

Women's Work: Female Transmission of Mythical Narrative*

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SUMMARY: The role of women storytellers and singers in promulgating classical myth in antiquity is, admittedly, difficult to determine, and some scholars dismiss entirely the notion that female popular narrative included traditional tales. When looked at in its entirety, however, the evidence strongly suggests that women told the same kinds of mythological tales—both to themselves and children—as those found in “higher” genres. This finding complicates the already difficult challenge of determining the lineage of mythological tales found in epic and tragedy, a complexity that Ovid may playfully acknowledge in his own collection of myth.

THE PAUCITY OF EVIDENCE ABOUT POPULAR NARRATIVE IN THE GREEK AND Roman worlds usually leaves us guessing about much of its nature and influence. This is particularly true when it comes to women's storytelling, for both the narratives and the narrators remain for the most part hidden from sight, casually alluded to in a variety of (often demeaning) asides. We know women told stories and sang songs—but what were they, and did they have a significant role in disseminating traditional tales? Some scholars feel women's narratives should be given the benefit of the doubt. Nikolopoulos, for example, concludes that it “is almost certain ... that in a predominantly oral society like the Greek and the Roman during the Republic, women story-tellers contributed a great deal to preserving and handing down the cultural tradition by word of mouth.”¹ Skinner is less “certain,” suggesting only that “perhaps” women storytellers “contributed a great deal to preserving and handing on

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¹Nikolopoulos 2004: 141; cf. Trenkner 1958: 16–22; Bremmer 1987: 201; R. Thomas 1989: 108–9. Buxton 1994: 18–21 notes the paradox that (in his opinion) women perform a vital role that ancient authors primarily disparage.

oral traditions, even after the dissemination of literacy” (1993: 132). On the other side of the divide, Powell completely rejects the importance of female mythical narrative for the Greeks: “One often hears, or assumes, that myths were also told by mothers to their children or in other family contexts, but the evidence for this is slight; such stories seem to have been of the bogey-man variety and were certainly not what we think of as Greek myth.”² Indeed, some references suggest women’s “song” primarily comprised lullabies and chanteys, as we find in John Chrysostom’s comments:

By nature we take such delight in song that even infants clinging at the breast, if they are crying and perturbed, can be put to sleep by singing. This is how the nurses who carry them in their arms, walking them up and down many times and singing them childish ditties, make their eyelids close ... Again, women who are weaving, or disentangling the threads on their spindles, often sing: sometimes each of them sings for herself, at other times they all harmonize a melody together.³

Although I am certain I will not put this argument to rest, my purpose in this paper is to argue that the evidence actually offers good reason to conclude that women did tell or sing (the difference is inconsequential to my argument) mythic narratives, both to themselves and to children. The influence of this “female narrative” is difficult to determine, but I will conclude with some suggestions of at least one place to look. (Hint: it’s Ovid.) But first, to the evidence itself. We can start with Chrysostom’s link between women’s wool-working and singing, for we have numerous allusions to female “yarn spinning.”⁴

² Powell 2001: 75. This rejection of significance is most common in discussions of the Romans. This interpretation seems to go back to Veyne 1988: 43–46, who suggested that mythology after the Hellenistic period was almost exclusively in the hands of the literary culture. Most recently this is repeated in part by Cameron 2004: 218, 237–38; contra is Wiseman 1989: 135.

³ *Sermon on the Psalms* (PG 55) 156–57; quoted from Stevenson 2002: 27, who cites the passage as evidence for the persistence of women’s popular, unwritten narratives in late antiquity.

⁴ Although “weaving a tale” and “spinning a yarn” have the same meaning, these are of course distinct actions, and the two ancient metaphors ultimately derive from different aspects of the process; see Nagy 1996: 64. Nevertheless, efforts to tease out a metaphorical distinction between the two acts in classical poets, such as that by Pantelia 1993 for Homer, have not proved helpful, and no efforts have been made here to disentangle the various stages of wool-working. The focus in this section is on what women were saying and singing while engaged in their traditional domestic activities. The etymological and metapoetic link between phases of wool-working and narrative has been well established (Rosati 1999: 245–47 provides a convenient summary) and the arguments need not be

There are two different types of connection found between women's mythic storytelling and wool-working. The first is the story that can be told in the cloth itself as women weave. The epic archetype for narrative wool-working is Helen in the *Iliad*, who is introduced as weaving an ecphrastic tapestry depicting the many trials (ἄεθλους) suffered by the Trojans and Greeks in their fight over her (*Il.* 3.121–28). A scholiast on the passage already observed that “the poet has fashioned a worthy archetype of his own poetic art.”⁵ Several scholars have argued that the funeral cloth woven by Penelope for Laertes (e.g., *Od.* 2.94–110) must have been a story cloth. This would explain the long time it took for Penelope to make progress (and the suitors' remarkable patience), as well as her personal attention to the weaving.⁶ The

repeated here. Bergren 1983: 72 wisely reminds us that we cannot be certain which is the original and which the metaphorical process: “Is weaving a figurative speech or is poetry a figurative web?” Important discussions include: Durante 1960, esp. 241–44; Stanford 1972: 130 on the etymology of *hymnos*; Lyne 1978 on *Ciris* 9–11, 21; Snyder 1981 on the development of the wool-working metaphor—evolved from but not found in Homer—by the lyric poets. Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 125 follows up on Snyder's gender-determined distinction between weaver's loom and poet's lyre: while women weave at the loom, poets play at the lyre. Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 119–21 disagree with Snyder's argument; see also Nagy 1996: 64n22. Snyder 1983: 43 examines Lucretius as a “spinner of words”; cf. Kennedy 1986 on spinning/weaving and speaking in Homer. Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 106–55 is the most comprehensive (if also speculative) treatment, esp. on the Latin side (131–55), and they conclude that in “Rome, weaving is writing” (146–47); see also Hunter 2006: 81–82 on Plaut. *Pseud.* 397–405. For the comparison of style with sewing and weaving, see Brink 1971 on Hor. *Ars P.* 15–16.

⁵ Quoted in Bergren 1983: 79; see also Kennedy 1986; Barber 1991: 373; Worman 2001: 30–31; Robinson 2006: 31–33; Roisman 2006: 9–11; Blondell 2010: 19–20; cf. *Il.* 6.323–24. Helen is also first seen in the *Odyssey*—perhaps with a nice bit of Homeric irony—with a golden distaff and silver basket of wool (*Od.* 4.120–37; cf. 15.105; Eur. *Or.* 1431–36). For critical discussions of ecphrasis—a popular subject esp. after the postmodern tweak of Fowler 2000: 64–85 on the link between ecphrasis and narrative—see Bartsch and Elsner, eds. 2007; Francis 2009; and below for Ovid's “performative ecphrases.”

⁶ Barber 1991: 358–82; Clayton 2004: 34–35. Andromache also weaves multicolored roses (θρόνα ποικίλ', *Il.* 22.441) into a tapestry. There is no mythological reference here, but the flowers may have magical connotations; see Bolling 1958: 277–81 and Barber 1991: 372–77. The cloths that Ion uses to create a banquet pavilion (Eur. *Ion* 1140–62) are decorated not only with celestial figures (e.g., Heaven, Helios, Night, the Pleiades, Orion, and the Bear) but also with sea-battles, animal hunts, and perhaps centaurs (μῆξόθηρας φῶτας, 1161). These tapestries, stored in the Delphic treasuries, were most likely conceived of as having been woven by women, but there were also male weavers in antiquity (see below). Similarly, the gender of the Greek weaver of the pieces of a funereal

subject of the tapestry, however, remains a mystery. Iphigenia wove the tale of the quarrel of Thyestes and Atreus (Eur. *IT* 811–17), and of course there are numerous references in Athenian literature to the Panathenaic *peplos* with its depiction of the Gigantomachy.⁷ The horrific tale of Philomela (Ov. *Met.* 4.438–674)—woven into her own tapestry—has been thoroughly unraveled in recent Ovidian scholarship, both from narratological and feminist perspectives.⁸ Women can literally spin a narrative, and it is worth noting at this point that the apparent subject of their weaving is often a traditional tale of personal significance.⁹

textile from Crimea (4th century B.C.E.) is unknown. This cloth includes depictions of familiar figures from Greek mythology: a Fury, Nike, Athena, Jocasta, Phaedra, Eulimene (a Nereid found in scenes depicting the struggle between Peleus and Thetis), Mopsus, Hippomedon, and Iolaus; see Gerziger 1975 and Barber 1991: 378–80. Barber 1991: 363–65 reviews the numerous representations in Greek art of tapestry figures, usually depicted on vases in scenes with women (such as Penelope) at a loom. She proposes (1994: 229) that Mycenaean women portrayed myths or the deeds of their families in their weaving. See also her discussion of evidence from other early cultures for women's entertaining each other with singing and dancing as they spin and weave, esp. the Sopron vase from the Hallstatt culture (1991: 55–56, 294; 1994: 86–89).

