

Artistic Analysis of *The Fable of Arachne*



Velázquez, Diego. *The Fable of Arachne*. 1644, https://www.wga.hu/html_m/v/velazque/09/0901vela.html.

Las Hilanderas, also known as “The Spinners,” or *The Fable of Arachne*, is a painting by Diego Velázquez, painted on canvas in 1644. *The Fable of Arachne* is Velázquez’s representation of Ovid’s *Arachne and Minerva*. It represents two very important parts of Ovid’s *Arachne and Minerva*.

First, in the foreground, two women are weaving, while three others look on. One weaver is an old woman, while the other is young. The old woman depicted is Minerva. In *Arachne and Minerva*, Ovid writes that Minerva disguises herself as an old woman, and tells Arachne to revoke her challenge to Minerva. Because the “old woman” Minerva gives advice to Arachne in the story, she is painted as if she was talking, or giving advice, to the woman on the far left. The young woman depicted is Arachne. In *Arachne and Minerva*, Arachne ignores the old woman’s

advice, and stands by her challenge, eager to weave and prove Minerva wrong. Thus, Arachne is shown with her head turned away, engrossed in her weaving, like written in the story.

The second part of the story is represented in the background. The events in the background happen after the events in the foreground. We can infer this for two reasons: first, Minerva is shown in her younger form, wearing her helmet. This is accurate to the story, as Minerva, upon hearing Arachne's decision to stick by the challenge, transforms out of her disguise and accepts Arachne's challenge. Therefore, we know that the background events happen after the foreground events. Second, there are two tapestries hanging on the walls, showing that the weaving is already finished. The one which can be seen the best is crucial to the plot line of *Arachne and Minerva*. While Minerva wove scenes of mortals being punished for challenging gods, Arachne wove scenes of gods abusing mortals. Therefore Velázquez chose to paint Titian's 1560 painting, *The Rape of Europa*, as Arachne's tapestry. Europa, a mortal, was abducted and raped by Zeus, and thus was shown as an example of gods abusing mortals.



Titian. "The Rape of Europa." *Titian.org*, Titian.org, 1560, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, www.titian.org/rape-of-europa.jsp

Minerva is visibly upset at Arachne's tapestry, as she is seen with her hand raised at Arachne (center woman in the background). This scene is before the actual metamorphosis, as

in the story, Minerva starts to beat Arachne, who tries to hang herself to avoid more beating. Minerva keeps her alive, but turns her into a spider so that she would keep weaving the rest of her life.

The Fable of Arachne is very accurate to *Arachne and Minerva*, as both scenes represented by Velázquez are factual. However, while the core/climax of the story is the metamorphosis itself, Velázquez, by putting the old woman and young woman in the foreground, introduces a different core and moral: that one should respect age and experience, as those factors ensure wisdom to the beholder. His main point is to respect one's elders, and to accept advice from them and listen to it, for if Arachne did just that, she would be human, and not a spider.