

THE CHALLENGE

Listen while I tell the story
Of Arakhnè, weaver maiden.
Pride and folly were her downfall.
Proud was she and foolish also,
Proud at all her wondrous web-craft,
Proudly weaving cloth with cunning;
But her pride became her folly –
Foolish were the boasts she uttered,
Foolish was the challenge given,
Foolish were the themes she wove then.
Pride and folly changed the maiden,
Changed the maiden's youthful beauty,
Changed it to a form most alien.

Let me start at the beginning:
Daughter was she of one Idmon,
Idmon, famous dyer of woollens,
Which he dyed in Tyrian purple;
Famous was he throughout Lydia,
And in neighb'ring lands of Asia –
Famous for his Tyrian purple,
Famous for his woollen-dying.
So Arakhnè loved the wool-cloths,
Loved the woollens dyed in purple;
So she learnt the art of weaving;
Spun the wool and wove the wool-cloth,
Wove the cloth with skill and cunning.

In Hypaipa was her workshop,
Where she wove her wondrous wool-cloths,
Wove them with her skilful cunning;
Wove upon them scenes of beauty,
Scenes from ancient heroes' stories;
In Hypaipa all did praise her,
Praised the maiden's wondrous wool-cloths,
Praised the maiden's skill and cunning,
Praised the art with which the pictures
On the cloths were executed:
All the scenes so bright and vivid –
All so bright as almost living
Were the figures that were woven,
Woven by the skilful maiden.

But the praise made her conceited,
Turned the foolish maiden's reason,
Turned her to a foolish madness.
For she boasted none was better

Than was she at skilful weaving.
“None is better,” said the maiden,
“None at all ’mongst mortal mankind,
“None at all ’mongst gods supernal,
“Nor among the gods infernal;
“None, not one, can weave more finely!”

“Not Athenè?” people asked her.
“Not the mighty weaver goddess?”

“Not Athenè,” was her answer;
“Not Athenè, Zeus’s daughter,
“Not for all her godly cunning
“Could she weave with art so skilful.
“Could she make her scenes so vivid,
“Make the figures seem all breathing,
Living there upon the wool-cloth.”

So she boasted in her folly,
And her hubris reached Olympus,
Reached the ears of wise Athenè.
Angry was the weaver goddess,
Angry at the maiden’s hubris;
Yet her heart was stirred with pity,
Pity for the foolish maiden,
Pity for her youthful madness.

So Athenè, Zeus’s daughter,
Came to earth in human figure,
In an agèd woman’s figure.
There she met the foolish maiden,
Met Arakhnè in her workshop,
Heard the foolish maiden’s boasting,
Warned her ’gainst her godless hubris,
Warned her of Athenè’s anger.

But Arakhnè scorned the woman,
Said her age had turned her simple,
Said her brain was surely addled.

“For I speak not out of hubris,”
Said the proud, conceited maiden,
“For Athenè knows for certain
“That my weaving is far better,
“That my figures are more vivid.
“Yes, Athenè fears a challenge,
“For she knows she’ll be defeated.”

So the foolish maiden boasted,
Little thinking that the woman
Was indeed the weaver goddess.
Then the goddess changed appearance,
Changed from crone into Athenè

Manifest in all her glory.
“So you challenge me at weaving,”
Said Athenè to the maiden.
“Here I see two looms are ready;
“In your shop is wool aplenty,
“Wool abundant, brightly colored –
“All that’s needful for the challenge.
“Now set to! Take up the challenge!”

Maid and goddess started weaving;
To and fro the shuttles traveled,
Shooting woof between the warp threads.
Maid and goddess worked with cunning,
Worked with art and craft most skilful,
Making figures bright and vivid,
Figures one would think were living.

Of her vict’ry wove the goddess,
When her gift had pleased the people,
When her olive they had chosen,
When Poseidon was rejected;
Athens then they named their city,
Hailed the goddess as their patron,
Honored her above all others.

