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ARACHNEAN ENCOUNTERS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY: HOLLANDER, LONGLEY, STALLINGS*

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In noua fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.1–2)[1]

Perhaps better than any other poetic work, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* lend themselves to manifold repercussions and receptions in art, be they written or visual.[2] Over the centuries, they have had a massive impact on Western culture and themselves been metamorphosed to speak to all kinds of different ages and tastes.[3]

The present paper aims to show the creative influence of the *Metamorphoses* on twentieth-century English poetry by closely examining one example: the story of Arachne and Minerva. I would like to demonstrate how the modern poets under scrutiny, John Hollander, Michael Longley and Alicia E. Stallings, pick up not only on the content of the well-known myth as established by Ovid, but also on structural elements of the Ovidian story in their poems, perhaps the most powerful English poetic treatments of the Arachne topic in the twentieth century.[4]

My analysis of the modern poems will show both a conscious interaction with Ovid's text and a dialogue with scholarship. I will argue that, while Hollander's, Longley's and Stallings's understanding of the Ovidian authorised version of the myth is shaped similarly, displaying interest in metapoetic and feminist readings of Ovid, their shared ideas are realised in quite different poetic modes: whereas Longley re-casts the story for a powerful male voice in a poetics that embraces and develops a stream of the Ovidian texture, Hollander and Stallings, on the other hand, intricately invert the Ovidian power relations and instate Arachne as the authoritative speaker.

METHODOLOGY

The English Arachne and spider poems will be viewed as documents of reception of Ovid without underestimating the other poetic mechanisms at work.[5] This is easier said than done. How can someone who is working in the field of reception resist the tendency to ignore the manifold effects and messages that poetic texts carry, but are not directly related to what one might expect (or may wish) to find there since one purports to know the antecedent text? Although reader-response-theory empowers the reader as the creative agent in constant structuring and restructuring of the aesthetic object, we must not forget that at the same time it relies fundamentally on the textual structure, which 'offers guidance as to what is to be produced' (Iser 1978: 107). Thus, the present paper will – rather than adhering to any school or ideology of interpretation – aim to substantiate its claims wherever possible by including close rhetorical, text-based analyses, in order not to let the 'interplay' between text and reader become mere 'playing' of one reader.

Such text-based readings are important not only with regard to the modern poems, but also for the analysis of Ovid's text. As Paul de Man points out, 'the relationship between the work and its future is not purely arbitrary' (Jauss 1982: xiv): in fact, the very rhetorical structure and poetical architecture of Ovid's text determines to a large extent the ways in which it has come to be understood in the history of reception. This is not to say that analyses of the structures and rhetorical forms of both the ancient and modern texts are enough to account for the intricate relations between them. If we want to aim for structural interpretations in a work on reception, we could do worse than take 'structural description' in Jauss's sense: as 'grounded in an analysis of the process of reception' (Jauss 1982: 140).

For the purposes of the present paper, I propose to understand this 'process of reception' with the traditional triad of the hermeneutic process: *intelligere* – *interpretari* – *applicare*.[6] In what follows, I shall try to imitate this hermeneutic scheme.[7] The first section will be concerned with the 'perceptual understanding' (*intelligere*) of Ovid's Arachne narrative and thus provide a summary of the passage. The next section will deal with 'reflective interpretation' (*interpretari*), in that it presents the relevant scholarly views on the text, leading us on to the main concern of this article, the analysis of the

twentieth-century poets (*applicare*) and to the results of their processes of *intelligere – interpretari – applicare*. As these steps are part of a circle and necessarily inherently connected (rather than strictly following each other in a linear way), it will be inevitable to allow some degree of circularity in the present paper as well, keeping the Ovidian version and the modern poems in play.

OVID'S VERSION: METAMORPHOSES 6.1–145
INTELLIGERE: A SUMMARY

Ovid's Arachne-Minerva episode appears at the beginning of the sixth book of the *Metamorphoses* in a context of several stories of humans who receive divine punishment.[8] Both in the preceding story at the end of the fifth book, to which Ovid explicitly looks back in Minerva's first words, and in Arachne's story, punishment is the consequence of humans being so bold as to compete with gods.[9] What, then, are the main lines of Ovid's story?

The episode commences with a contextualisation: Minerva's approval of the muses punishing the Pierides. Arachne, a simple woman by nature, 'famous not for her birthplace nor for the origin of her family, but for her skill (*ars*)' (7–8), catches the goddess's attention because she reveals hubristic boldness (23–4). She even goes so far as to wish for a competition with the goddess herself (25). Pallas, disguised as an old woman, appears to Arachne and advises her to be content with her fame amongst mortals, but not to test a goddess (30–2). Arachne, however, scorns the advice and offends the old woman (37–42), whereupon Minerva epiphanically reveals her true identity (43–5). The divine appearance does not make Arachne falter in her decision to compete with the goddess, and she 'rushes' into the fateful contest (50–1).

Before the narrator commences with the description of the tapestries, he elaborates on the technicalities of the craftsmanship and materiality of weaving (53–60) and gives, in the simile of the rainbow, an overview of the panoply of colour present in the works being woven (63–9). Minerva's composition, described in 33 lines containing five scenes, has a rigid structure: the first scene has divine order and Jupiter at its centre, relating the goddess's contest about the name of the city of the Areopagus (70–82), a contest that she wins.[10] Four further scenes, in the corners of her tapestry, show examples of the terrible fate of humans vying for renown.[11] A row of olive leaves frames the edges of Minerva's work (101–2). Arachne's work, then, described in 26 lines containing 21 scenes, focuses on the sexual affairs of male gods with women. Arachne, too, begins with Jupiter: the first scene depicts his affair with Europa (103–7); those with eight other women follow in fast acceleration (108–14).[12] Next, we learn of six of Neptune's adventures (115–20) and, following an authorial comment on Arachne's technique being true to life (121), those of Apollo (122–4), Liber (125), and Saturn (126). The border of Arachne's work 'has flowers interwoven with twining ivy' (*nexilibus flores hederis habet intertextos*, 128).