⁷ See Tuck 2009: 155 for references. Interestingly, several times the Titanomachy is substituted in tragedy for the more traditional battle with the giants; see Kyriakou 2006 on Eur. *IT* 221–24; Stamatopoulou forthcoming. Women's woven handiworks are often used as tokens of recognition, e.g., (in addition to *IT* 811–17) Aesch. *Cho.* 231–32 (a beastly design) and Eur. *Ion* 1413–25 (a Gorgon).

⁸ See Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 139–49 with references. Important early studies include Joplin 1984 and Richlin 1992, esp. 162–65. The tapestries of Arachne and Minerva in the *Metamorphoses*, containing nothing but mythical narrative, are also regularly viewed as representatives of different poetic, political, and gendered dynamics; see below.

⁹ It should be noted that the most poignant association between spinning and a narrative—the “span” of a human life—is to be found in the Fates. The connection between fate and spinning is firmly embedded in Greek, from Homer (e.g., *Il.* 20.127–28; 24.210; *Od.* 7.197) and Hesiod (e.g., *Theog.* 218 = 905) to Nonnus (*Dion.* 1.366–67). The image is also popular in the Augustan poets; see Eitrem 1932: 2479–85; Bianchi 1953: 47–54, 205–220; Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1988 on *Od.* 7.196–98; Edwards 1991 on *Il.* 20.125–28; Detienne and Vernant 1991: 137–38; Richardson 1993 on *Il.* 24.525; and esp. Dietrich 1965: 79–82, 289–94. Suhr 1969: 143–50 examines “spinning” Aphrodite's association with fate. Barber 1994: 235–38 suggests that the Greek image of spinning Fates may have originated in the actual spinning of waiting midwives; see Dietrich 1965 for a survey of possible origins of the conceit. The name of the Roman *Parcae* seems to derive from *parere* and may have been the name of a goddess of birth, or at least Varro (Aul. Gell. 3.16.9–11) saw it that way; see Quinn 1970 on Catull. 64.306; Coleman 1977 and Clausen 1994 on Verg. *Ecl.* 4.47.

But the more important association for our purposes is the one between spinning and oral storytelling, the very tales women tell—or songs that they sing—while they are doing their work. We have to look carefully to catch a glimpse of the subjects of these songs and stories performed by women at the loom. Partly this is simply because they are songs of women inside the home, and partly because they are associated with common work of any kind, lumped together with other songs of the “folk.” Amidst casual references to such “working ditties” as mill songs, reaping songs, nursery songs, rowing songs, and herding songs, we also learn that there were spinning songs.¹⁰ An epitaph composed by Leonidas of Tarentum celebrates “old Platthis,” who “often banished her evening and morning sleep, fighting off poverty, and nearing gray old age sang something to her spindle and familiar distaff” (*Anth. Pal.* 7.726.1–4).¹¹ O’Higgins has concluded that many of the songs sung by women as they worked must have been obscene and probably drew on an everyday vocabulary of words connected with spinning, weaving, and food production.¹² Ovid compares his own poetry, written as solace in his exile, to the songs a slave girl sings while performing her assigned spinning (*Tr.* 4.1.13–14):

cantantis pariter, pariter data pensa trahentis,
fallitur ancillae decipiturque labor.

In her simultaneous singing and spinning out of the daily allotment of wool, the slave girl wiles away and forgets her labor.¹³

The epic models for this association of wool-working and song are Homer’s Calypso and Circe, both of whom are first encountered singing while working at their looms (*Od.* 5.61–62; 10.221–23, 226–28, 254–55).¹⁴ Virgil’s Circe similarly fills groves with song while weaving (*Aen.* 7.10–14):

¹⁰ See esp. *Ath.* 14.618c–e; *Poll.* 4.53; with other references collected in Edmonds 1967: 488–549 and Scobie 1983: 3. On the *ioulos* as a (possible) weaving song, see also Gow 1950 on *Theoc. Id.* 10.41; Lambin 1992: 140–41; cf. the textual variants and discussion surrounding Powell, *Coll. Alex.* 10. For the Romans, see Varro fr. 16 of his Menippean satire Ὀνοχ λῦρας (in Bücheler 1963). The association of storytelling with poor people’s professions and places of work is universal; see Dégh 1969: 68.

¹¹ See Gow-Page, *HE* 2.375–76 on v. 4.

¹² O’Higgins 2001: 149–50; on *aischrologia* in general, see Collins 2004: 225–30.

¹³ This and all subsequent translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ Clader 1976: 8 notes that these descriptions contain the only two uses of the verb ἀοιδιάω in Homer, so the verbal idea is strongly linked to the weaving theme. On the other hand, the participial form functions as the convenient nominative singular to the genitive

proxima Circaeae raduntur litora terrae,
dives inaccessos ubi solis filia lucos
adsiduo resonat cantu, tectisque superbis
urit odoratam nocturna in lumina cedrum
arguto tenuis percurrrens pectine telas.

They brush close by the shores of Circe's land, where the rich daughter of the Sun makes the inaccessible groves resound with her endless song. In her lofty halls she burns sweet-smelling cedar for light at night, while she runs her whistling shuttle through the fine threads.¹⁵

Virgil has translated Homer's scene, which takes place in the bright morning, to the evening (*nocturna in lumina*; cf. 7.8–9). Perhaps he borrows from his own Georgic vision of the tasks to be performed during the long winter evenings (G. 1.291–94)¹⁶:

et quidam seros hiberni ad luminis ignis
pervigilat ferroque faces inspicat acuto;
interea longum cantu solata laborem
arguto coniunx percurrit pectine telas.

And there's a certain man who works by the late fires of the winter light and shapes torches with sharp iron. Meanwhile his wife, relieving her long work with a song, runs her whistling shuttle through the threads.

But there is also an elegiac tint to this image of the faithful female working diligently through the evening, spinning and singing—and staying away from all other men. The associations of female fidelity and wool-working go back to Homer, of course, and for the Romans *lanificium* is intimately linked to *pudicitia*, or the ideal female virtue. Penelope and Lucretia (Livy 1.57.7; cf. Ov. *Fast.* 2.725–852) are the paradigms, but this familiar association is

ἀειδοῦσης, and singular to the nominative plural (ἀμειβόμεναι ὅπῃ καλῇ); see Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1988 on *Od.* 5.61 and 62, who add that it “is natural that Calypso, like Circe (x 227), should sing while performing this repetitive task; it must be by chance that mortal women are not explicitly said to do so.” On the meaning and significance of *aidos*, see Maslov 2009.

¹⁵ Ovid (one might say “typically”) both nods to the topos and inverts it by having a Greek eyewitness insist that Circe did *not* weave. Instead, the witch sat regally supervising her attendants, who “neither move their fingers to draw out the wool nor spin the pliant threads” (*Met.* 14. 264–65).

¹⁶ R. F. Thomas 1986: 65 finds Virgil's substitution in the *Aeneid* of *tenuis* for the earlier *coniunx* significant in supplying another metaphor for Hellenistic poetic production.

found consistently throughout ancient sources.¹⁷ The elegists envision their mistresses as Roman heroines, waiting virtuously for the poet to return. Propertius, for example, famously depicts a querulous Cynthia bewailing her lonely night (1.3.41–46):

nam modo purpureo fallebam stamine somnum,
 rursus et Orpheae carmine, fessa, lyrae;
 interdum leviter mecum deserta querebar
 externo longas saepe in amore moras:
 dum me iucundis lassam Sopor impulit alis.
 illa fuit lacrimis ultima cura meis.

For now I was cheating sleep with my purple thread, and now, exhausted, with a song of the Orphean lyre. Sometimes, abandoned as I was, I complained quietly to myself of the long hours, so frequent now, you spend in another's love, until Sleep struck me in my weariness with its gentle wings. That was the last care for my tears.

In this particular case (looming ironies aside), Cynthia claims to have spent the evening apparently alternating between singing songs and spinning, either talking or singing to herself about the poet's infidelity. Her isolation, however, is unusual (and perhaps suspicious)—the picture of female virtue stereotypically requires the woman to be surrounded by other women, or at least by one old woman.¹⁸ Propertius's Arethusa, for example, waits for her absent husband, working wool at night while sitting faithfully with her sister and *pallida nutrix* (4.3.18, 33–34, 41–42; cf. 3.6.15–18). Tibullus presents the elegist's most enduring fantasy (1.3.83–88):

¹⁷ See Ogilvie's note 1965 ad loc.; Hemelrik 1987: 217; also Ter. *Haut.* 275; Prop. 3.6.15–16; 4.3.33–42. Wives were consistently praised—often when dead—for their spinning and weaving; see *ILS* 8393–4 (which include the stories of “Turia” and Murdia), 8402–3. Columella (*Rust.* 12 Praef. 9) laments the collapse of previous values by noting that wool is now purchased rather than virtuously woven at home.

