of Athens, Diodorus of Sicily, texts referring to the Orphic tradition, and Nonnos. Diodorus of Sicily tells that at the time of her abduction, Persephone, accompanied by Artemis and Athena, was in the process of weaving a *peplos* for Zeus, the father (V, 3, 4). The Orphic tradition associates the three goddesses and invokes their virginity:<sup>54</sup> Artemis and Athena who are within her (*Kore*) safeguard her virginity, a way of expressing the irreducibly double nature of Persephone. Elsewhere, the weaving of *Kore* appears subordinate to the figure of Athena, qualified by the Orphics as the *mistress of weaving* (Kern OF, 178). In Nonnos’ tale, which is situated in the same tradition, Persephone

executes a task identical to that of the *arrephoroi*, and the space of the loom is supposed to protect the young girl from *eros*.

To distance the *Maiden* from *all the gods of Olympus filled with desire*—such is the intention of Demeter when she hides Persephone in a *partheneon* (a virginal workshop) of weavers, according to the tradition reported by Nonnos, which seems to originate with the Orphics. In a far-off grotto, in the company of Nymphs who are skilled weavers, Persephone prepares the thread and *sets the warp* for the cloth, singing the praise of Athena, the mistress of textile works (ἰστοτέλεια).<sup>55</sup> Loomwork does not, however, protect the divine Maiden from the assault of the snake-Zeus, who penetrates the depths of the virginal chamber, and from this union Zagreus, the horned one, is born. The text pities Persephone for not having been able, after all, to avoid this monstrous union inside the *partheneon*. The text specifies that Persephone was ravished *before her marriage*.

For the human maiden, abandoning the service of Athena “before its time,” is the equivalent of placing her future womanhood under an inauspicious sign. Thus Creusa, seduced by Apollo, enfolds Ion, the child born of this secret union, with her unfinished work. And the swaddling clothes of Ion bear a strong resemblance to a replica or a bit of Athena’s attire, for it is a *peplos* bearing the image of a Gorgon in the center part, like an *aegis* (1421-1423). The text allows one to believe that *the loomwork of a girl* (1425, 1489), *this careless work of a girl* (1490-1491), the work of a princess living in the Acropolis, were part of an original *arrehephoric* service abruptly abandoned, especially if one reads the myth as a repetition of the myth of the daughters of Cecrops<sup>56</sup>, the first to weave wool in Attica and to busy themselves with divine garments.<sup>57</sup> Would Creusa have been struck with sterility for having abandoned her ritual task and wrapped an illegitimate child in the sacred cloth? In any case, the inappropriate use of her weaving prefigures the failure of her womanhood: “The very imperfection of her youthful efforts ... testifies to her failure, the failure of an *Arrehephoros* who did not complete her task for Athena, perhaps, but also, indissociably, the failure of Apollo’s victim to move on from the status of *parthenos* and enter into marriage.”<sup>58</sup>

Euripides is the only author of the classical period come down to us who makes weaving in honor of Athena a poetic subject; for

the concerns with the attire of Athena Polias seem surrounded with great discretion, like the sojourn of the *arrhephoroi* on the Acropolis, who began their seclusion by solemnly setting the loom for the sacred cloth. Hermeneutics have long interpreted *arrhephoric* service through the ritual act which marked its end: the transportation of indescribable objects to, they said, Aphrodite's enclosure in the Gardens. Today, the attentive interpretation of Pausanias' text on the *arrhephoroi*<sup>59</sup> and the changing of the topography of the Acropolis brought about by the determination and the precise placement of the Aglaurion<sup>60</sup> show that, we know much less than we think we do, even about the route of the *Arrhephoroi*: not only what they carried, but also the end of their route remain secret.

It is not that easy to introduce Aphrodite into the *arrhephoric* ritual, and to make it an initiation into sexuality.<sup>61</sup> The mythology concerning the weaving of young girls in the service of Athena makes a barrier against *Eros*. A last example of this incompatibility would be *Arachne*: for the Greeks, she was originally a very beautiful girl, metamorphosed for not having respected Athena's craft.

