

# Vulcan and arachne: partners in crime?



Ovid made a strange decision when he wrote his story about Arachne in Book VI, “Of Praise and Punishment.” After all, her story literally describes her spinning and weaving her art, so one would assume that Ovid would place his story about her in Book IV, “Spinning Yarns and Weaving Tales.” Yet simultaneously, it comes as no surprise that Ovid likes to complicate things – he crafts his stories intricately and expertly. Perhaps Ovid separated this particular narrative from the “Spinning Yarns and Weaving Tales” section of the *Metamorphoses* in order for readers to exercise their brains a bit. Ovid’s placement decisions force the reader to draw parallels from the Book IV stories to the one about Arachne in Book VI. Vulcan’s story about Mars and Venus in Book IV most directly mirrors Arachne’s in terms of language. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Vulcan and Arachne parallel each other in their specific episodes.

Through very similar language, Ovid emphasises just how talented both Vulcan and Arachne are in their respective artistic disciplines. For instance, Ovid describes the net that Vulcan weaves for Mars and Venus as, “a net of bronze links/ so finely woven that it fooled the eye” (*Metamorphoses* IV. 242-3). Upon first glance it seems as though Ovid simply wants to praise Vulcan’s fine craftsmanship when he describes the net as fooling “the eye.” However, upon a closer reading of Arachne’s story in Book VI, it becomes clear that Ovid wants the reader to connect the two stories in his or her mind.

Ovid’s intentions become exceptionally clear when comparing the description of Vulcan’s art to that of Arachne’s in Book VI. For example, when describing the bull in Arachne’s tapestry, Ovid writes that it was, “done so naturally you would have thought/ the bull and the waves he breasted were

both real” (Metamorphoses VI. 147-8). Arachne’s tapestry “fooled the eye” in the same way that Vulcan’s net does. Additionally, Ovid makes sure to compliment both works using the same type of emphasis before writing that they “fooled the eye” or made whoever looked upon the art believe that it looked “real.” Ovid writes that Arachne’s tapestry was “done so naturally,” and that Vulcan’s work was “so finely woven.” Ovid uses the word “so” very infrequently in the Metamorphoses to avoid extraneousness, but here he writes “so” twice in a row to exemplify the quality of the works. Additionally, Ovid uses two adverbs in his individual praises for Arachne and Vulcan. These adverbs, “naturally” and “finely,” further link the two images. Ovid could have described these works of art in so many different ways, yet he structures his compliments for them almost identically in order to link Arachne and Vulcan to one another.

Ovid even goes so far as to compare both Arachne and Vulcan to the same animal, connecting them even further. In reference to Vulcan’s net, Ovid writes that, “no thread of mortal weaving was as slender/ as this one was: finer than a spider’s” (Metamorphoses IV. 244-5). Ovid makes such an obvious reference to Arachne in this quotation that it would be difficult not to associate these two characters after reading that sentence. After Arachne challenges the goddess, for the rest of her life, she, “as a spider, carries on/ the art of weaving as she used to do” as a sort of punishment for her arrogance (Metamorphoses VI. 207-8). Upon a closer reading, one might wonder why Ovid used a spider instead of a more attractive animal in reference to both of these characters.

Perhaps Ovid chose the spider as the animal responsible for linking Vulcan and Arachne's stories because both of their narratives involve this strange balance between fear and the motif of being overlooked. For instance, Vulcan and Arachne are both metaphorically small characters in the *Metamorphoses*. Like a spider, people tend to step on them a lot. Vulcan is crippled, so his beautiful wife Venus thinks that she can cheat on him whenever she pleases. Arachne grew up in rough circumstances, so she feels angry at the gods for smiting her (*Metamorphoses* VI. 10-20). Yet although Vulcan and Arachne both had a rough time in life when compared to many other characters in the *Metamorphoses*, people fear them, too. They both have supreme mastery and talent in their respective arts. Arachne has the courage to challenge the gods, and even though Vulcan is deformed, he still has enough pride to stand up for himself when his wife, Venus, cheats on him so openly. Like spiders catching prey in their webs, both of these two characters use their talents to attempt to catch their prey in different webs of sorts. Perhaps the ironic fear that these two underdog characters bring about explains why Ovid chose the spider image to link them together.

Ovid's purpose in using such similar language for both Arachne and Vulcan was to connect the characters and force the reader to compare them with each other. From their nature as underdogs to their talents as artists, Arachne and Vulcan are very similar people. Eventually, Arachne gets punished because she is not a goddess, and Vulcan claims victory in his task due to his status as a god, keeping in theme with Ovid's larger narrative in the *Metamorphoses*. However, if not for the very specific verbal techniques

that Ovid uses in his stories about both of these characters, one would be much less likely to notice just how similar they really are.