¹⁸ Again, Homer supplies the epic precedent with Helen (*Il.* 6.323–24; *Od.* 4.123–33). Interestingly, when we first meet Helen in Book 3 of the *Iliad* (141–45), she appears to be alone as she weaves her tapestry (although attendants are mentioned at the end of the scene when she veils herself and leaves for the Scaean gates). Similarly, Calpyso (*Od.* 5.199) and Circe (*Od.* 10.348) have handmaidens who are not remarked upon during their weaving scenes. Of course, none of these three is exactly the virtuous wife. Penelope must have been attended by maids while working on her weaving, as her unraveling was betrayed by one of her own servant women (as the suitors tell it, *Od.* 2.108–9; 24.144–45; Penelope herself sees a larger conspiracy involving more than one of her domestics, *Od.* 19.154–55).

at tu casta precor maneat, sanctique pudoris
 adsideat custos sedula semper anus.
 haec tibi fabellas referat positaque lucerna
 deducat plena stamina longa colu,
 at circa gravibus pensis adfixa puella
 paulatim somno fessa remittat opus.

But I pray that you remain faithful, and that an old woman sit at your side, constantly vigilant of your pure chastity. She can tell you stories¹⁹ and by lamplight spin out long threads from a full distaff. And nearby let a servant girl, intent on her heavy allotment of wool, little by little drop her work in sleep, exhausted.

For Tibullus, the countryside itself conjures up dreams of female virtue, again depicted through the combination of wool-working and singing (2.1.63–66; Murgatroyd's text):

hinc et femineus labor est, hinc pensa colusque,
 fusus et adposito pollice versat opus:
 atque aliqua adsidue texitrix operata Minervae
 cantat, et a pulso tela sonat latere.

From the country there's woman's work, from here too comes the measure of wool on the distaff, and with the pressing of the thumb the spindle twists the work. And some weaver constantly busy at Minerva's work sings, and the loom resounds when warp-weights strike.

The poets are viewing a familiar cultural fact through the lens of gendered expectations.²⁰ This link between singing and weaving may also help to explain the frequent references in Greek literature to the "singing shuttle." Aristophanes, for example, in what is likely to be a parody of Euripides,²¹

¹⁹ Maltby 2002 on 1.3.85–87 acutely adds that *fabellas* "often has a pejorative sense of 'old wives' tales'; see below.

²⁰ There were male weavers as well, but there is no evidence I know of that connects them to mythological storytelling, although one Pompeian *textor* refers to an apparently despised spinstress (a *quasillaria* named Salvilla) as *Latona(m) tua(m)* (transliterated by M. Della Corte, *CIL* 4.8384); see Moeller 1969: 564. Hesiod tells the farmer to make his own clothes; see *Op.* 536–38 with West 1978 on 538, and the joke at *Ar. Av.* 712. For male weavers in Athens and their place in commercial textiles, see West 1971: 54; Thompson 1982; Barber 1994: 277–83; Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 181 with n75. Evidence for male weavers in the Roman world, esp. at Pompeii, is collected in Moeller 1969. For a Roman male slave first trained as weaver, see Suet. *Gram.* 23 and Rawson 1986: 55n120. Lucretius suggests that men invented weaving but turned it over to women once they had to take on the tougher work of agriculture (5.1354–60); cf. Paus. 8.4.1.

²¹ See Borthwick 1994: 29–30, who compares it to the *Hypsipyle* passage discussed below. The scholiast on *Ran.* 1315 says the phrase is from Euripides' *Meleager* (*TGF* 523).

refers to the “tuneful shuttle” (κερκίδος αοιδού, *Ran.* 1316). This connection is found frequently in the *Palatine Anthology*: for example, a “singing shuttle” (κερκίδα ... μελπομέναν, 6.160.1–2); the “shuttle, minstrel of the loom” (κερκίδα, τὰν ἰστῶν μολπάδιδα, 6.288.5); the “nightingale among the weavers” (κερκίδα ... ἀηδόνα τὰν ἐν ἑρίθοις, 6.174.5); and “shuttles with voices like early-twittering swallows” (κερκίδας ὀρθρολάοισι χελιδόσιν εἰκελοφώνους, 6.247.1). Euripides also refers to a shuttle in the “beautiful sounding looms” (ἰστοῖς ἐν καλλιφθόγγοις, *IT* 222). These passages are usually interpreted as references to the sound the shuttle makes as it contacts the warp.²² But perhaps this analogy was more readily available because the act of weaving itself was so often accompanied by the singing of women at work.

There can be little doubt, then, that women sang songs of some sort. But what, exactly, were these songs sung by women at the loom? Were they merely of the “bogeyman variety”? First, it is clear that female narrative had a variety of contexts, settings, intentions, and topics. In Euripides’ *Hypsipyle*, the eponymous heroine—once a Lemnian princess but now a slave forced to serve as a nurse—contrasts the lullabies she must sing with the songs she once voiced at the loom back home (*Hyps.* 752f9–14):

These are not Lemnian songs for relieving the labour of weft-thread and web-stretching shuttle that the Muse wants me to voice (κρέκειν), but what serves for a tender boy, to lull him or charm him or tend his needs. This do I tunefully sing (αὐδῶ).²³

Euripides seems to be linking “weaving” and “singing” with the verb κρέκειν. In its earliest appearance (Sappho 102), it takes ἴστον, “web” or “loom,” as an object, and clearly refers to weaving (cf. Eur. *El.* 542). But two other attested meanings are “playing an instrument” and “singing to instrumental accompaniment.”²⁴ So *Hypsipyle* used to weave while “weaving” a song. She gives no specific indication of the content of her former singing, but the implication is that her songs at the loom were more substantial. And although the subject of both her former and present songs remains unclear, the chorus wonders if

²² See, e.g., the comments of Dover 1997 on *Ran.* 1315; Collard, Cropp, and Gibert 2004 on *Hyps.* 752f9–11 with other references; Kyriakou 2006 on *IT* 221–24. For Roman examples, see Bömer 1976: 105. Barber 1991: 362n4, however, states from experience that “warp-weighted looms do not ‘whisper’ or ‘whir,’ as the translators would have it. They clank.” *Kerkis* is also identified occasionally as a “pin beater,” but a shuttle seems to be more appropriate in most contexts.

²³ Text and translation from Collard, Cropp, and Gibert 2004; see their comments on 752f 9–11.

²⁴ See the discussion of Dunbar 1995 on Ar. *Av.* 682–83. Bond 1963 on *Hyps.* fr. I ii 9–10 adds that the verb can also mean simply “to make a noise.”

she has been singing (ἄ[ι]δεις) about Lemnos, the golden fleece, and the Argo, for this is a topic she apparently cannot stop celebrating (Ἀργῶ τὰν διὰ σοῦ / στόματος αἰεὶ κλιζομένην, 752f20–21). In this case the topic has personal significance. But it is nevertheless interesting that her song focuses on a traditional mythological narrative. For when we look closely at other references, we find that we do have a number of hints about the content of these female narratives, and if we take the sources at their word, it is surprising how often the subjects of women's songs overlap directly with traditional tales of the sort found in a mythological compendium such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The women of the chorus in *Iphigenia at Aulis* (785–800), for example, connect the narrating of the story of Leda and the swan with weaving, as they imagine the fate of the Trojan women, captives forced to tell (μυθεῖσθαι) each other such stories while working at Greek looms.²⁵ This connection is made explicit in Euripides' *Ion*. The chorus of Athenian women arrives at Delphi and recognizes the myths carved onto the facades of the temple: Heracles, Bellerophon, the Gigantomachy. And where did they hear (at least some of) these stories?

And near him [Heracles] someone else raises the blazing torch. Is it he whose story I heard as I plied my loom, shield-bearing Iolaus who took up shared labors with the son of Zeus and helped him endure them? (*Ion* 194–200)

The women later state that they have never heard, either at their spinning (literally “at their spindles,” ἐπὶ κερκίσιν) or in stories (λόγοις) of children born of mortal and god sharing in any good fortune (*Ion* 507–9). The implication is clear: Athenian women could be expected to have heard—and no doubt sung—standard bits of heroic and divine mythology, including tales of Heracles, during their spinning and weaving.²⁶

²⁵ Tuck 2009: 156 also cites Eur. *IT* 220–24, where Iphigenia laments that she cannot “dance for Hera, surrounded by lovely songs, or work the designs in my looms of Titans or Pallas Athena.” Tuck suggests that as the text stands, the singing and weaving need not be considered as separate activities. He examines passages in Euripides that reveal the playwright's “consistent pairing of weaving with the recitation of mythological stories”; however, Tuck's ultimate goal is to suggest that this singing may have been embedded with numerical information that enabled the weavers to create the images in their work, perhaps singing the same story that they were weaving into the cloth.