The story closes with the account of Pallas transforming Arachne into a spider. Upon the tapestry's completion, neither Minerva nor Envy are able to criticise it substantially (129–30), and, in rage, the goddess destroys the mortal woman's artwork that depicts the 'crimes of the gods' (*caelestia crimina*, 130–1). The devastated Arachne, who is on the point of hanging herself, arouses the 'pity' of Minerva (*Pallas miserata*, 135),[13] who decides that the girl is not to die, but that she and her descendants have to live as spiders ever after (136–8). Thus, transformed into a spider, Arachne 'practises her old art of weaving' (*antiquas exercet aranea telas*, 145).

INTERPRETARI: SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON THE EPISODE

What have scholars made of Ovid's version of the Arachne myth? There is a vast bibliography of literary treatments of this text as well as of its reception.[14] It is plausible to assume that the most influential twentieth-century strands of interpretation are also pertinent to the modern poets' understanding of the myth; and they can, in a slightly different sense from the poems drawing on the Arachne topic, be considered documents of reception in their own right. I will introduce the two strands of interpretation of the Ovidian version that are most pertinent to the understanding of Hollander's, Longley's and Stallings's poems: the pervasive metapoetic readings, focusing on the techniques of *mise en abyme* and *ekphrasis*, as well as the feminist interpretations of the passage.[15]

One way of reading Ovid's Arachne episode is to view the passage as a metapoetic text. Byron Harries's 1990 essay is an important example of an interpretation that acknowledges that 'the art of poetic composition is regularly portrayed as analogous to that of the clever, imaginative weaver' (Harries 1990: 64–5).[16] The poetic composition alluded to is conspicuously Hellenistic: most strikingly, the Ovidian account is itself described with vocabulary that is suited to the process of Hellenistic poetic composition.[17] Gianpiero Rosati gives more examples of the association of the weaver Arachne with the poet and renders it plausible that Ovid successfully 'created a foundation myth for the metaphor of poetic spinning/weaving, and for the connected image which associates the poet with the spider' (Rosati 1999: 250).[18] There is also a similarity between Arachne's manner of weaving and Ovid's own art: it is not difficult to read the passage – together with Harries and others – as a *mise en abyme*. The theme of Arachne's work and the manner of its presentation show *en miniature* what is happening on the macro-level of the entire poem.[19] Arachne's artwork is also a *mise en abyme* in that it picks up earlier episodes of the *Metamorphoses*. Most strikingly, it mentions the rape of Medusa by Neptune (119–20), which Ovid recounts in the fourth book. The allusion is provocative: we know from Ovid's earlier account that the rape happened in Minerva's very own temple.[20] In her 1974 essay, Eleanor Windsor Leach similarly highlights the bearing the Arachne episode has on the understanding of the literary programme and poetics of the *Metamorphoses*; but she does so by focusing on the aspect of *ekphrasis*, and without pushing the identification of the poet's aesthetics with those of Arachne's composition as far as Harries does. Rather, she acknowledges the importance of both Minerva's and Arachne's aesthetic underpinnings as integral constituents of Ovid's literary project.[21] The ekphrastic mode of speaking, then, is instrumental in 'offer[ing] the artist the opportunity to speak *in propria persona*' (Leach 1974: 104).[22] Leach shows that the Ovidian *ekphrasis* serves as an image of the text in which it is embedded: an insight that is crucial to the understanding of Ovid's text.[23] In a slightly different take on the passage, Clara Shaw Hardy argues that the Ovidian narrator uses the *ekphraseis* of Minerva's and Arachne's artworks for his own aims: an initial narrative interest in evoking sympathy for the human transgressors in Minerva's cautionary corner tales, Hardy argues, turns into an eventual focus on the power of the male gods at the end of the description of Arachne's tapestry. The male Ovidian narrator, especially in lines 122–6, removes the victimized women Arachne identifies with completely from the scene, focusing instead on 'the generative power of the gods' (Hardy 1995: 146). In fact, the narrator's progression and shifting focus in describing Arachne's artwork has interfered with her ability to speak: 'in a sense she has already been "silenced" by the narrator' (Hardy 1995: 146). This observation is crucial for the understanding of the modern poems under discussion in the following, and suggests a brief consideration of feminist interpretations of the passage, readings that have become very influential in the reception of the Arachne myth.[24]

Aiming to 'find a woman's gaze' in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Patricia Salzman-Mitchell adds another dimension to Hardy's observation on Arachne's being silenced by the male narrator, attempting to 'redeem the visual with all its pertinent traces as a feminine expressive feature that bestows a gaze upon women' (Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 118). The Arachne episode consequently plays a major role in her considerations since 'the language of textiles,' as Nancy Miller already pointed out, 'tends to engender [...] a metaphorics of femininity' (Miller 1986: 271).[25] The female Arachne aspires to have a voice and to compete, warrior-like, with the goddess.[26] Salzman-Mitchell concludes:

> Arachne is required to be a woman only, but she does not accept the terms of this equation: she threatens to subvert them in her weaving, but the goddess destroys the woman's countercultural attempt. (Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 137)

