

Arachne According to Ovid and Dante: Challenging False Idols

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In the *Metamorphoses* and *Purgatorio*, Ovid and Dante challenge unquestioned leaders of their respective societies and demonstrate an awareness of the dangers presented by the creation of perfect and human art. They criticize political and religious authorities of their time through the character of Arachne, whose prideful contest with Minerva ended in her transformation and most notably, the destruction of her beautiful tapestry. According to Volk, “the tapestry of Arachne, as we have seen, functions as a kind of miniature version of the [*Metamorphoses*] as a whole” (23). Viewed in this light, Ovid’s telling of Arachne’s story has the distinct purpose of alluding to his struggle with the leadership of Augustus, who ultimately exiled him from Rome in 8 C.E. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante encounters Arachne on the terrace of pride in Purgatory. This scene, most commonly known through Gustave Doré’s illustrations of *Purgatorio*, emphasizes how her art ultimately became “*stracci*, tattered remnants of the ill-conceived project on which she embarked” (Barolini 132). Like Ovid before him, Dante uses Arachne as a reference to his power struggle with the Black Guelphs who had exiled him from Florence in 1302. Dante refers to Ovid implicitly and explicitly throughout the *Divine Comedy*, and follows in his foot-steps as he casts an empathetic light on the flawed character of Arachne, whose prideful challenge to Minerva appears associated to his own struggles with the Church and State. Examining Dante’s representation of Arachne and relationship to Ovid uncovers his challenge to religious authority and defense of the fallibility of all artists’ rightful pride.

According to Ovid's telling of the myth, Arachne and Minerva's competition can be seen as a challenge to an unjust system upheld by a jealous tyrant. While Minerva weaves scenes of prideful mortals falling due to their own hubris, Arachne "weaves, at first the story of Europa, as the bull deceived her. So perfect was her art, it seemed a real bull in real waves" (Ovid line 103). Exposing the faults of Jupiter and others as she wove more beautifully than Minerva, Arachne chips away at the idea of impeccable gods and calls into question their worship. Refusing to be deceived by this religious system as Europa had been by Jupiter, she outperforms her divine superior and sets the dangerous precedent that perfection comes not from heaven, but from mankind. According to William S. Anderson, it is "likely that Ovid changed the story so that Arachne actually wins the contest against Minerva. The goddess punishes her only because she cannot handle losing to the girl's disrespectful tapestry" (34). If Ovid indeed made the decision to rewrite Arachne as the victor of the competition, he validates Arachne's claims and cements her as an underdog rather than an unsuccessful braggart.

Evidence of Ovid's changes can be found in intermittent comments he adds towards the end of the tale. When Minerva realizes she has lost the competition and cannot find any imperfection in Arachne's work, he states that "even envy cannot censor perfect art" (Ovid line 129). This rare break in the narrative conveys an important message about censorship and demonstrates a strong belief in the value of his own art. Recalling not only the *Metamorphoses* but also his earlier and more controversial poems such as the *Heroides*, *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid condemns attempts to silence his work. Augustus, Rome's first emperor, routinely tried to censor Ovid and his 'morally egregious' poems. Ovid scoffs at Augustus by subtly alluding to him through Minerva, an all-powerful goddess who shows gratuitous jealousy and rage towards Arachne's exquisite tapestry, which showcases scenes from other stories within

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this way, Ovid manages to indirectly praise his own poetry as a masterpiece made by human hands and claims that not even the heavens could destroy it.

Minerva indeed functions as a representation of Augustus, seen that both espouse ideal Roman values and demand their unquestioned worship. As Minerva professes before contending with Arachne, "no creature of the earth should ever slight the majesty that dwells in me" (Ovid line 3). Immediately differentiating herself from mere mortals such as Arachne, she communicates that her divine status makes her infallible and justifies her superiority. Similarly to how Arachne later outperforms Minerva, Ovid views his works as a protest against Augustus and his public self-idolatry.¹ Augustus fostered the cult of himself by encouraging poetry which connected him to Rome's mythological past, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*. This was deemed necessary in order to legitimize his rule as a direct descendant of Aeneas. Unlike Virgil, Ovid does not praise Augustus's connection to divinity and origins of Rome. Instead, he questions it by comparing the distaste he showed for his poems to Minerva's anger towards the beauty of Arachne's tapestry. According to P.J. Davis, Ovid "challenges the Augustan regime at the level of ideology and resists the Augustan conception of what it was to be Roman" (Davis vii). In fact, he offers a unique and imperfect view of Roman culture in his poems which starkly contrasts the neat set of traditions espoused by Augustus. Seen in this light, Arachne's rejection of Minerva's divine superiority can be interpreted as Ovid's 'prideful' refusal to accept Augustus's cultural and political leadership of Rome.