²⁶ The chorus of women in the *Hypsipyle* has heard the stories of Europa and Io “from the wise” (παρά σοφῶν, 752g18–33). To whom this refers is unclear. Bond 1963 on fr. I iii 18ff. compares this expression to other examples of a chorus's “self-consciously explaining” the source of knowledge, and to words Euripidean characters use when apologizing for commonplaces. But the parallels are very loose, and I agree with Collard, Cropp, and

We find similar insights into women's narrative in Theocritus 24. Hera has sent snakes to kill Heracles, who has gleefully strangled his assailants. The startled Alcmena summons Tiresias for answers, and the prophet has good news (*Id.* 24.75–80):

For by the sweet light that has long been gone from my eyes, many Achaean women will roll the thread on their knees as they sing (ἀείδοισαί) at nightfall of Alcmena by name, and you will be an object of reverence to Argive women. Such a man is this, your son, destined to ascend to the star-bearing heaven.

Tiresias goes on to mention Heracles' twelve labors and to hint of his eventual reconciliation with Hera upon his marriage to Hebe and acceptance in Olympus (24.80–85). The implication is clear. A woman doing her wool-working²⁷ could be expected to sing songs derived from the body of traditional narrative, in this case from the heroic cycle surrounding Heracles. A first-century funerary inscription from Chios quotes two old women from Cos: "O sweet dawn, to whom by lamplight we sang songs of the demigods (μύθους ἡίδομεν ἡμιθέων)." ²⁸ Again we have indirect evidence—there is no specific reference to spinning—that women at their looms or distaffs sang songs of heroes, that is, mythological tales. Ovid seems once again to put his own twist on this convention when he portrays an irritated Deianira imagining a spinning Heracles narrating the tale of *his own* deeds to Omphale (*Her.* 9.73–84). Deianira then actually presents his "song" for 16 more verses before wondering how his feminine dress does not humiliate him into silence. In *Heroides* 19, Ovid turns the conventions upside down by having an amorous (and very available) Hero pass the time waiting to join Leander in their illicit love through the "woman's art" (*feminea ... arte*) of spinning (*tortaque versato ducentes stamina fuso*, 37–38). As if to point out her undermining of tradition, she imagines Leander asking what she says as she spins (*quid loquar interea tam longo tempore, quaeris?*, 39). This "song" she sings while wool-working—the very letter she is writing—turns into an anxious grilling of her would-be-guardian nurse about her lover's whereabouts (41–54).

Gibert 2004 on 752g18 that there is nothing particularly self-conscious or apologetic in this passage. Moreover, the only parallel reference cited by Bond to *sophoi* as a source is at *Ion* 1139, where the emphasis really is on technical expertise. There seems to me to be no reason *not* to take the reference as a glance at the nature of "traditional" tales themselves, whether told by poets or amongst women at work. See below for Philostratus's reference to nurses as "skilled at" (*sophai*) telling tales like that of Theseus and Ariadne.

²⁷ See Gow 1950 on 24.76 for the process and purpose of "rubbing" the wool.

²⁸ Kaibel 232 = Peek V-I 474, cited in Buxton 1994: 20.

And instead of the heroine's virtuously nodding off in mid-work, it is the old nurse who passes out while Hero vigilantly fantasizes about Leander's disrobing! Even the lantern (*vigilantia lumina*), a traditional accoutrement of the tireless maiden's long evening of work,²⁹ is transformed here into the signal Hero employs for her lover to make his "accustomed journey" to her bedroom (35–36).

Perhaps the most discussed bit of evidence for the subject matter of spinning women's songs comes from Virgil's portrait of sea nymphs wool-working under water (*G.* 4.333–35, 345–49; list of nymphs omitted):

at mater sonitum thalamo sub fluminis alti
sensit. eam circum Milesia vellera Nymphae
carpebant hyali saturo fucata colore. 335

...
inter quas curam Clymene narrabat inanem 345
Vulcani, Martisque dolos et dulcia furta,
aque Chao densos divum numerabat amores
carmine quo captae dum fuis mollia pensa
devolvunt.

And his [Aristaeus's] mother heard the cry in her chamber under the deep river. Around her the nymphs were carding Milesian wool dyed the rich color of glass-green ... Among them Clymene was recounting Vulcan's futile attention and the tricks and stolen joys of Mars. And she was running through the numerous loves of the gods, beginning from Chaos. Charmed by her song, the nymphs twist down the soft wool from their spindles.

Here once again is our tale-telling matron amidst female spinners. It is not obvious that Clymene is doing any wool-working herself, but the context is clear: she is recounting mythological love stories (divine ones at that) to entertain (*captae*) the nymphs (including herself) as they do their work. Thomas makes an important observation: "The Homeric status of Clymene's song recedes as she sings a divine erotology, an account of the numerous affairs of the gods. While no such poem is known (an abridged version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would qualify) an Alexandrian or neoteric setting is suggested."³⁰ Thomas

²⁹ Avery 1954. The lantern became an important symbol in the story as told by Musaeus, for with the extinction of the lantern came the drowning of Leander. The lamp can also form part of the setting for sex; cf. *Anth. Pal.* 5.4 (Philodemus), 5.8 (Meleager); Prop. 2.15.3.

³⁰ R. F. Thomas 1988 on 4.347; see also Knox 1986: 12–13. Silenus's song in the sixth *Eclogue* has also long been shown to parallel Ovid's epic. Wheeler 1999: 15 calls Ovid's epic "a realization of this idealized Vergilian poetic program"; cf. Otis 1970: 48, 94; Ross 1975: 25–26; Knox 1986: 10–12; Jouteur 2001: 94.

is surely right about the Ovidian program beginning *a chaos*, and perhaps Ovid realized it as well, choosing to have one of the spinning Minyides (his first human, internal narrators) tell this same story of Mars and Venus (*Met.* 4.169–89). And Arachne’s amazing fabric (*Met.* 6.103–28) depicts nothing but the *densos divum amores*, thus also fulfilling Clymene’s program.

From these few direct references, then, we can tentatively conclude that at least some of the time women lightened their wool-working by singing, telling, and listening to traditional tales of heroes, gods, and love that were compatible—indeed, in many cases identical—with mythological tales of the kind found in “higher” genres such as Ovid’s epic. It would be perverse, I think (though of course possible), to argue that in every one of these examples the male author is projecting masculine poetic activity into the quotidian female sphere against all cultural norms. This connection between spinning, weaving, and telling mythological tales (often about illicit sex) may supply the context for Semonides’ comments on the (rare) virtuous wife in his notorious satire on women, in which he claims that she does not take pleasure in sitting among women where “they tell tales of love” (λέγουσιν ἀφροδισίους λόγους, 7.90–91).³¹ And there is yet another fascinating series of references that reveals the pervasiveness of mythological tale-telling among women. A few efforts have been made to survey these female stories, but with no attempt to determine the subject matter of women’s narratives.

First, we know of women actually singing mythological themes as poets. Corinna, for example, announces that her theme is “the prowess of heroes and heroines” (ἰώνει δ’ εἰρώων ἀρετὰς / χεῖρωάδων, 664b PMG). In 655 PMG she insists her subject will be “fine tales” that she later calls “stories from my fathers.” From what we can tell, much of her poetry seems to have focused on local heroic narratives.³² The author of the *Ornithogonia*—a poem in which

³¹ Lloyd-Jones 1975 on 90–91 compares this reference to assertions in comedy that older women corrupt the younger ones. (And one recalls the role of the older “bawd” in Horace and the Roman elegiac poets who keeps the lovers apart; cf. *Anth. Pal.* 5.262, 289, 294; Leaena in Plaut. *Curc.*)

³² Most of her subjects, to guess from the fragments and titles, derived from Boeotian myths; see Page 1953, conclusions on p. 45; West 1970: 282; Kirkwood 1974: 191; Snyder 1984; 1989: 41–55; Rayor 1993: 228–29; Henderson 1995: 29; MacLachlan 1997: 216; Lamour 2005: 26–39; esp. Collins 2006. For the disputed title of her work(s), see the summary of Burzacchini 1991: 53–55. Myrtis may have also have concentrated on local Boeotian legends; Praxilla dealt with Achilles; and Telesilla treated Greek myth as well (to judge from the one surviving two-line fragment); see Snyder 1989: 40–41, 57–61. Yatromanolakis 2009: 269–70 suggests that Sappho 44, a narrative about the wedding of Andromache and Hector, may hint at the existence of narrative folk songs and point to an “interdiscursivity between ‘literary’ and ‘popular’ singing traditions.” Even more

bird species are derived from human metamorphoses—may have been a woman.³³ Horace calls on Tyndaris to “sing on a Teian lyre of Penelope and glittering Circe, suffering over one man” (*Carm.* 1.17.18–20), and in another ode suggests that Lyde should hymn Latona, Cynthia, and especially Aphrodite (3.28.11–14).³⁴ We can at least conclude that it was imaginable for educated women to sing traditional mythological tales—even tales of metamorphoses—perhaps often with a focus on love (à la Anacreon).