The subsequent destruction of Arachne's tapestry may be read as standing for the rape by a female goddess with masculine features,[27] and the metamorphosis into a spider reveals yet one more meaningful layer: the big 'stomach' (*cetera uenter habet*, 6.144) can be taken 'as an allusion to women's primary function in ancient societies, pregnancy and reproduction' and the small head of the spider likewise 'as a symbolic "decapitation" and suppression of female identity' (Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 138).[28]

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POEMS
APPLICARE: VERSIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Let us first see how these metapoetic and feminist issues are explored in Michael Longley's 1994 'Spiderwoman', a poem that conspicuously revolves around a centre of sexual themes, combining

fairly literal Ovid with fairly bold Longley. At first, Longley focuses solely on Ovid's rendition of Arachne's metamorphosis into a spider. 'Highhandedly perhaps,' he himself comments on the poem in question in Harrison's 2009 book *Living Classics*, 'I made "Spiderwoman" fifty percent Ovid's invention and fifty percent my own [...] Into five lines I concentrated Ovid's scary account of Arachne dwindling to a spider' (Longley 2009: 108–9). The poem begins thus:

> Arachne starts with Ovid and finishes with me.
>
> Her hair falls out and the ears and nostrils disappear
> From her contracting face, her body minuscule, thin
> Fingers clinging to her sides by way of legs, the rest
> All stomach, from which she manufactures gossamer
> And so keeps up her former trade, weaver, spider
> (Hofmann/Lasdun 1994: 146)

The 'highhanded' claim in the first line prominently signals a *Weiterspinnen* of the Ovidian poetic texture in recalling the *perpetuum carmen*'s famous opening: ... *primaque ab origine mundi* / *ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen* (*Metamorphoses* 1.3–4), 'bring this perpetual song down from the first beginning of the world to my own times'. The Longleyan speaker assumes the Ovidian role, re-casting Ovid's version of the Arachne myth as the *prima origo* from which he himself now 'begins' – as the one to give the Arachnean poetics its final touches. Linking the Arachne passage specifically with the beginning of the whole poem, Longley gives prominence to the passage's significance as *mise en abyme*: the modern poet pays homage to the Ovidian ambition, sharing an affinity with the modern critic. Interestingly, the *perpetuum carmen* is one that is composed and re-composed in modern times through the lens of poetic criticism.

It is in this clearly Ovidian poetics that Longley's poem develops in the lines that follow, giving an almost line-by-line rendition of Ovid's account of the transformation, and closely adhering to the stages of the process described there.[29] Especially striking is the translation 'All stomach', acknowledging the importance of the stomach, as does Salzman-Mitchell in her reading of Ovid eleven years after Longley (see above). 'All stomach' also thematically leads on to the second part of the poem:

> Enticing the eight eyes of my imagination
> To make love on her lethal doily, to dangle sperm
> Like teardrops from an eyelash, massage it into her
> While I avoid the spinnerets – navel, vulva, bum –
> And the widening smile behind her embroidery.
>
> She wears our babies like brooches on her abdomen.
> (Hofmann/Lasdun 1994: 146)[30]

In these lines, the speaker imagines his sexual union with the 'spiderwoman' – in a clinical exactness ('While I avoid the spinnerets – navel, vulva, bum') that deviates in its explicitness from Ovidian tales of sex and rape, which tend to be allusive and euphemistic,[31] but is not un-Ovidian in tone. For an Ovidian male exploration of the female anatomy one might compare the famous depiction of Corinna's body in *Amores* 1.5.[32] Note where the modern poem deviates from the comparable Ovidian precedent: where the Ovidian imagination moves towards the erotic aposiopesis (*cetera quis nescit? ...*, *Amores* 1.5.25), the Longleyan speaker, in his 'imagination', forces the transformed Arachne into a verbal sexual union ('make love', 'sperm', 'massage it into her').[33] In his imagined sexual act with the spider, he can build on numerous Ovidian tales of rape, but does so intricately subverting them.[34] Most importantly, he seems to cleanse them of major negative connotations. While Ovid also mentions, and often highlights, the guilt and punishment the victimised women have to bear afterwards, the Longleyan speaker imagines quite a different result: having been forced to have sex, the 'spiderwoman' proudly wears the results of it like 'brooches', 'smiling'. And yet, there is a (fittingly hidden) sense of a need to conceal something in the 'abdomen',[35] while 'brooches' retains its etymological link with 'broach',[36] reverberating with an echo of the violent act.

Moreover, Longley is aware of the analogy of spider and poet. In fact, it is only because the speaker has already become spider-like – 'enticing the eight eyes of my imagination' – that he is able to versify

his 'imagination' in the following lines.[37] The spider poetics seems to be both the necessary prerequisite and, simultaneously, the result of Longley's poetic underpinnings: a result that, as the speaker claims, is supposed to be a final one ('Arachne starts with Ovid and finishes with me'); and yet, the imagination of the last stanza creates, in the imagination of the sexual union of spider-speaker and spider-woman, an inevitable open-endedness. The resistance to closure is emphasised in the last line of the poem: 'She wears our babies like brooches on her abdomen'. The 'babies' may be read as future interpretations and receptions of the Arachnean poetics, shaped by Ovid and, arguably, Longley.[38]

Let us now see how John Hollander, U.S. poet and distinguished literary scholar, elaborates on the metapoetic and feminist issues of the Ovidian version in his poem 'Arachne', first published in 1995, one year after Longley's. Strikingly, we are not presented with a powerful male narrator of the Ovidian or Longleyan type. Rather, Hollander allows Arachne to speak for herself. My analysis will first examine the way in which the speaker Arachne attempts to deconstruct Ovid's version, but yet cannot escape it. Second, it will consider Hollander's interest in the ekphrastic tradition, a tradition that was shaped not least by Ovid, as Leach has shown in her fine contribution.[39] In doing so, we will have the opportunity of observing a dialogue between scholarship and poetry, since Hollander has written about ekphrasis in his work as a literary critic.