Arachne's challenge to Minerva's authority would be alluded to nearly 1300 years later in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Encountering Arachne as half-spider and half-woman on Purgatory's

¹ Born Gaius Octavius, Augustus adopted the honorific to enhance his role as both a political and religious leader. He also referred to himself as the son of a god (*divi filius*).

terrace of pride,² Dante kneels down next to her and states “O folle Aragne, si vedea io te gia mezza ragna, Trista in su li stracci de l’opera che mal per te si fe” (“Oh mad Arachne, I saw you already as half a spider, sorrowful for the tatters of your art which did you so much harm”; *Purgatorio* XII, 43-45). Emphasizing the image of her work being left in tatters, Dante recalls Minerva’s rageful destruction of Arachne’s tapestry, or rather her attempts to censor it. His use of the word ‘stracci’ goes along with this idea of censorship, as it invokes the image of something once beautiful now in pieces. The use of the phrase ‘mal per te si fe’ suggests that Arachne was a victim of powerful outside forces which turned her ‘opera’ against her. He also gives Arachne additional respect despite her position in Purgatory by describing her as only half a spider (‘mezza ragna’) suspended in metamorphosis, granting her some humanity in contrast with to monster she has been turned into. The image of her as half human and half monster matches the tone Dante sets for *Purgatorio*, which serves as a middle ground between infernal evil and heavenly good.

Dante displays a conflicted relationship to Ovid’s legacy in the *Divine Comedy* as he alludes to his works and mimics his writing style while also dismissing him in *Inferno*. As Julie Van Peteghem writes, “we know Dante had direct knowledge of Ovid’s writings: in his treatises and letters he often quotes Ovid and several Italian phrases from the *Commedia* come close to being literal translations of Ovid’s Latin” (40). Unlike many other classical authors included in the text, Dante seldom cites Ovid when paraphrasing stories from the *Metamorphoses* such as that of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus. Perhaps overt nods to Ovid would have lessened the originality of the *Divine Comedy*, and it seems that Dante wanted to avoid comparisons to the

² Dante’s Purgatory is shaped like a mountain, with layered terraces leading upwards. The Terrace of Pride is the first following two stages of Ante-Purgatory.

legendary poet. He accomplishes this quite explicitly by referring to Ovid in Canto 25 of *Inferno* when looking upon a group of sinners whose bodies were being transformed into beasts (or ‘stolen’ from them) as a punishment for theft. He compares the transformation he is witnessing to those from the *Metamorphoses* and claims that these are far more striking. As Dante writes, “Let Ovid now be silent, where he tells of Cadmus, Arethusa; if his verse has made of one a serpent, one a fountain, I do not envy him; he never did transmute two natures, face to face, so that both forms were ready to exchange their matter” (*Inferno* XXV, 97-102). He underlines what Ovid did not accomplish, thus establishing a sense of superiority over him. Ovid’s voice and legacy are thanked but silenced very directly. Nevertheless, he relies heavily on ‘Ovidian’ content and style, using it in *Purgatorio* to analyze the figure of Arachne.

Like Ovid, Dante validates his opposition to authoritative figures while acknowledging pride as human artists creating ‘divine’ beauty through art or literature. Dante empathizes and relates to Arachne’s faults as “he himself bends down among the prideful, thereby experiencing some of their condition” (Hollander xix). As an artist in her own right, Dante seems to redeem Arachne and her representation of truth through beautiful tapestry. The art she creates in fact resembles Dante’s ‘truthful’ representation of the world, which incorporates good, evil and a staunch moral code which applies to everyone equally. He has the clout to make such bold suggestions because the *Divine Comedy* incorporates all possible knowledge (classical and medieval), just as Arachne’s tapestry displayed all the knowledge, beauty and faults of her world which included the mistakes of the gods.