Nurses and mothers are also frequently cited—and criticized—for filling children’s heads with stories that seem to come straight out of Ovid’s mythological epic. The nurse in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (447–56) is apparently quite credible when she conjures up such traditional stories as Zeus’s lust for Semele, and the tale of Aurora (Eos) and Cephalus (both retold in the *Metamorphoses*). Even in the later Roman empire, Philostratus observes disparagingly that nurses tell tragic love stories: “That Theseus acted unjustly towards Ariadne ... and left her sleeping on the island of Dia, you no doubt have heard from your nurse; for those women are skilled (σοφαί) in such things and they cry over them whenever they wish” (Philostr. *Imag.* 1.15.1; cf. Ov. *Met.* 8.169–82).³⁵ Arnobius, a Christian apologist of the late third and early fourth centuries, throws weavers and old women into the same dustbin. When attacking the myth of Attis, he asks (*Adv. nat.* 5.14):

cum historias, quaeso, perlegitis tales, nonne vobis videmini aut textriculas puellas
audire taedosi operis circumscribentes moras aut infantibus credulis avocamenta
quaeritantes anus longaevas et varias fictiones sub imagine veritatis expromere?

Please! When you read such tales, don’t you feel you are listening to weaving girls killing time as they do their wearisome work, or old crones seeking

complex is the apparent relationship between Erinna’s *Distaff* and the composition of her poetry; for the title of this work and discussion, see the summary in Neri 2003: 94–98.

³³ For what we know of Boios/Boio, see the summary in Forbes Irving 1990: 33.

³⁴ On the matter of women Latin poets (besides the short collection of Sulpicia), we are unfortunately much in the dark. There seems to have been no flourishing culture as in Greece; see Snyder 1989: 123–28; Hallett 2002; Stevenson 2002; Woeckner 2002; Greene 2005: xix; cf. Habinek 1998: 122–36, who shows that the Roman *docta puella* should have learning, discernment, and performance, but was denied the last and thus ultimately silenced. Ovid clearly knows of female authors, as when he expresses his concern for a *doctissima* poet named Perilla (*Tr.* 3.7).

³⁵ Catull. 64.50–264 famously depicts this mythological tale in the woven tapestry of Thetis’s nuptial bed-spread. For links in Catullus 64 between weaving and text, see Scheid and Svenbro 1996: 95–107 and Robinson 2006: 49–50, who concludes that creators of textiles are “creators of the text.”

diversions for credulous children as they dust off manifold fictions under the semblance of truth?³⁶

Plato is famous for ejecting the poetic tales about gods from his utopia, but he is equally harsh on the stories told to children by nurses and mothers—because they turn out to be identical!³⁷ He argues that some people do not believe in the gods because of stories they used to hear “from the lips of mothers and nurses” (*Leg.* 887d). These stories he defines more clearly in the *Republic* as those same tales told by poets such as Homer and Hesiod, that is, “falsehoods” about gods transforming themselves into strangers to test mortals, the succession myth (Uranus, Cronus, Zeus), the Gigantomachy, Hera in fetters (*Resp.* 381c-e; 377a–378e). Again, it is as if Ovid had been working straight from this list, including in the first book of the *Metamorphoses* references to Cronus (1.113–14), a Gigantomachy (1.151–60), and a story of the transformed Jupiter (Lycaon, 1.209–39). Following Plato, Cicero blames “parent, nurse, teacher, poet, and the stage” for their efforts to twist youths’ “pliable and untrained” (*teneros et rudes*) minds (*Leg.* 1.47).³⁸

³⁶ Cf. Sidonius’s nasty reference to someone who is a “whirlpool from the stitchers of tales” (*gurgis de sutoribus fabularum*, *Epist.* 3.13.2). For criticism of nurses, see Tac. *Dial.* 28–29, *Germ.* 20, and the story of Favorinus in Aul. Gell. 12.1. Macrobius (*In Somn.* 1.2.6–12) relegates all *fabulae* that only gratify the ear (*delectatio*) and do not instruct (*utilitas*) “into the cradle of nurses” (*in nutricum cunas*); see Scobie 1969: 13–16. Plutarch (*Mor.* 3d–f) approves of Plato’s advising nurses to choose stories carefully, and quotes Phocylides on the subject. Hansen 2002: 12 observes that foreign-born nurses may have been very important in introducing Greek stories to Italy; see also Wiedemann 1989: 144; Golden 1990: 149. Plato and others (e.g., Philostr. *Her.* 137) criticize nurses and mothers together; see below. On the other hand, old women and nurses, sharing a duality with old men, are often credited as sources of traditional insight; see Massaro 1977: 129–34 on the “wise nurse.” According to Dio Chrysostom (4.73–74), nurses tell children stories to comfort them after a whipping or to calm them down (cf. Eur. *Heracl.* 76–77; 98–100; Plut. *Thes.* 23; Apuleius’s famous tale of Cupid and Psyche is told by an old woman to a young woman to distract her with—literally this time—an old wives’ tale, *anilibusque fabulis*, *Met.* 4.27); see also Wiedemann 1989: 145.

³⁷ For Plato’s treatment of myth, see Detienne 1986: 82–102. Plato is probably the earliest extant author to use the phrase “Old Wives’ Tale”; Massaro 1977: 106 with n1, providing, of course, that Corinna is later than the fifth century and that the title of her collection could not be translated *Old Wives’ Tales*. Stories told by nurses, mothers, and old women/wives are often lumped together indiscriminately in the sources, although some modern critics have objected; see Burkert 1982: 717 (a critique of Moser-Rath 1977).

³⁸ See Wiseman 1989: 135, 137. Interestingly, Cicero’s language at this point is replete with terms that are found in wool-working contexts, e.g., *tenduntur*, *inficiunt*, *flectunt*, *implicata*. His point seems to be that children are shaped (we might use another technological term, “molded”) like cloth by false stories.

More tantalizing still is the large group of references to “old wives’ tales.” To label something an *anilis fabula* (and its various Greek equivalents, e.g., γραῶν ὄθλος, μῦθος γραός, and any kind story characterized as γραῶδης) was “the ultimate insult that a literary critic could apply to a writer’s work, or that anyone could apply to another person’s speech.”³⁹ As such, it is often difficult to determine if an ancient source is referring to actual stories told by or listened to (and believed by) women, or merely denigrating the subject under discussion (e.g., Pl. *Resp.* 350e), or some combination of both. The expression can be used to describe a wide variety of narrative: animal fable (e.g., Horace’s country mouse and city mouse, *Sat.* 2.6.77–78)⁴⁰; “nonsense” in general (e.g., Herod. 1.74–75; Pl. *Grg.* 527a); false claims (Pl. *Th.* 176b) and philosophical doctrines or approaches with which one disagrees (Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.34; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 58; Sen. *Ep.* 94; *Ben.* 1.4); love stories (Apul. *Met.* 4.27); any “scraps” (*scidas*) unworthy of reading (Quint. *Inst.* 1.8.19; Severus includes all of Apuleius’s novel among “old women’s rubbish,” *neniis ... anilibus*, SHA *Clod.* 12.12). So one must tread with caution: when someone says that a certain myth is the kind of story women tell or prefer, does he mean it literally (and thus offer us some evidence of female narratives), or is he merely using a cultural shorthand for “unbelievable crap”?