Hollander's Arachne attempts to tell us her version of the weaving contest and to correct what 'they will say', the way the myth will be – or has been – related. She employs expressive language ('It was not to challenge her, / Like some idiot warrior going up against some / Other idiot warrior') and contrasts what is *not* the case in her view with her own lived version of events. The repeated 'No ...', each time deeming the accounts preceding it in the poem invalid, appears to be the structural device that the whole poem's architecture is built on, a device especially suited for the purpose of Arachne's undertaking: to deconstruct Ovid, 'that liar'. At first, Hollander's Arachne seems to have gained a poetic voice of her own, having escaped both Minerva and Ovid.[40] However, in an intriguing form of dramatic irony,[41] the poem's speaker cannot escape her former, Ovidian self. Let us look at one particular instance:

> The skill at weaving was itself a web
> All right, but not one I was caught in – neither
> That, nor my oh-so-celebrated pride in it
> (Hollander 1995: 87)

> All the mechanics and the pain – oh oh the pain
> Of the transformation will go undescribed
> No, there will be none of that.
> (Hollander 1995: 88)

Note how, unconsciously, the 'oh-so-celebrated pride' of the first stanza is echoed later in the poem by 'oh oh the pain', thus linking – exactly as in the Ovidian version – Arachne's pride with the painful punishment.[42] Moreover, even after the transformation, in the second part of the poem, which describes Arachne living as a spider – an account absent from Ovid – Hollander's Arachne cannot flee the Minervan logic present in Ovid's text: 'it is not that [Arachne] sits now at the center of the whole / Thing' – that is, where Minerva 'sits' in her tapestry in Ovid. Rather, Arachne 'sit[s] tight in an upper corner / regarding [her] lovely gossamer garden' – a description that evokes the place Minerva assigns to her when, in the *Metamorphoses*, she weaves the cautionary tales of punished mortals into the 'corners' of her tapestry (6.83–100). Even in an episode missing from Ovid – a poetic realm that should therefore genuinely be Arachne's own – Hollander's Arachne cannot escape the confines of Ovid's version of the myth.

Just like the feminist critics interested in recuperating the feminist gaze in the myth, Hollander is also intrigued by the poetic possibilities of allowing Arachne to speak for herself and to show us how she sees things. For the purposes of this analysis, I will examine the poem's emphasis on gaze and vision and the ekphrastic moves in the poem through the lens of Hollander's own work on the topic, mainly drawing on his 1988 essay 'The poetics of *ekphrasis*'.[43] The first half of Hollander's poem in particular is concerned with the Ovidian *descriptio* and the relationship between text and image. In the second stanza, Arachne embarks on a meta-discourse about weaving and *ekphrasis*:

> Well, weaving, admittedly, can be the best
> Of work: onto the warp of unsignifying strength
> Are woven the threads of imaging that
> Do their unseen work of structure too,
> But can depict even while they draw
> The warp together: my images are thus
> Truly in and of the fabric, texture itself becoming
> Text, rather than lying, like painting,
> Lightly upon some canvas or some wall.
> (Hollander 1995: 87)

Of course the poet is fully aware of all the metapoetic implications of weaving, linking it with the poetic process. Arachne becomes the artist who, rather than being the female object gazed at, tries to invert the usual pattern, becoming the gazing subject instead.[44] From the powerful position of viewing artist, she attempts to show us her truth without deceit. Note the ambiguity of 'lying' in the last but one line: 'texture itself becoming / Text, rather than lying'. But how certain and true can any description be? We will get a sense of it in the poem. Arachne does not explicitly want to give an *ekphrasis* of her artwork, but introduces the depiction of what she wove as the representation of what 'they will say':

> But they will say that what I so wonderfully wove
> Was all those terrible unfunny rapes her father
> Changed himself into those shapes – flame,
> Gold, swan, bull and all – in order more amusingly
> To carry out: he was at least a connoisseur
> Of bestialities. And not to speak of Neptune,
> Apollo and the rest of them with their dallying below stairs.
>
> No, it was none of that: who needs
> Yet more porn, and yet more subtleties
> Of formal treatment – legs, arms, and affrighted
> Lineaments rhyming with patterns compliant branches make, and
> Glittering vague waves and high suggestive clouds?
> (Hollander 1995: 87–8)

Despite the speaker's decision to give 'none of that' all of it is there: the lines describe the main aspects of the Ovidian ekphrasis of Arachne's tapestry. Again, Arachne cannot flee the confines of the Ovidian authorised version of the myth, but she can speak and give a voice to her protest. Hollander's version allows us to see Arachne as Ovid's reader, reading about her own work of art and expressing her disgust:

> And then the whole array of nasty vignettes bordered with
> Flowers and ivy intertwined – *intertextos* – says
> That liar, Ovid, as if I had been *reading*
> Some old book of the floral! No, it was none of that:
> Who needs yet more vegetative decoration
> Reducing the restless gaze to the blankly satisfied stare?
> (Hollander 1995: 88)

The repeated 'no' and the gesture of *apotrope* invest Arachne's account with a moment of uncertainty: readers are to question the two conflicting versions, Ovid's on the one hand and Arachne's on the other. Hollander effectively employs a device he draws attention to in his own essay on *ekphrasis*: a rupture of 'the certainty of the ekphrastic reading, calling attention to the contingent and even fragile quality of the relation of any description of its object' (Hollander 1988: 210). Moreover, the last line of the above quoted stanza introduces the visual ('gaze', 'stare'), which is so central to *ekphrasis*. The next, longer stanza continues in a similar vein:

> No: it was she herself I would show, the weaver
> Woven into my web, the face of terrifying wisdom

> Beyond the knowledge of Apollo and the tricky lore
> Of Hermes. And that is what went into my web,
> What grew out of my dancing hands and singing
> Eyes and seeing heart. Her face emerged from
> My sky and my clouds – was it not then something
> Of my face, as well? She paused in her own work
> And gazed at mine;
> And to the Goddess' gray eyes
> That image of her seemed, for too long a moment,
> To be even more real than she was herself.
> Too long, but still
> A moment: for then her thread of thought broke as
> A sudden wind blew through the chamber
> We were working in, and shook the veil
> And set the face of wisdom a-trembling,
> Which with trembling gaze she coldly noted.
> (Hollander 1995: 88)

It is interesting to observe how Hollander addresses in his own poem the same question that he carves out as the question *par excellence* of *ekphrasis* in his analysis of a Rossetti poem: 'What is she looking at?' (Hollander 1988: 215). Note how 'the Goddess' is almost exclusively reduced to her sensory vision ('gazed at mine', 'the Goddess' gray eyes', 'with trembling gaze she coldly noted') and a surrounding sense of coldness ('gray', 'A sudden wind', 'coldly noted'). Arachne, on the other hand, the one who creates this 'sky' and the 'clouds', is presented in striking contrast through synaesthetic catachresis as having 'dancing hands and singing / Eyes and seeing heart'. Arachne, the artist, attempts to make her viewer, 'the Goddess', the passive object of her art: she wants to 'show' her ('No: it was she herself I would show').[45] It is precisely this, her attempt to invert the established hierarchies of viewing and gazing, that is her transgression.[46] Failing to make the viewer her victim, she is victimised instead: 'And that was all for weaving and for me'. Poetry and deceiving the eyes can be dangerous, and life and representation cannot easily be torn apart. Hollander remarks in his essay about an ekphrastic poem that it ends in 'a final putting together of the elements of the reading' (Hollander 1988: 214), and emphasises that what 'all true art always says to the serious observer' is 'You must alter your life' (Hollander 1988: 216).[47] It is only fitting that his 'Arachne' ends thus: 'hanging / Like life itself, after all, by a thread'.

Like in Hollander's text, Arachne is the speaker in Alicia E. Stallings's poem. Stallings, a distinguished poet as well as a trained Classicist,[48] published 'Arachne Gives Thanks to Athena' in her 1999 collection *Archaic Smile*. The whole poem runs thus:

> It is no punishment. They are mistaken –
> The brothers, the father. My prayers were answered.
> I was all fingertips. Nothing was perfect:
> What I had woven, the moths will have eaten;
> At the end of my rope was a noose's knot.
>
> Now it's no longer the thing, but the pattern,
> And that will endure, even though webs be broken.
>
> I, if not beautiful, am beauty's maker.
> Old age cannot rob me, nor cowardly lovers.
> The moon once pulled blood from me. Now I pull silver.
> Here are the lines I pulled from my own belly –
> Hang them with rainbows, ice, dewdrops, darkness.
> (Stallings 1999: 43)

Stallings's technical mastery shows in this poem, especially in her use of a catalectic dactylic tetrameter (meaningfully varied in some lines), which not only comes close to Ovid's dactylic hexameter both in length and rhythm, but also serves well in investing Arachne's account with a sense of sweeping movement. This choice of metre is not the natural and only possible choice in English to

allow for a powerful rendering of the Ovidian myth: in his poetic translation of the Ovidian episode, Ted Hughes, for instance, chooses to rely on his characteristically swift, short lines, giving it a sense of rushed rapidity.[49] Stallings, on the other hand, makes use of a metre that resembles the epic Latin hexameter: thus, she invests her female speaker with a confidence similar to that of the unfailing epic Ovidian narrator.

A confidence the speaker can draw from her having successfully escaped her patriarchal surroundings ('They are mistaken – / The brothers, the father.').[50] Unlike in Ovid or in Hollander's poem, the goddess Minerva is not seen as a competitor here, but as a deity granting fulfilment of prayers. The hubristic boldness of Ovid's Arachne, in her competitiveness even being offended at the suggestion that there might be someone better than her,[51] is re-interpreted as a prayer ('It is no punishment. [...] My prayers were answered'). Ovid's negated *recusatio* – *nihil est quod uicta recusem* (*Metamorphoses* 6.25), 'There is nothing I would, if defeated, refuse' – can, as becomes clear from Stallings's version, also be read as a latent wish to be defeated, and thus freed of the present state. And it is not only her patriarchal surroundings that Stallings's Arachne is exempt from: it is also important to note that she has nothing to fear from 'cowardly lovers'. Instead of being reduced to her female functions of reproduction, for which she would be dependent on her 'age' and those 'cowardly lovers', she now carries her own creativity ('Here are the lines I pulled from my own belly').

