

# Arachne the Weaver

Long ago, there lived among the Greeks a young woman named Arachne [uh-RAK-nee], who was a very gifted weaver. A weaver weaves or spins threads or yarns together to make cloth. Arachne wove upon a wooden contraption called a loom. She did not just weave solid colors; she wove tapestries, wonderful woven pictures that people would hang on their walls as art.

People came from distant lands to see these masterpieces in Arachne's studio. A visitor might comment, "This is amazing! Why, look at the leaves on this tree. They look so real that you almost expect them to move in the breeze. And this deer in the meadow looks as if he is going to turn and bound away."

The visitors would tell Arachne, "You are the finest weaver in all the world!" But then they would add, "Except, of course, for the goddess Athena, who invented weaving!" Athena was actually the goddess of all handicrafts, not just weaving.

At first, when people compared Arachne's work to that of Athena's, Arachne was flattered. But as years passed, she began to get annoyed. She would say, "I'm sure Athena is very talented, but look, did you see this one over here?" As still more years passed, whenever people compared her to the goddess, Arachne would angrily say, "I don't care if Athena invented weaving. I think *I* am the best weaver in the world!"

Word of this eventually reached the ears of the goddess Athena on Mount Olympus. She decided to visit Arachne's studio to learn if Arachne was truly saying such things. However, Athena did not want Arachne to recognize her, so with her magic, Athena changed her own appearance from a beautiful, athletic young woman. Now, with a wave of her hand and a puff of smoke, gone was the young woman, replaced by a woman so old and bent with age that she had to lean on a walking stick to get around. Of course, inside that body was still the goddess Athena, but no one would have recognized her.



In this disguise she went to visit Arachne, commenting, "Your work is extraordinary, my dear. I am certain that you are the finest weaver in the world—except, of course, for the goddess Athena."

Hearing this, Arachne, thinking she spoke to a bent, old woman, angrily exclaimed, "I am sick of hearing about Athena. I say that *I* am the best weaver in the world!"

Well, there was a puff of smoke, and when it blew away, who did Arachne see standing there with her but the beautiful goddess Athena. Arachne was afraid of what the goddess might do to her, but she took a deep breath and said, "I meant what I said. I am prepared to prove that I am the best. I have two wooden looms for weaving. You use one, and I shall use the other. Let us see once and for all who the best is."

So the goddess and the young woman chose their colors and started to weave. When at last they stopped, Arachne grinned, for she truly believed she had won. She pointed out all the wonderful features of her work to the goddess.

“Look,” she said, “see how real the stream looks tumbling down this hillside, and how the water reflects the colors of the sunlight, as real water would do. And if you move over here to look, the colors actually change, the way real sunlight would change.”



At last she turned to see Athena’s tapestry. Arachne saw at once that the work of the goddess was even finer than her own. Athena had woven a stream, but hers seemed to ripple and move. She had woven clouds that appeared to fl oat lightly in the sky, and above it all she had woven the gods in all of their majesty.

Upset and embarrassed, Arachne turned and ran from the room. Athena caught up with her, asking, “Where are you going?”

Arachne exclaimed, “I thought I was the best, but you are superior; <sup>13</sup> and no matter how long and hard I work at it, I will never be as good as you are. I shall never weave again.”

Then Athena grew stern. “Everyone is born with some special gift or talent, if only he or she can fi gure out what it is and how to use it. You must not waste this skill of yours. We shall see to it that you *shall* weave again.”

She reached out and touched Arachne’s shoulder with the tip of one fi nger. Instantly, Arachne began to change shape. She grew smaller and

smaller, and her body rounder and rounder. Her legs and arms grew longer and thinner until, after about fi ve minutes, Arachne had turned into the very fi rst spider in the world. Today we call all the members of the spider family *arachnids* [uh-RAK-nids], and that is why some people say all spiders are the children of Arachne the Weaver.