But there is a consistency of one type of reference to “old wives’ tales” that catches one’s attention, and that is to mythological narrative. Old women are frequently criticized for listening to, telling, and believing “incredible” stories.⁴¹ And what are they? There are many references to frightening tales

³⁹ Scobie 1979: 244–52. His survey—also Scobie 1983: 17–19—and esp. that of Massaro 1977 are still the most comprehensive; see also Salles 1981 for Roman popular literature in general. We find the expression in both Greek and Latin, although Romans could dismiss belief in “fables” about such things as werewolves as *Graeca credulitas* (Plin. *HN* 8.80–82). Old women are also given to talk and telling stories in general, e.g., Pl. *Hp. mai.* 286a and Rosivach 1994: 113. For references to *aniles fabulae*, see the lists in Otto 1890: 28; Herod. 1.74 in Headlam and Knox 1922; Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.12 in Pease 1955–58; Bolte and Polivka 1963: 41–47; Massaro 1977; Scobie 1979: 244n71. Ziolkowski 2002 argues that women’s oral culture threatened the new literate world from fifth-century Athens through the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, folktales and proverbs were attributed to a social class (peasants) rather than a gender, but in the early modern period women “rose again” to tell Mother Goose rhymes; see Ziolkowski 2007: 118–19.

⁴⁰ Although Aesop’s fables are often distinguished from *aniles fabulae* as being more useful in education (e.g., Quint. *Inst.* 1.9.2), they were written off as “servile”; see Marchesi 2005.

⁴¹ Old women as superstitious: Bremmer 1987: 201; Rosivach 1994: 113; Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.70, 3.92; *Dom.* 105; *Div.* 1.7, 2.19, 2.125, 2.141; cf. *Nat. D.* 1.55; Polyb. 12.24.5; cf.

of “bugbears” and “bogeys” conjured up especially by nurses to tame their wards.⁴² But, *pace* Powell, old women’s tales are also consistently linked to mythological depictions of the afterlife,⁴³ historical “miracles,”⁴⁴ and especially traditional mythology. Plato lumps tales of Heracles, genealogies of heroes, foundation stories, and myths of Neoptolemus and Nestor all under the rubric of old women’s narrative (*Hp. mai.* 285d-e; *Lysis* 205c-d; *Ti.* 23b). Cicero likewise dismisses the entire mythological (and Homeric) apparatus of the gods—genealogies, marriages, relationships, passions, wars—as suitable for old women (*Nat. D.* 2.70–71). Strabo, on the other hand, defends Homer, criticizing Eratosthenes for calling poetry a “fable-prating old wife.” In an unattractive defense of mythological tales, he argues that the uneducated, simple-minded, and “women without reason” need these marvelous stories: bogeys like Lamia and Gorgo to frighten; tales of Heracles and Theseus to inspire; the terrors of the underworld to deter (1.2.3–9). Although Strabo is more interested in the reception than the creation of stories, his point is still that these tales are of particular interest to certain groups, one of which is women. The Christian apologist Minucius Felix (early third century) specifically labels as *aniles* those *fabulae* that tell “of men turned into birds and beasts, and men transformed into trees and flowers” (*de hominibus aves et feras et de hominibus arbores atque flores*, 20.4). There could hardly be a better

Massaro 1977: 125–28 for the etymology of *anus* from the Greek ἄνους—*quod iam sit sine sensu* (Festus 5.25–27 L.)—and Latin glosses in which *anilis* is connected to *amentia*. For invective against old women in general, see Richlin 1983: 109–16.

⁴² See the treatment of Scobie 1979: 246. For a possible nursery rhyme with this sort of terrifying tale (from Donat. on Ter. *Ad.* 537), see Williams 1970, although Jocelyn 1971 argues that it comes from a *fabula Atellana*. We should not slight the possible influence of these nurses’ scare-tactics. The author of a study of the British nanny suggests that Robert Louis Stevenson’s “fascinations with the macabre, the grotesque, the supernatural, which is woven throughout Stevenson’s work, derives from sessions with” the story telling of his “giant Scottish” nanny (Gathorne-Hardy 1972: 129–31). He also examines the nanny behind the “gruesome” tales told to Dickens. These anecdotes come from a section of the book entitled “Terror by Story-Telling: The Nanny as Bard.” See also Warner 1998: 192–237 for the influence of women’s lullabies across cultures.

⁴³ Women were thought to be esp. afraid of mythological terrors of the afterlife, or of death itself (e.g., Cic. *Tusc.* 1.48, 1.93; *Nat. D.* 2.5), and to use them to terrify children (e.g., Plut. *Mor.* 1105b).

⁴⁴ For old women and historical miracles, see, e.g., Cic. *Nat. D.* 3.11–13 on the belief in the manifestation of Castor and Pollux; cf. Julian, *Or.* 5.161b, who says the “overwise” person will call the miraculous story of the introduction of the Mother of Gods to Rome an “old wives’ tale.”

description of Ovid's epic or some of its Hellenistic predecessors. Christian critics of paganism—starting with St. Paul (1 Tim. 4.7)—regularly refer to the mythological tales of gods and heroes as γραῶδεις μύθους. According to Jan Bremmer, a new word, *graologie*, was coined by Tatian to describe the mythographer Pherecydes.⁴⁵

Although the evidence is diffuse, we can conclude that Greek and Roman women knew mythological tales and told them, both to each other (especially when engaged in spinning and weaving) and to children.⁴⁶ Women appear to have been a great repository of traditional tales, and must have played a significant role passing along the stories (much too significant a role, according to many ancient critics of the practice).⁴⁷

I have left to the end our most substantial piece of evidence that links women with mythical narrative: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. One might argue that in any epic collection of myths with internal narratives, some of the storytellers are bound to be female. But Ovid is not inventing a cultural connection; he is adapting one for his own narratological purposes. As we have seen, one of the most important environments for mythological storytelling seems to have been during women's wool-working. It has frequently been noted that two of the four particular episodes that have become the focus of Ovidian metapoetic commentary—the tapestries of Minerva and Arachne, and the tales of the Minyeides—connect spinning and/or weaving with the telling of mythological stories.⁴⁸ In fact, the impious daughters of Minyas are the first

⁴⁵ Bremmer 1987: 201; cf. Massaro 1977: 115–21; Lactant. *Div. inst.* 3.18.16. At this point, “old women's tales” are also equated with “Jewish tales” for their lack of credibility, e.g., Jerome's phrase *iudaicas atque aniles fabulosas* (*In Ezech.* 11.38 = CC 75.526; cf. Basil of Caesarea, *Adv. Eunom.* 1.14 = PG 29.544c). And it seems that pagan critics of Christianity referred to Christian tales of martyrs and the biblical creation tale as *aniles fabulae*, e.g., Prudent. *Perist.* 9.18; Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.36. See also Ziolkowski 2002: 106–7 for the phrase used by Christians (esp. Augustine and Jerome) to distinguish between the orthodox and heterodox.

⁴⁶ It is perhaps revealing that Macrobius (*In Somn.* 1.2.6–12) uses both *contexter* and *contextio* in his discussion of *fabulae*; see Scobie 1969: 14–15.

⁴⁷ Women seem also to have had an important early role in singing the praises of the dead. Varro (commenting on Plautus at *Ling.* 7.70) says that a *praeifica* is a woman hired to celebrate the dead man in front of his house. This was apparently an ancient custom—he refers to Aristotle's *Nomima barbarika* (and Naevius) for support, and says elsewhere (fr. 110 Riposati) that this custom disappeared around the time of the Punic War; see Wiseman 1989: 134.

⁴⁸ These episodes, along with the contest of the Muses and the Pierides, as well as Orpheus's tales, have now become the standard fare of narratological analyses of Ovid's

internal narrators in the epic whose tales are related in full—that is, storytellers whose tales have been shown to provide a window into the poet's own narrative methods and objectives.⁴⁹ Wool-working is thus presented in the epic as a primary metaphor for the creation of poetry. Rosati's splendid study (1999) of the significance of weaving for the *Metamorphoses* demonstrates the centrality of Ovid's "activation" of the metaphoric relationship between spinning/weaving and storytelling. He shows how Ovid revives the "largely dead metaphors" for literary activities of spinning and weaving in the Greek and Latin vocabulary by illustrating its *aition* and giving it narrative form in the episodes of the Minyeides and Arachne/Minerva. Ovid thus creates literal illustrations of the "metaphor of *textus*, of the text as weaving," and the Minyeides' episode in particular is "thus an illustration of the metaphor of *deducere carmen* (1.4), of the correspondence between the thread of continuous narration and the thread which flows uninterruptedly from the hands of the spinner."⁵⁰ I would suggest that by foregrounding the connection between women's telling of mythological stories and spinning/weaving (as Rosati observes, the Minyeides actually perform both processes), Ovid also focuses attention on the familiar *cultural* links between these two activities and their significance to his collection of traditional tales. The poet is not only reviving

compositional techniques, perhaps first brought to attention by Anderson 1968: 102–3. Two important earlier articles are Leach 1974 and Lateiner 1984; see now Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 117–49 for stories involving weaving, 152–66 for the Minyeides, 166–84 for the Pierides; Pavlock 2009: 89–109 for the most recent examination of Orpheus; she has also added Narcissus, Medea, Ulysses, and Daedalus to the usual list of suspects who function as Ovid's surrogates in "mirroring much of the poem's content and illuminating ways by which the narrative operates" (2009: 5). Johnson 2008 provides recent bibliography on Ovid's "performative ecphrases," although she does not treat the Minyeides, who "are characterized above all as semicomical Ovidian housewives, whistling while they work" (26). This "whistling" is, apparently, their storytelling, so Johnson dismisses their creations as "old wives' tales" just as so many critics before her.