So far so good, but there is more to this poem. Unlike her former self, Stallings's Arachne is no longer subject to imperfection and transitoriness. Note how the structure of the whole poem accompanies the change in subject-matter: the first five lines, looking back on the story of Arachne's former – and decidedly Ovidian – self, abound in references to bodily categories and materiality ('The brothers, the father', 'all fingertips', 'What I had woven, the moths will have eaten', 'a noose's knot'). This emphasis reminds us of Ovid: we recall his focus on the materiality of weaving – before commencing the *ekphraseis* of the actual artworks, the Ovidian speaker gives an *ekphrasis* of the loom (*Metamorphoses* 6.53–60).[52] Stallings's 'noose's knot' closes a line that also formally leads away from the seeming perfection of the first four lines in its change – or 'knot' – in the previously smooth catalectic dactylic tetrameter. The 'noose's knot' alludes to Arachne's suicidal attempt in the *Metamorphoses* before the goddess transforms her into a spider.[53] What follows is the central line of the poem, which calls both speaker and reader to the immediacy of the account of metamorphosis. In itself, the line mirrors its content: the transition taking place in the poem from 'thing' to 'pattern', chiastically linking 'Now ... pattern' and 'no longer the thing'. The chiasmus is the paradigmatic device performatively accompanying the process of metamorphosis: we move with the transformation, which is introduced at the very beginning of the line, 'now' (A), and sweeps over the state that is overcome, 'no longer the thing' (BB), to 'the pattern' (A). This performative account of transformation reminds us of Ovid's technique, who takes pains to describe his metamorphoses in detailed, psychologically discerning ways, focusing on the different stages of the bodily transformations.[54] In Stallings's poem, metamorphosis can also be witnessed in the middle of happening. It is, however, not about 'changing bodies', but about the transformation from 'thing' to 'pattern'. The next five lines, then, deal with immaterial categories and the indestructible quality of Arachne's 'new' art ('And that will endure'). A last line 'hanging' at the end of the poem after the pronounced pause of the preceding one brings us back to Ovid in the allusion to 'his' rainbow and description of colours,[55] but betrays a last note of melancholy, emphasised by the dark alliterating 'd' at the very end of the line: 'Hang them with rainbows, ice, dewdrops, darkness', a note that reminds us of the Ovidian-Longleyan atmosphere, tinged with a sense of desperation.

CONCLUSION

The English contemporary poems discussed in the present study reveal a discerning engagement with Ovid's version of the Arachne myth. We have seen that the creative impact of Ovid's poetics and the aesthetic underpinnings of the Arachne episode, dissected especially in the metapoetic and feminist scholarly readings, have shaped the structures and poetic architectures of the modern poems. The striking similarities of the scholarly *interpretari* and the poetic *applicare* can plausibly be taken as telling *signa* of affine hermeneutic processes.

Michael Longley's 'Spiderwoman' combines a close rendition of Ovid's account of Arachne's transformation with a union of 'spiderwoman' and spider-poet in a powerful male imagination, creating a new Arachnean poetics that does not, as the male speaker initially claims, 'finish' with the poem, but

due to its resistance to closure at the end may be perpetuated *ad infinitum*. John Hollander, literary scholar and poet, explores the possibilities of having Arachne speak for herself in his text, a poem so indicative of his scholarly interest in *ekphrasis*. In a reading that shares its perspective with feminist interpretations of Ovid's version, the poem invests Arachne, through her art, with a female gaze – and yet, she is unable to escape her Ovidian self. Alicia E. Stallings goes one step further in liberating 'Arachne': she depicts her as having wished for metamorphosis. The confident female speaker of her poem has thus broken free from her patriarchal surroundings, as well as her former imperfection, and received the power of creating indestructible, pattern-like art.

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1 Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are always quoted from Tarrant's Oxford text (2004); all translations are my own.

2 Probably the most recent instance of reception combining text and visual art is the collection of poems inspired by the exhibition 'Metamorphosis: Titian 2012' (11th July to 23rd September 2012): National Gallery (2012).

3 See Brown (1999), and also Coelsch-Foisner's introduction (2009: esp. VII–XVIII), with further bibliography. The reception of the Arachne myth in particular is discussed in detail in Ballestra-Puech (2006).

4 Other receptions are beyond the scope of the present study: they are not as relevant for my line of argument, or are treated in detail elsewhere. In prose, the most memorable example is probably Christoph Ransmayr's Arachne in *Die letzte Welt* (1988), for which see Ballestra-Puech (2006: 376–84). At least worthy of note are Antonia S. Byatt's idiosyncratic and polyphonic 'Arachne' (2001), and the poem by Thom Gunn (1994; see Merten 2004: 293–6). English translations of the *Metamorphoses* and the Arachne story in particular are treated in Harrison (2004) and Henderson (1999).

5 The Arachne myth itself will not be considered a relic of the past, treating Ovid's and the modern poets' versions in a hierarchical order. Rather, I would like to account for the simultaneity of myth, viewing it, in the words of Hans Blumenberg, as 'immer schon in Rezeption übergegangen' (1971: 28).

6 See Gadamer (1960: esp. 290–5). Charles Martindale's influential treatment (1993) explores reader-response theory and the 'hermeneutics of reception' in the context of Latinist literary criticism.

[7] For a fuller account, see Jauss's chapter on 'The Poetic Text within the Change of Horizons of Reading', (1982: esp. 139–48).

[8] Apart from Arachne, we learn of Pierus' daughters, punished by the muses (5.662–78), Niobe (6.146–312), the Lycian farmers (6.313–81), and Marsyas (6.382–400). The position of the Arachne episode within the whole poem is significant: 'D'abord sa position dans l'ensemble des Métamorphoses ne laisse pas d'être significative : cet épisode se trouve situé au début du livre VI (vers 1 à 145), il ouvre donc la seconde « pentade » de l'ouvrage, ce qui révèle l'importance qu'Ovide lui attachait' (von Albrecht 1979: 267).

[9] At the end of the fifth book, the muses punish Pierus' daughters (5.250–678); at the beginning of the sixth, Arachne is to be punished for challenging Minerva in the art of weaving. Note that Minerva is, right from the start, determined to punish her: *tum secum: 'laudare parum est; laudemur et ipsae,* / *numina nec sperni sine poena nostra sinamus.'* / *Maeoniaeque animum fatis intendit Arachnes* (6.3–5), 'Then, to herself [Minerva said]: "To praise is not enough; let us ourselves be praised, and let us not allow that our divinity is slighted without punishment." And she bent her thoughts on the fate of Arachne of Maeonia'.