The model of weaving in the animal world is the spider's web. Knowing this, one might have expected a more marked presence of the spider in the representations of this activity. There is a trace of it in the myth of *Arachne* (an arachnid) the weaver, but she is a marginal mythic figure. In the two versions that have come down to us, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VI, 5ff.) and Nicander's *Theriaca*, we have young girls who did not respect the purity of the service of Athena. The Latin version is more well-known: *Arachne*, the boastful Lydian weaver, refuses the patronage of Athena and claims to weave better than the goddess. It is not this boastful manifestation that unleashes the punishment of Athena, but rather the fact that *Arachne* weaves the loves of the Olympian gods and not stories glorifying the goddess, like the one represented on the panathenaic *peplos*. The other version is Greek, and more ancient, and roots the myth squarely in Athenian soil: *There lived in Attica a brother and a sister; the boy was called Phalanx and the girl Arachne. Phalanx had learned the art of war from Athena, Arachne the art of weaving. But they had an incestuous relationship between them, which earned them the abomination of Athena. The goddess meta-*

morphosed them into the “creeping” type of animal, in which the parents are destined to be devoured by their offspring.<sup>62</sup> Ephebic education and the education of young girls are linked here, both domains being apprenticeships patronized by Athena. In both the Athenian and Latin versions, weaving and sexuality are still marked by a strongly negative relationship: corresponding to the sexual transgression of the young disciples of Athena is the sweetened version of scenes of love that the boastful Lydian weaves. The antithesis is verified once again: for young girls, loomwork is as much, if not more, a moral exercise as an apprenticeship in household tasks. This is what the Lacedaemonians reproach the other Greeks for: “forming” the feminine character in a type of education based on shutting them inside and on textile work.<sup>63</sup>

Arachne is the example of the feminine behavior that creates disorder: in the passage from the human order to that of animals, the young girl will never arrive at her *telos* (her term); the illicit use of the loom will make her hideous, and she will be at the origin of the animal species which engages in monstrous familial relations. This is an ideal tale to scare young girls, like the tale of the daughters of Cecrops who lose their lives for having opened the chest containing Erichthonius. Arachne leaves her loom to seek death by hanging, the mode of suicide privileged to women<sup>64</sup> Standing apart from the Greek language, which classes the word, ἀράχνης more in the masculine gender, the myth centers on a feminine destiny.<sup>65</sup> To make a girl of striking beauty hideous is a punishment that the goddesses inflict to prevent access to marriage, the *telos* of all women. For to say that a girl is “beautiful” usually signifies that she is of marrying age.<sup>66</sup> Ever hung from a thread that comes from her body, Arachne devotes herself to an endless weaving, the sign of an unaccomplished feminine life, the monstrous reply to the works of the divine *Parthenos*, whom she so wanted to equal.

In literature, weaving is a language parallel to the subject of femininity, as if, after the fashion of the Moirai, the mythic weavers, bent over their looms, worked at the prefiguration of their own fates. And so the young girl who creates her weaving is likewise engaged in a process of self-creation: in a culture characterized by the difficulty of direct discourse on the reality of femi-

nine life, the cloth on the loom speaks of the very body of she who works it. This symbolic operation appears clearly in the Athenian custom of indicating the birth of a girl by a tuft of wool suspended over the doorway<sup>67</sup>, a metaphor one finds explicitly developed, many centuries later, in a modern Greek *epithalamium*.

I had a white cotton plant outside my door  
And I spun cotton with my distaff  
But someone came and stole it from me  
and married it in another part of town.

Translated by Sophie Hawkes

\*Translator's note: for quotes from Homer I have used the following editions:

*The Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951).  
*The Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu (Baltimore, 1962.)

## Notes

1. Sappho. *Poems and Fragments*, translated by Josephine Balmer (New Jersey, 1984), 40.
2. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, I, 3-4.
3. L. Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1976), 200-203.
4. On the gynaeceum as the most interior part of the house, see F. Zeitlin, "Cultic Models of the Female: Rites of Dionysius and Demeter," *Arethusa*, 15, 1-2, 1982, 143 ff. On the woman alone with her companions as a theme with negative connotations, see *ibid*.
5. On the exemplary spouse of Ischomachus, see Cl. Mossé. *La femme dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1983), p. 34-38.
6. I. Papadopoulou-Belmehti, *L'art de Pandora. La Mythologie du tissage en Grèce ancienne* (Doctoral thesis, Paris, 1992).
7. On imaged language as a genre of discourse given to women and used as well to describe them, see A. Iriate, *Las Redes del enigma* (Madrid, 1990). On the wearing and taking off of the sash as a metaphor for the changing status of the woman, see P. Schmitt, "Athéna Apatouria et la ceinture," *Annales E.S.C.*, 32, 1977, 1059-1073.
8. On the song of the shuttle, which marks dawn, see the votive epigrams of the *Palatine Anthology* (VI, 160, 174, 274).
9. Michèle Le Doeuff, *L'Imaginaire philosophique* (Paris, 1980), 137.