⁴⁹ As noted by Janan 1994: 427. Sharrock 2002a: 213 comments on the spinning at 4.34–36 as redolent of Augustan poetics. Mercury's interrupted tale of Syrinx, however, is the first embedded tale in the epic; for its narratological implications, see Nagle 1988.

⁵⁰ Rosati 1999: 248. And this metaphor is perhaps in line with Roman literary theory as well, which could derive *vates* from *viere*, an archaic verb meaning "to plait" or "weave"; so Varro *Ling.* 7.36: "they called ancient poets *vates* from 'weaving verses' (*a versibus viendis*)."
As Newman 1967: 15 observes, what matters is the plausibility of the etymology at the time, not its ultimate validity. Rosati also notes that at the level of narrative structure, Ovid uses the technique of *mise en abyme* by metadiegesis in the case of the Minyeides and by ecphrasis with Arachne and Minerva.

a literary metaphor but subtly noting his own generic “upgrading” of female mythological narrative.

Ovid seems to be unusually interested in female storytelling: “female narratives occupy very large portions of the text.”⁵¹ In fact, those who count this sort of thing have determined that 14 of the 37 “intradiegetic” narrators in the epic are female. As Nikolopoulos concludes, “no poem in hexameters before the *Metamorphoses* had privileged female narrative discourse to such an extent.”⁵² The poet makes the Minyides, wool-working women, the first human narrators of the text, and he carefully crafts their narratives to serve as some sort of model of the epic as a whole. As they weave, the daughters of Minyas tell Ovidian stories of love and transformation (Pyramus and Thisbe, Venus and Mars, Leucothoe and Sol, Clytie, Salmacis and Hermaphroditus), bypassing many more possible tales. It is not my purpose here to review these stories in any detail, or to analyze *how* they provide insights into Ovid’s narrative—these issues have been well treated. Instead, I want briefly to supplement Rosati’s observation that the Minyides’ stories are carefully linked to their actual wool-working—the two operations are simultaneously and completely interwoven.⁵³

The loom-loving sisters stay home, rejecting the rites of Bacchus in favor of spinning and weaving (4.31–35). Ovid not only “activates” the latent metaphor of spinning/weaving as writing, but brings to the surface the cultural link between women’s mythological tale-telling and their domestic duties (4.36–41):

e quibus una levi **deducens** pollice filum
 “dum cessant aliae commentaque sacra frequentant,
 nos quoque, quas Pallas, melior dea, detinet,” inquit,
 “utile opus manuum vario sermone levemus
 perque vices aliquid, quod tempora longa videri
 non sinat, in medium vacuas referamus ad aures.”

⁵¹ Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 151; see her important discussion (150–206) of the function and import of female narrators. At one point (165) she concludes: “Paradoxically, Ovid, being a male author, has often been identified with women authorial figures to display personal poetics, which suggests perhaps that *Metamorphoses* itself is a mixture of ‘masculine’ epic and ‘feminine’ fluidity and that strict gender definitions are doomed to failure.” I am suggesting here that Ovid may also include so many female “authorial figures” as a way to allude to a familiar, oral, female source of material that also found expression in public, written, “masculine” poetry.

⁵² Nikolopoulos 2004: 143; see his general discussion, complete with charts, on pp. 141–60.

⁵³ Rosati 1999: 243–45.

One of them, while spinning out the thread with a nimble thumb, said, “While the other women cease work and celebrate the concocted rites [of Bacchus], let us no less, who are engaged with Pallas (a better deity), lighten the useful work of our hands with a variety of stories. As we listen, let us each in turn recall tales to make the time seem shorter.

This spinning (*deducens* is a key programmatic word here) storyteller is a poet with a large repertoire of stories (*plurima norat*, 4.43). She skips over three possible tales before landing on Pyramus and Thisbe, apparently pleased with its novelty (*haec quoniam vulgaris fabula non est*, 4.53).⁵⁴ Perhaps as a tribute to her cultural role, this first spinster alone of the sisters has no name—she is another of history’s anonymous spinning tale-tellers.⁵⁵ As she works the wool (*lana sua fila sequente*), she begins (*orsa [est]*, 4.54) her song. Here Ovid applies a metaphor associated with his narrator’s craft, as *ordior* ultimately derives from the process of “laying the warp of (a web).”⁵⁶ The first sister’s tale is intertwined—temporally, spatially, and etymologically—with her wool-working. Ovid is doing everything he can to draw our attention to the connection between these two activities, advertising the link between women, spinning and weaving, and wondrous tales of love and metamorphoses.⁵⁷

It is not surprising, then, that Ovid’s authorial representatives make weaving and woven garments important elements in their stories. A “fine garment”

⁵⁴ Tarrant 2005 discusses this Ovidian technique.

⁵⁵ Hansen 1998: xxxii notes that unknown authorship is a characteristic of ancient popular literature, and this certainly applies to what we know of women’s tales. Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 153 assumes that the first to speak is Alcithoe, but this is nowhere stated in the text.

⁵⁶ Anderson 1997 on 51–54; Rosati 1999: 244–45; see Blümner 1875: 125–26 for the metaphor, and esp. Cicero’s two playful applications at *De or.* 2.3.145 and 2.38.158. It is a familiar epicism, though rare in Ovid, thus matching the proud language of the Minyad; see Nagy 1996: 63 with n70 on the possible etymology of *prooimion* from “sew” and thus also referring to the “front edge of the thread.” Volk 2002: 21–23 suggests that *oimē* refers to the “path of song.” The *non vulgaris* may suggest the status of the story—not ordinary—as well as its Alexandrian novelty. There could also be some irony in the sequence of tales, as the anonymous narrator’s criterion of unfamiliarity is perhaps challenged by her sister’s choice of the oh-so familiar tale of Mars and Venus (4.169–89), which “for a long time was the best known in all heaven” (189; cf. *Am.* 1.9.40: *notior in caelo fabula nulla fuit*. Ovid says the same thing of the myth of Iphigenia at *Pont.* 3.2.91).

⁵⁷ Deremetz 1987: 765–66, adapting Bergren 1983 on “feminine language” in Greek poetry, is the only scholar I have seen who follows through on the gender implications of the metaphor, although he explores the implications of poetry as an “activité féminine” in quite a different direction in Virgil.

(*tenuis amictus*, 4.104) dropped by the fleeing Thisbe plays the crucial role in Pyramus's fatal misunderstanding. The storyteller will not let us forget this abandoned, torn, and bloody cloak—*vestem ... sanguine tinctam* (107); *velamina Thisbes* (115); *dedit oscula vesti* (117); *vestemque suam cognovit* (147)—so symbolically rich in a tale of a virgin's failed and ultimately lethal efforts to consummate her love.⁵⁸ When Leuconoe takes her turn at speaking, Ovid repeats the wool-working metaphor (*orsa est*, 4.167). In her first effort, the sister describes the net Vulcan crafts to trap his adulterous wife as thinner than either the "finest threads" (*tenuissima ... stamina*) or a spider's web (4.178–79). Leuconoe's second tale features Leucothoe, an innocent young woman sitting amidst twelve servants, chastely turning the spindle and spinning fine threads (*levia versato ducentem stamina fuso*, 4.221).⁵⁹ Sol, disguised insidiously as the young woman's mother, dismisses the slaves and confesses his passion. The fearful maiden traumatically (and with unmistakable symbolism) drops her wool-work (*et colus et fusus digitis cecidere remissis*, 229) and quickly loses her virginity.⁶⁰ Ovid reminds us one more time of the setting of the frame when he introduces the third sister, Alcithoe, who is "running her shuttle through the threads of her upright loom" (*radio stantis percurrrens stamina telae*, 4.275).⁶¹ Her single story, that of Salmacis's infatuation with and sexual attack on Hermaphroditus, culminates psychologically with the nymph's complete envelopment of her victim, "as tendrils of ivy often weave together to cover tall tree trunks" (*utve solent hederæ longos intexere truncos*, 4.365). Bacchus's punishment of these *sprettores deorum* requires the complete dissolution of their work (*opus, vestis*), loom (*telae*), and threads (*fila, sta-*

⁵⁸ See esp. Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 154–55 on the garment as an "obvious synecdoche for the girl herself."