[10] Hence, the name of the city: Athens.

[11] Rhodope and Haemus turned into 'cold mountains' (87–8), the Pygmean mother turned into a crane (90–2), Antigone turned into a bird (93–7), and 'bereaved Cinyras', who has to embrace the temple steps into which his daughters were metamorphosed (98–100).

[12] I.e. Asterie (108), Leda (109), Antiope (110–11), Alcmene (112), Danaë and Aegina (113), Mnemosyne and Proserpina (114).

[13] A 'pity', though, that I would want to read as ironic. Rosati (2009: 269) accurately remarks *ad loc.*: 'la vendetta di Minerva è di una crudele perfidia (suona ironico perciò *miserata*)'. On a more abstract level, it is important to keep in mind that recent studies have carved out irony as a subversive force and *constituens* of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole, see Krupp (2009).

[14] See the doxographical overview and selected bibliography in Rosati's commentary (2009: 244–7). A comprehensive overview, including the origins of the Arachne myth, an interpretation of her own as well as a contextualisation of the episode within the *Metamorphoses* is given by Ballestra-Puech (2006: 19–68).

[15] This means that I will not discuss the influential political interpretations of the passage. For a paradigmatic political interpretation that occupies itself with the question whether the Arachne passage can be read as (Anti-)Augustan see Curran (1972). Such an approach is discarded, for instance, by Leach (1974: 117). More subtle political approaches to the *Metamorphoses* include, most famously, Barchiesi (1997), and Hardie (1997).

[16] Note also the analogy of Arachne's life as a weaver to that of a poet; she attains all her fame through her *ars* (6.7–8). Cf. Horace's and Ovid's poetic autobiographies at Horace, *Satires* 1.6 and Ovid, *Tristia* 2.109–16.

[17] See Rosati (1999: 249–50). Note also that the account bears considerable similarity to Catullus' description of the weaving of the Fates in c. 64.311–17. In addition, Arachne's resemblance to Alexandrian artists can be corroborated further by considering the fact that, just like Callimachus sings 'out of reach of envy' (Callimachus, *Epigrams* 21.4), Arachne's work is out of reach of Livor ('Envy', 129–30), who finds no fault in it; see Barchiesi (1997: 42).

[18] In Scheid/Svenbro (1994), a comprehensive treatment on the metaphorics of weaving, Catullus is considered very important for the development of the metaphor of *textus* in Latin. See esp. 139–62. (For discussion about this, I am grateful to Martin Stöckinger.)

[19] For a comprehensive treatment of *mise en abyme* see Dällenbach (1977), the standard work which helped the device take centre stage in many studies of literary criticism.

[20] *Hanc pelagi rector templo uitiasse Mineruae* / *dicitur* (4.798–9), 'They say that the lord of the sea violated her [i.e. Medusa] in the temple of Minerva'.

[21] For the same interpretation see Lausberg (1982: 115).

[22] However, unlike in the epic tradition, Leach argues, Ovid does not use the device to incorporate external material into his poem that could not otherwise be easily admitted into his work: we find that Minerva's and Arachne's tapestries function not as 'windows looking towards a world outside of the poem but [as] mirrors of the poem itself' (Leach 1974: 106).

[23] Her point has rightly become an integral part of the scholarly *communis opinio* on the Arachne passage. See, e.g., Hardie (2002: 176) and Rosati (1999: 240).

[24] At least ever since Patricia Joplin's essay 'The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours' (1984) and, two years later, Nancy Miller's 'Arachnologies' (1986), 'Arachne' has become a focal point of *gender studies* and a symbol of feminist readings, to which e.g. Mapel Bloomberg (2001) bears witness.

[25] On weaving, spinning, their implications and the relevant ancient references see Salzman-Mitchell (2005: 119–25). In Miller's more straightforward political feminist reading, Arachne uses her weaving skills to show her rebellion: 'against the classically theocentric balance of Athena's tapestry, Arachne constructs a feminocentric protest' (Miller 1986: 273).

[26] But what about Minerva's femininity? Is she not a woman, too? Not quite: according to Nancy Miller, she can be seen as 'outwomaned, and in phallic identification with Olympian authority' (Miller 1986: 273). In a similar vein already Joplin (1984: 51), and rehearsed again in Salzman-Mitchell (2005: 137).

[27] See also Oliensis (2004: 292): 'When she strikes out at Arachne, the warrior-goddess (*virago*, 130) reclaims for herself the role of phallic aggressor, forcing Arachne out of the role of potent creator and into that of rape victim'. Also note the similar structure of the tale of Minerva punishing Arachne and the accounts of many rapes in the *Metamorphoses*: just as Minerva, the male gods normally try persuasive speech first, but are determined to achieve their ends with the women right from the start; see Curran (1978: 220).

[28] Also note Salzman-Mitchell's reference to a feminist study on the significance of the head for female identity: Eilberg-Schwartz/Doniger (1995).

[29] *Metamorphoses* 6.141–5, see below, n. 54.

[30] In accordance with a later (otherwise unaltered) version of the poem (Longley 2006: 205), I have normalised the spelling of Hofman/Lasdun's 'spineret' to 'spinneret'; surely, a typographical error in the 1994 version is more likely than assuming a neologism (as does Merten 2004: 297, n. 270).

[31] For instance, Curran (1978: 215) points out that Ovid's 'language is often less than explicit' and explains it with 'the artistic principles of decorum and of variety and indirection of expression'.

