

2021

## The Weaver's Tale: A Mythical Retelling of Arachne and Minerva

Julianne Long

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/peregrinereview>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Permanent URL:

### Recommended Citation

Long, Julianne (2021) "The Weaver's Tale: A Mythical Retelling of Arachne and Minerva," *The Peregrine Review*: Vol. 34, Article 42.

Available at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/peregrinereview/vol34/iss1/42>

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

## The Weaver's Tale: A Mythical Retelling of Arachne and Minerva

Julianne Long

There was no honor in Hypaepa.

A poor town, with poorer people. My father, with no wife to feed the mouths of my brothers, married me off as soon as I was able. Fortunately for myself, my husband was only a handful of years older than I; I know of many girls my age nursing children born from the seed of a man older than their fathers. Unfortunately for all of us, my husband was poorer than even my father. And with a ring and a vow, so was I. Famine, plague, storm, every ailment the gods could hurl upon us—they came without mercy. We prayed, we sacrificed, we confessed every offense we could think of. Even when death claimed my husband—and my future—there came no deliverance from the gods.

So I created my own.

It began with the needle. Simple jobs, mending shirts and socks for the neighbors when they had enough pity and extra coin. Patching became tailoring, then stitching and spinning yarn and thread until my palms calloused and fingers bled. But the need in our little town grew as seams ripped and infected clothing had to be burnt, and burial cloths had to be woven. In the end, it was that extra coin from my own needle and thread that kept food on the table and the roof over my bed. I kept myself alive.

When the plagues and famines departed, the need for spare shirts and mends disappeared as though overnight. I had sold everything I could spare, every piece of furniture, until my lone cottage was devoid of table and chair and stove until I was left only with a bed and a loom that had gone untouched for too many years—years that had carved their marks into every crease in my hands. And I wove.

It felt like breathing again for the first time, as though I'd emerged from the surface of a stream I hadn't known I'd been trapped under. The colors intertwined in a perfect web of harmony while an image took shape, and for those hours that turned into days, the world of my own creation was more real than the shaft in my hands.

When word spread of my living tapestries, more than just the people of Hypaepa were interested. I sold enough to pay my debts, and more when merchants whose shoes were worth more than my own house came to barter. The poorer followed them—though they had nothing with to buy—but they begged me to teach them. “If all the world could know my secrets,” I learned to say, “I would surely be destitute.”

And then there were those that offered no bargain or plea but came to Hypaepa only to observe. My hands worked tirelessly those days, to give them the sight of something worth remembering. They thanked me most times, even showering my speed and detail in praise. “You must have had an excellent teacher,” I heard over and over again.

“My mother,” I would repeat, over and over again.

And they would smile in awe. “One would think your mother was the Goddess herself.” That was the one that begged me to crack my loom in half. And I would smile politely, until one day, my voice snapped. “What goddess.”

The pitiful man before me now physically shrank back. “I only meant,” he was faltering, “your skill has no match below, a true gift from—“

“Gift?” I spat. “The gods give no gifts, least of all the one you presume to be my teacher. What has she given me that I have not made with my own toil?” The innocent man was struck silent, but I was not. “If she deserves my worship, let her earn it—let all of them earn it. But I will not let my hands be tainted with the stain of her gift.”

No sooner had the man departed than a warning came in the form of a stranger, an old crone of a woman with weakened fingers. “You mustn’t speak such things.” Her voice was as hushed as the wind. “The gods are jealous. No hand will come to stop a curse by their lips.”

“A curse indeed,” I scoffed, busying myself with the last rows of the tapestry—a shoreline today, the ocean glistening crystal under coal-dark clouds. “I’ve survived enough curses for a lifetime, with no gods to thank for it. If they are so jealous, perhaps they are the ones who should beg for my praise.”

The silence stretched long, and for a moment I thought the old woman had left me in peace. “You truly have a gift,” she told me, “unmatched, only by the Goddess of that loom.” I slammed the shaft, for the first time meeting her eyes. Too sharp, too gray, a reflection of the storm strung across my own wooden frame. “I’d like to see her try.”

The woman’s eyes flared. All at once, her stooped spine straightened. Her skin tightened and glowed. The ratted cloak around her shoulders withered away to reveal shimmering pleats that dusted the tips of the grass. Her hands were white and deft, without trace of vein. “Let’s begin,” was all the Goddess said.

...

“Is there a worthy judge among you?”

The Goddess's words echoed impossibly across the mountainside. The crowd that had gathered over the last hours, once bustling with life and intrigue, now stood as stone. She watched their heads bow in pathetic reverence, and I grimaced with my fists clenched against the blisters now gracing my hands.

Finally, she herself stepped back to survey both works. Her eyes could have cut through each thread on my loom, searching for any sign of imperfection. There wouldn't be. I had poured every ounce of my skill into that piece on my loom—every trick up my sleeve, every spiteful curse I wished to lay upon the skies, every pain and plague and death that the gods ignored. That she ignored. I thought of my mother, who worked the same shaft until the plagues took her too. The second tapestry was a mockery of my earlier work: the Weaver's own conquering of the sea and its lord. Her depiction carried the storm in her open palm.

The Goddess's eyes cut through mine in a flash of steel. "Flawless." The word was spat through that clenched, angular jaw. And she waited.

I made her wait a little longer. "Matched," I said.

Lightning flashed in her eyes. In a breath of a moment, I saw her shimmering dress harden into steel, plates of armor strapping upon her breast, her arms, the crown of her head. And she was the goddess of the loom no more.

My skull was slammed against the frame. I heard the wood splinter as I sprawled in the dirt. Another snap, and the shaft was ripped to a jagged piece in the goddess' armored hands. It slashed open the front of the tapestry, then beat against the base of the loom itself, over and over again until my mother's memory lay shattered in splinters in the dirt—

And then the shaft crashed onto my hands. I heard them crack before I felt the pain, lancing up each finger and through my arms. My stomach churned as I saw their jagged angles. Broken. Mangled as the loom before me now.

"Say it again," the Goddess snarled.

I couldn't.

...

The spectating crowd had gone long before I returned home. The townspeople that had once ogled at my loom now avoided my gaze. Even the physician was nowhere to be found, but it would have been futile. My hands were beyond hope. Even if Apollo himself were to heal me, my weaving would only be a warning: No one defies the Goddess. My fingers screamed in pain

to be wrapped around the final thread they would hold. I forced them to bend around the rope of silk, one last time. One last knot. One last loop.

The Goddess found me hanging there. The people say it was pity that guided her to lift me from my home gallows. Pity on the angled joints that grew long and twisted, feather-light. Pity that lifted my soul inches from rest and wrangled it into the body of a beast. Perhaps they were right. But perhaps I will remain only a reflection of Her likeness: I have never been more a spider than she.