10. This, in fact, is from "The Bacchae" of Euripides, translated by William Arrowsmith, in *Euripides V* (Chicago, 1967), line 1236.
11. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI, 97-98.
12. The name means literally, "she who fights men."
13. *Palatine Anthology*, 9, 190. M.L. West, (*ZPE* 25, 1977, 95-119), thinks that due to her forced loomwork, attested by tradition, the Erinna would not have had the time to write such a beautiful poem, and that the author would thus have to be a man. M. Arthur refutes this reasoning convincingly, taking the image of weaving as a literary convention, in "The Tortoise and the Mirror: Erinna PSI 1090," *Classical World*, 74, 2, 1980, 53-65.
14. M. Arthur, *op. cit.*
15. Nicole Loraux, *The Children of Athena*, translated by Caroline Levine (Princeton, 1993), 176.
16. "When a poet says that a young girl is untamed (ἀδμή, ἄδμητο), he means that she is not married," C. Calame, *Les Choeurs de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque*, Vol. I (Rome, 1977), 413, n. 123.
17. "Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite," in *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Charles Boer (Irving, 1979), 69.
18. From "Ion," by Euripides, translated by Ronald Frederick Willetts, in *Euripides III* (Chicago, 1958), line 26.
19. II, 92, 93, 116, 117, 121, 122, 124.
20. On Penelope's waiting, see I. Papadopoulou-Belmehti, "Le chant de Pénélope," *Autrement* (series: *Mutations*) January 1994, 107-117.
21. Scholia to verse II, 97.
22. Noted by A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, 1960), 172-173.
23. According to the analysis of R.P. Martin (*The Language of Heroes*, Ithaca, 1989), the word does not simply designate speech, but long and detailed discourse, coming from a person invested with authority.
24. On this much commented on passage, see P. Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos* (Ithaca, 1987), 195 ff.
25. See M. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition. A Study in the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley, 1974), 71 ff.
26. N. Loraux, *op. cit.*, 161.
27. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1260 to 30 (quotation of Sophocles); G. Sissa, *Le Corps virginal* (Paris, 1987), 77 ff.
28. See also *Thesmophories*, 819-829.
29. V. 641-647: as noted by F. Zeitlin, *op. cit.*, 150, the women refer to themselves uniquely with the rituals of young girls.
30. F. Zeitlin, *op. cit.*, 151-153.
31. See the comments of J. Redfield, "Notes on the Greek Wedding," *Arethusa*, 15, 1-2, 1982, 194-195, on weaving as an "asexual production."
32. On this problematic syntagma (*Theogony*, 513-514), see N. Loraux, *op. cit.*, 87-88.
33. Hesiod, *Works of Days*, 63-64.
34. The limitation of space allows only for a brief presentation of these weavers: for more details and a general bibliography of the myths about them, see I. Papadopoulou-Belmehti, *op. cit.*: Deianeira, 319-329; Aedon, 286; the Minyans, 283-287.
35. According to the Antoninus Liberalis version of *Les Metamorphoses*, XI.