[32] Ovid, *Amores* 1.5.17–25. Note in particular lines 21–2: *quam castigato planus sub pectore uenter!* / *quantum et quale latus! quam iuuenale femur!* (text follows Kenney's *OCT*, 1995), 'What a flat belly beneath the firm bosom! / What beautiful flanks! What young thighs!'.

[33] The very thing she has been freed from in Stallings's interpretation; see the analysis of her poem.

[34] Note also that, in Ovid, the men and gods are not interested in raping animals; 'it is always women who mate with animals' (Curran 1978: 219). The Longleyan male imagination is about sex with a spider.

[35] For the possible etymology of 'abdomen' < Lat. *abdere* 'hide, conceal' see *OED* s.v. and Walde/Hofmann (1938) s.v.

[36] The *OED* s.v. 'brooch' (n.) traces the etymology of the noun to the Middle English 'broche', which is 'the same word as "broach", the differentiation of spelling being only recent, and hardly yet established'.

[37] Noted and elaborated on in Merten (2004: 298).

[38] Or, in Merten's interpretation (2004: 298–9): 'Als Mythosrezeption geht diese Deutung der Geschichte der Arachne als Figuration einer androgynen Poetik schwanger mit den zukünftigen Deutungen, die sie selbst gezeugt hat. [...] Mythos und Sprache weisen auf ihre Ursprungs- und Endlosigkeit hin, gerade indem sie von ihrem Ursprung und von ihrem Ende erzählen'.

[39] See Leach (1974). Hollander's interest in *ekphrasis* is evidenced not only in the poem under scrutiny, but also in his scholarly writing, see most notably Hollander (1988), a seminal article that coins the term 'notional ekphrasis'.

[40] Special distance is created towards Minerva, who is exclusively referred to not by her name (as are the other ancient gods mentioned in the poem), but as 'wisdom' or 'the Goddess'.

[41] Dane (1991) provides useful discussion of the term 'dramatic irony' and its history in criticism.

[42] Readers will do well to pay close attention to these and other 'echoes' in Hollander's text: not only are they omnipresent in this poem; they have also been central to his scholarly work, see his monograph *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (1981).

[43] It cannot be the aim of the present brief analysis to contribute anything substantial to the theoretical discussion about the narrative mode of *ekphrasis*. For the theoretical problem of the modes of narration vs. description see Genette (1982: 127–44) and Don Fowler's 1991 essay. Valuable insights into the rhetorical function and poetics of *ekphrasis* in ancient texts are also gained from Perutelli (1978), Harrison (2001), and the special issue of *Ramus*, Elsner (2002). *Ekphrasis* both ancient and modern is the concern of Bartsch/Elsner (2007). For a treatment of the ekphrastic mode in modern English poetry see, most recently, Kennedy (2012).

[44] Cf. Salzman-Mitchell (2005: 134) on Arachne's attempt to do this in Ovid's version. Fredrick (2002) discusses notions of the gaze in antiquity and provides brief summaries of relevant theoretical positions.

[45] Already anticipated in the last line of the first stanza of the poem: 'But rather to show *her* –' [my emphasis].

[46] See above, n. 44. Literary criticism in this area has been enriched by insights from the field of film studies. Influential treatments that consider the 'male gaze' and trace a link between gender and violence include Berger (1972) and Kaplan (1983).

[47] The line is the finishing line of Rilke's 'Archaïscher Torso Apollos', *Neue Gedichte. Anderer Teil*, 1908: 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern'.

[48] Perhaps best evidenced in her verse translation of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (2007).

[49] Hughes (1997). For Hughes's ubiquitous engagement with the Classics see Rees (2009).

[50] Also noted by Taraskiewicz (2010/11), n.p.: see her brief analysis of the poem in the section 'Loom-songs'.

[51] *Scires a Pallade doctam.* / *Quod tamen ipsa negat tantaque offensa magistra* / *'certet' ait 'mecum; nihil est quod uicta recusem* (*Metamorphoses* 6.23–5), 'You would think she had been taught by Pallas. But she herself denied that, and, taking offence that there should be such a great mistress, said, "Let her compete with me; there is nothing I would, if defeated, refuse"'.

[52] Might *haud mora* (6.53) also be a meta-comment of the epic narrator? Even though the narrative seems to demand swiftness, the narrator takes his time for the *ekphrasis* of the loom – but, as the narrator claims, it will not be an ekphrasis involving typical epic *mora*.

[53] *Non tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligauit* / *guttura* (*Metamorphoses* 6.134–5), 'She, the unfortunate, could not bear it and courageously slipped a noose around her neck'.

[54] Of course, the process of Arachne's transformation is a case in point: *defluxere comae, cum quis et naris et aures* / *fitque caput minimum, toto quoque corpore parua est;* / *in latere exiles digiti pro cruribus haerent,* / *cetera uenter habet, de quo tamen illa remittit* / *stamen et antiquas exercet aranea telas* (*Metamorphoses* 6.141–5), 'Her hair dropped off, with it both nose and ears, and her head becomes extremely small, indeed her whole body is small; to her sides slender fingers are stuck instead of legs, the rest is belly, from which she yet gives out a thread and, as a spider, practises her weaving as of old'.

[55] *Qualis ab imbre solet percussis solibus arcus* / *inficere ingenti longum curuamine caelum* / *in quo diuersi niteant cum mille colores,* / *transitus ipse tamen spectantia lumina fallit* (*Metamorphoses* 6.63–6), 'As, after the sun rays have been struck by rain, the arch usually paints the sky far and wide in a huge bow, in which a thousand different colours shine, and yet each gradation deceives the gazing eyes'.