Dante and Ovid’s pride in their creations and ‘objective’ beliefs about the world lead both to challenge their ideological rivals as it led Arachne to face Minerva. In Ovid’s case it had been Augustus, and for Dante it was the Black Guelphs who had taken political control over the city

of Florence. Similarly to Ovid, Dante alludes to Arachne's strife with Minerva in order to represent his own clash with the religious authority of Pope Boniface VII,³ who was supported by the Black Guelphs and rejected by Dante and the white Guelphs. Writing the *Divine Comedy* after his exile from Florence, Dante shows resentment towards the illegitimate leaders of his home city in the same way that Ovid and Arachne demonstrated disrespect towards their fraudulent superiors.

An additional layer of righteousness is added to Arachne's struggle with Minerva in Dante's representation, as she challenges a pagan goddess and refuses to accept her superiority. It could be said that Dante praises the contempt Arachne shows for Minerva not only because it represents his strife with the authority of the Black Guelphs, but also because it cements paganism as an inferior religion. This contention indirectly supports Dante's idea of Catholic Christianity as the indisputable true religion. He would emphasize this further by placing legendary pagan figures of the past in the castle of Limbo, situated in the first circle of Hell. Despite their virtuous lives and having been born before Christ, they cannot enter Heaven because they were never baptized. Arachne similarly cannot belong in heaven. Furthermore, while her pride pulls her down to Purgatory, it stops short of dragging her to hell because she refused to accept false idols.

The ambivalence Dante shows about Arachne and arguably, himself, comes across in Gustave Doré's "Arachne," an engraved illustration for *Purgatorio, Canto XIII* (Figure 1). In it, Dante kneels next to Arachne, positioning himself closer to her while Virgil stands above them both. Virgil had remained in the good graces of Augustus and had not demonstrated 'excessive

³ Dante reserves a spot for then living Pope Boniface VII in the 8th circle of *Inferno*, where he would be punished for eternity because of his 'deceitful actions'.

pride' for his work in the way Ovid had, perhaps rendering him 'superior' in this sense to both Dante and Arachne. The disfigured and mangled bodies in the background contrast the light from above that seems to bless Arachne. Far from Doré's harsh representations of *Inferno* in which demons and hideous winged creatures relentlessly torture sinners, he depicts Arachne as relatively gracious despite her monstrous transformation. Dante appears to contemplate her as she lays in a most vulnerable state with her many legs splayed out before two men. Unlike Virgil, he seems to understand her weaknesses and sinful pride because he recognizes it as an essential characteristic of artists. The reconciliation he draws between Arachne's brave rebellion against authority and excessive hubris fits nicely into the unique creation of "Purgatory,"⁴ where it is hard to distinguish between good and evil. The difficulty in separating good from evil additionally parallels Dante's perspective on the Church. Although he was a staunch Catholic, his mistrust in its leadership under Pope Boniface VIII deeply affected how he viewed its institutions.

Arachne's existence between heaven and hell recalls the original punishment given to her by Minerva after her loss of the competition. Deciding not to let her die, she states that "Although I grant you life, most wicked one, your fate shall be to dangle on a cord" (Ovid line 136). The cord she dangles on can be interpreted as her rightful mistrust of Minerva's illegitimate power, while the emptiness beneath her could be thought of as the pitfalls of pride. The delicate strand separating these two indicates her impossible odds in contending against a goddess. Ovid and Dante seem to dangle on this same cord as they criticize religious authorities, hoping they will not fall and have their respective 'Arachnean' tapestries ripped to shreds. By