36. Note the ambiguity of the status of the Minyans: in spite of the existence of a child, Antoninus Liberalis calls them *korai* and situates them in the house of their father; in Ovid's version (*Metamorphoses*, IV) there is no mention of the child and nothing indicates that the Minyans were married; see J.S. Kambitsis, *Minyades et Protides* (in Greek) (Jannina, 1975), 37. N. Loraux, *Les Expériences de Terésias*, (Paris, 1989), 52-53.
38. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, I, 3-4.
39. This is the opinion, for example, of Y. Verdier with regard to rural France, "... work has a moral value: one is calm, with the hands occupied." *Façons de dire, Façons de faire* (Paris, 1979), 172; see also *ibid.* 256.) On the importance of the theme of idleness as a characteristic of feminine nature in Hesiod, see A. Ballabriga, "L'Equinoxe d'hiver," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superior di Pisa*, Series III, Vol. XI, 3, 1981, 580ff.
40. "Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite," *op. cit.*, 69.
41. L. Brisson, *Le Mythe de Tirésias* (Leyde, 1976), 91. Eustathe, commentator on *Od.*, X.494. On the passage of Sostratus, see L. Brisson, *ibid.*, 78, n. 1.
42. See Euripides, "Ion," *op. cit.*, line 1425.
43. Sappho, *op. cit.*. The same antithesis will be taken up again in certain votive epigrams of the *Palatine Anthology* (VI, 283, 285).
44. XXIV, 240.
45. The adjective ἀγέλαστος is an ironic allusion to the traditional epithet of Aphrodite: φιλομ(μ)ειδης, "the lover of laughter" ("Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite," *op. cit.*) and is related through homonymic ambiguity to the word in Hesiod for love and desire (*Theogony*, 200, with the commentary of M.L. West).
46. Suda, s.v. ξανᾶν, ξανῶ, ξαίνειν.
47. For a concise and complete insight into the technique of weaving in ancient Greece, see F. Sosset, "Le tissage dans la Grèce ancienne," *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 1895-1896, 481-519.
48. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne* (Paris, 1974), 131. G. Drettas, *La Mère et l'Outil*, (Paris, 1980), 257, recounts that in present-day rural Bulgaria, "a stranger is not allowed to touch the warp ... the weaver is always visibly annoyed when people come too close to the loom, if there is the risk of having corporal contact with the person behind the loom."
49. One might recall the arrhaphoric version of the abduction of Persephone: she is torn from a loom, "while she was in the service of Athens": this abduction affects the cosmic order; on this version, see below 13ff.
50. Nonnos, XXIV, 267-268.
51. See above 4-5.
52. See the commentary that N. Loraux makes on this passage in "Un secret bien gardé," the preface to G. Sissa, *op. cit.*, 7-8.
53. Apollodorus of Athens, *F.G. Hist.*, 244 F89.
54. We find the same in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, in Euripides' *Helen of Troy*, and in Pausanias, VII, 31, 1-3. In Claudian, Diana and Pallas follow the chariot bearing Persephone away: *stimulat communis in arma virginitas* (*De raptu Proserpinae*, II, 207-208).
55. *Dionysiaca*, VI, 151-153, in the scene of weaving: 135-153.
56. N. Loraux, *op. cit.*, 225.
57. Philochorus, *F.Gr.Hist.*, 328 F 10.
58. N. Loraux, *op. cit.*, 225; G. Sissa, *Le Corps virginal*, 121-123.

59. E. Kadletz, "Pausanias, I, 27, 3 and the Route of the Arrhephoroi," *AJA*, 86, 1982, 445-446.
60. G.S. Dontas, "The True Aglaurion," *Hesperia*, 52/1, 1983, 48-63.
61. See, for example, W. Burkert, "Kekropidensage und Arrhephoria," *Hermes*, 94, 1966, 1-25, and the critique of C. Calame, *op. cit.*, 237-238.
62. *Scholia in Nicandri Theriaca*, 12a, 40.
63. Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians.*, I 3-4.
64. On this type of death see N. Loraux, *Façons tragiques de tuer une femme* (Paris, 1986), 31ff.
65. P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, s.v. ἀράχνης (Paris, 1968). See also, M. Collardelle-Diarrassouba, *Le Lièvre et l'Araignée dans les contes de l'ouest africain* (Paris, 1975), 142, where the spider is masculine both as an insect and as a character in the tale.
66. On the metaphoric significance of virginal beauty, the sign of ripeness for marriage, see C. Calme, *op. cit.*, 342-346; P. Brule, *La fille d'Athènes* (Besancon, 1987), 301ff. On the Proitides, who say their beauty fades because of Hera's wrath, see C. Calame, *op. cit.*, 215, and W. Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Berkeley, 1983) 169-170 (English translation).