But Arakhnè mocked th’Olympians,
Mocked the gods upon her web-cloth;
For she showed their shameful unions,
Infidelities committed
By the gods in bestial guises,
Showed them all in shameful detail,
Living there upon her web-cloth.
One and twenty scenes of lusting
Wove the maid in vivid detail,
One and twenty shameful failings
Of the gods revealed so clearly.

Then at last, the contest over,
Came Athenè to examine
All Arakhnè had been weaving;
Found her web-cloth perfect, flawless;
Knew the maid had stated truly
That no mortal could weave better,
That no goddess could weave better,
No, not e’en the weaver goddess.
As Athenè gazed in wonder,
Gazed in awe and admiration,
So the maid with pride was swollen
For she knew she’d won the challenge,
Knew Athenè knew it also.

But Athenè's mood was changing
As she gazed upon the figures
Woven on Arakhnè's web-cloth,
Woven there in shameful detail.
For she saw unchaste liaisons
Of the very gods immortal,
All their lustful copulations
Pictured there upon the web-cloth.
Shock o'ercame the virgin goddess,
Shocked was she that mortal maiden
Mocked immortal gods so lewdly,
Shocked was she at all the detail
Of their furtive copulations.
Chaste Athenè was disgusted;
Speechless, dazed, she stood astonished.

Then beheld she her own father,
Zeus portrayed in bestial guises –
Saw the swan seduce Queen Leda,
Saw the bull seduce Europè,
Saw the priestess Io transformed;
Virgin heifer Zeus had made her
To deceive the watchful Hera,
Hera, wife so often cheated.
So he had his way with Io,
Sating thus his lustful longing.

Shamed and angered was Athenè
Wrath o'ercame the virgin goddess,
Anger at Arakhnè's hubris,
Anger at her father's shaming
Shown in bright and vivid detail.
So she tore the cloth asunder,
Smashed Arakhnè's loom to pieces,
Struck Arakhnè with her shuttle,
Struck her in her wrath and fury.

Then Arakhnè knew her folly,
Knew her scenes were lewd and shameful,
Knew she'd mocked the gods through hubris,
Knew that though she'd won her challenge,
All was lost, her vict'ry bootless.
Shame o'ercame the hapless maiden,
Shame for all her foolish boasting,
Shame for weaving scenes of lewdness,
Shame for all her wanton hubris.
Shame drove her to greater madness;
Off she ran, contrite, remorseful,
Off she ran to hang her body

From a beam within her workshop
Where she'd done her cursèd weaving.
How she wished her shame be wiped out!
How she wished for death to take her,
Quench her hapless life for ever!

So Arakhnè in her madness,
In her dreadful, blinding fury,
Took a skein and tied it tightly
Round her neck before she clambered
Blindly, madly to a crossbeam;
There she wound the skein about it,
Fixed it fast with studied firmness;
Then she leapt down from the crossbeam,
Danced the death dance as she dangled
In the air 'twixt beam and shop floor.

Then Athenè's heart felt pity,
Pity for the foolish maiden,
Pity that a skill so wond'rous
Should have filled the maid with hubris,
Sorrow that such skill should vanish
With the hapless maiden's dying.
So she took the juice of wolfsbane,
Sprinkled it upon the maiden.
Lo, a change occurred most wond'rous:
Woollen skein to silk transmuting,
Spreading out into a webbing
Intricate and interlacing.
Transformed also was Arakhnè –
Head and chest were fused together.
Six more arms the maid was given;
All her arms grew long and jointed
Into eight long legs transmuted.
But her human legs had vanished
As her lower part was swelling;
In her bloated, hinder body,
Spinnerets the goddess gave her
That her skill might never vanish.

So Arakhnè mute and humbled,
Saved from death and cured of madness,
Lived again to weave with cunning,
Weaving webs with art most skilful,
Weaving webs of complex pattern.
Not with wool Arakhnè wove now,
But with silk both strong and subtil.
Thus Arakhnè kept her web-craft,
Kept her art and skilful cunning,

Weaving silken webs of beauty,
Webs of complex interlacings,
Webs to marvel at for ever –
Marvels spun by skilful spinner,
Marvels wrought by challenge winner.

Copyright © Ray Brown, March 2008