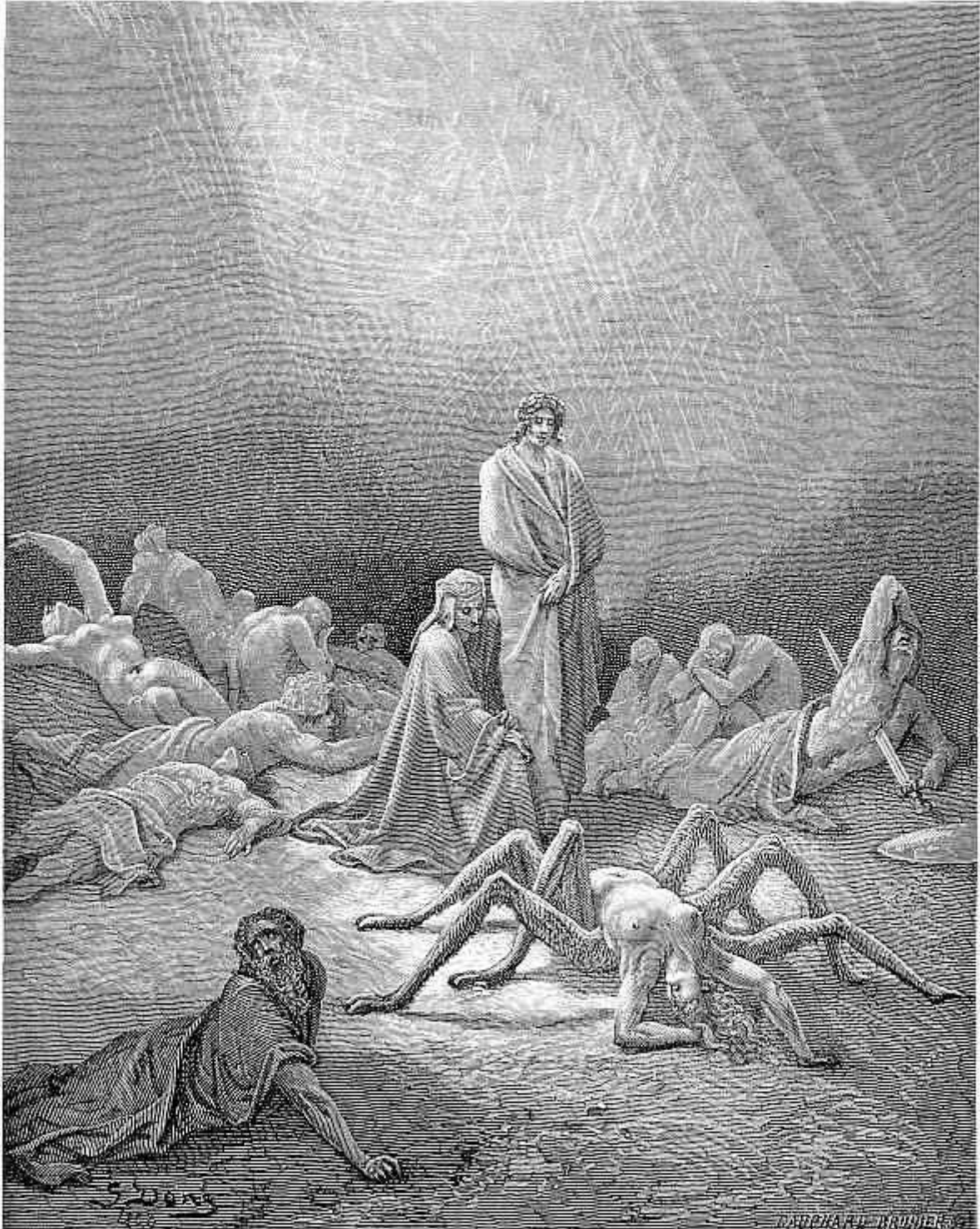
⁴ After the publication of "La Commedia" in 1321, the idea of a middle-ground between heaven and hell became an established part of Roman-Catholic doctrine that was modeled after Dante's work.

doing so, they cement the idea of perfect art deriving from human thought rather than divine intervention or inspiration.⁵ Ovid and Dante understand this contention to be prideful and perhaps dangerous, but they cannot help but profess it as they defend their work from censorship.

Ovid and Dante's parallels do not end at their shared criticism of religious leaders and institutions through Arachne's tale, as much of the *Divine Comedy's* narratives can in fact be considered "Ovidian in origin" (Barolini 2). Virgil, in stark contrast with Ovid, did not challenge Augustus but rather enabled his rise to divine figure by establishing his descent from Aeneas. One could debate the possibilities of a hypothetical journey through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* with Ovid instead of Virgil. Perhaps he chose Virgil to avoid controversy and align himself with universally respected poets, as many of Ovid's erotic poetry would have been known and considered extremely distasteful for readers of Dante in Medieval Italy. It may also stem from a desire not to be compared to the legendary poet, whose inspiration could potentially be understood as lessening the stylistic originality of *The Divine Comedy*. Nevertheless, Dante's many indirect references to him celebrate his works and elevate the characters in his poems. Characters such as Arachne are uplifted as they challenge their suppressors despite the consequences. Dante and Ovid acknowledge her pride, but believe this to be a small price for the bravery she showed in protecting her own uniquely human art.

⁵ Dante is guided through heaven by none other than a human being with Beatrice. This underlines the idea Dante contemplates with the figure of Arachne about humanity over divinity.

Appendix



ARACHNE

O mad Arachne! so I thee beheld / Een then half spüder (*Purg.* XII, 43; 44).

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