⁵⁹ Rosati 1999: 242n7 adds that Leucothoe's dozen servants match the number of nymphs surrounding Clymene in Virgil's *Georgics* (see above). Ovid may be recalling one of the classic scenes of story-telling wool-workers. The Minyeides themselves appear to be surrounded by female servants busy at their wool-working (*haerent telae famulasque laboribus urgent*, 4.35).

⁶⁰ This opposition between wool-working and lust merely inverts the "chaste weaver" motif examined earlier in this paper. Thus Cupid takes away Neobule's ability to work wool once she spots the object of her love (Hor. *Carm.* 3.12.5–8). This contrast is found as early as Sappho 102, whose speaker cannot strike her loom once she is overwhelmed with love. There are several epigrams in the *Anth. Pal.* (e.g., 6.48, 6.285) from women giving up implements of wool-working to turn to a life of love; cf. Ter. *An.* 74. Virgil plays with the topos in his second *Eclogue* (70–72), when Corydon's love for Alexis keeps him from "weaving" his basket.

⁶¹ For the debated meaning of *stantis*, see Bömer 1976 on 4.275.

men) into the natural manifestations of the god (ivy, grape-vines and clusters, 4.389–98). Their entire narrative existence is an entanglement of wool-working and story-telling, and with the destruction of the former comes the excision of the latter: they are transformed into bats, their voices silenced, now able only to emit a thin squeal (*levi stridore*, 4.412–13).⁶²

So the daughters of Minyas are not merely models of Ovidian storytelling or enactments of literary metaphors: in their spinning and story-telling they bring to life the very image of feminine activity the poet uses in the prologue to refer to his own epic creation. Rosati reminds us of the important programmatic metaphor—derived from spinning—found in *deducere*, that of the “fine style” of a *deductum carmen*. Ovid famously uses this generically potent verb in the proem to the *Metamorphoses* by calling upon the gods to “bring down (*deducite*) a continuous poem (*carmen*) from the first beginnings of the world to my own times” (*Met.* 1.3–4). This verb, part of an amazingly packed prologue, has elicited a good deal of discussion and has been read numerous ways. Anderson’s 1997 note ad loc. neatly summarizes the major issues raised by this final imperative:

The verb’s literal sense, “bring down,” “lead or guide from,” makes sense. However, much scholarly dispute centers on whether Ovid uses a traditional poetic phrase or metaphor and, if so, which one ... Possible metaphors are: nautical (launching), military (leading troops from one place to another), spinning, colonizing. Vergil, *Ecl.* 6.5, uses the participle *deductum carmen* in sharp contrast to “fat sheep,” and implicitly secures the meaning “(delicately) spun poetry”; he also declares himself on the side of Callimachean poetics.

The literal meaning is plain enough, but as Barchiesi has pointed out, there is a sly humor even on this literal level. Ovid is requesting the gods to escort the poem, almost as if they were to be the poem’s entourage⁶³ and thus, I would add, the doting admirers of not just the epic but the poet himself. Perhaps the gods are even envisioned as conducting the poet into the heart of the city, like clients escorting their patron (the poem) into the forum (a common use of *deduco*; e.g., *Tr.* 4.2.61). Or even more sneakily Ovidian, the gods are to

⁶² The adjectives once used to describe their deft touch with wool (*levi ... pollice*, 4.36) and the delicate products of the loom (*tenuissima ... stamina*, 4.178–79; *tenues ... amictus*, 4.104) now become ironically attenuated qualities of their wings (*tenui ... pinna*, 4.408) and voice (*levi ... stridore*, 4.413).

⁶³ Barchiesi 2005: 145. Wheeler 2002: 166–70 notes the use of *deduco* in universal histories in similar contexts, as well as Greek equivalents such as καταβιβάζω in Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.8 (previously noted by Barchiesi—see his comments 2005: 144), but he acknowledges the polysemous nature of the verb.

escort the poem to its marriage (another frequent use of *deduco*; e.g., *Fast.* 3.689; 4.153) or rendezvous (*Her.* 16.315): the epic poem is a lover as well, unable to leave completely behind its elegiac origins.

So even on the “literal” level, *deducite* can take the wary reader in several directions. As Anderson observes, however, the real debate has focused on the wide variety of possible secondary meanings of the verb, particularly its generic associations.⁶⁴ Several metaphors may be working at once, of course. Connotations of both seafaring and spinning, for example, can shade our reading of the verse.⁶⁵ But the primary metaphorical meaning accepted by most recent scholars is that of spinning.⁶⁶ Moreover, most critics now agree

⁶⁴ Other metaphors have been uncovered as well. Barchiesi 2005: 144, e.g., suggests that the idea of diverting water could be present, but does not elaborate; for Horace’s possible use of the metaphor, see Maróti 1965: 101–9. Steiner 1958: 219 notes that *deduco* here and at *Tr.* 2.559–60 contains “a suggestion of continuity” that is crystallized by *perpetuum*; see also Eisenhut 1961: 93. Borzsák 1964: 144–47 examines associations of *deducere* with triumphs and the “first inventor” motif in Horace, Propertius, and Ovid (though not in the proem of the *Metamorphoses*); cf. Nisbet-Hubbard 1970 on Hor. *Carm.* 1.37.31, and Barchiesi 2005: 144, who comments on the Virgilian combination of spatial imagery of transference with triumphal procession. See Deremetz 1995: 289–309 for connections with magic (e.g., the “leading down” of celestial bodies by witches) and the significance of a *deductum carmen* for Virgil; also Putnam 1982: 142 and 150n21, and Deremetz 1987 for Virgil’s “spinning.”

⁶⁵ So, e.g., Lee 1953 ad loc.; cf. Habinek 2005: 91 for *deducere* in Manil. *Astr.* 1.1–6 having a double meaning, to “spin out” and “draw down.”

⁶⁶ Ovid uses *deducere* of spinning both in the *Metamorphoses* (4.36; 6.69) and elsewhere (e.g., *Am.* 1.147 of a spider; *Her.* 9.77). This is a common meaning of the verb in Latin, e.g., Varro *Ling.* 7.54; Catull. 64.312; Tib. 1.3.86. Pöschl 1967: 269–70, in discussing Hor. *Carm.* 3.30 (*exegi monumentum*), demonstrates the link between *deducere* and the Greek κατέγειν for the spinning metaphor. Apuleius seems to have had Ovid in mind when he wrote the prologue to his own *Metamorphoses*. His narrator describes the subject of the novel in Ovidian language—*figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas*—and in the first two sentences has three references to binding/weaving (*conseram, mutuo nexu, exordior*); see Harrison 1990: 507–8; also Scobie 1975: 67–68; Scotti 1982: 53–62. The metaphor may have been suggested by Apuleius’s model as well (note the appearance of συνύφαινε in Photius’s summary of the lost Greek *Metamorphoses*, *Bibl. Cod.* 129); see Harrison and Winterbottom 2001: 11. From the metaphorical meaning of *deducere* “to draw out a thread” derives another figurative use of the word, “to compose” a literary work, i.e., “to spin” out a story. Ovid often uses *deducere* to mean “to write” or “to spin out a verse” (e.g., *Am.* 3.8.27; *Her.* 17.88; *Pont.* 1.5.13; 4.1.1; *Tr.* 1.1.39; 5.1.71; cf. 3.715); see Bömer 1969 on *Met.* 1.2 and examples in Brink 1982 on Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.224–25. Ovid plays neatly on these figurative uses of the verb when he introduces the mythological tales woven into Minerva’s tapestry by specifying that “a long familiar pattern/subject is spun/written into the warp” (*vetus in tela deducitur argumentum*, 6.69).

(as assumed by Rosati in the quotation above) that the verb when combined with *carmen* in this verse conjures up Hellenistic aesthetics of a “finely spun” poem (*carmen deductum*),⁶⁷ with *deductum* functioning as the equivalent of λεπτός (and its compounds), which also frequently “describes the finished product of spinning and weaving” in Greek poetry.⁶⁸ Most critical discussion understandably has focused on determining the exact nature of this programmatic allusion (as transmitted through Augustan poets) and its relationship to Callimachus’s “slender Muse” (Μοῦσαν ... λεπταλέην, *Aet.* fr. 1.24).⁶⁹

But perhaps Ovid is also drawing on the cultural context of the metaphor. If we remember that the verb *deducite* conjures up the literal meaning of spinning, the imperative suddenly reveals a deeper play on genre and gender than has been previously noted. Ovid is drawing on a very familiar context with his application of *deducere* and the modeling of the Minyides. The poet reminds his reader at these two crucial programmatic moments of the cultural reality. Most readers would have first heard the types of tales found in the epic from a woman: a mother, grandmother, or nurse (or perhaps

⁶⁷ As it was certainly taken by later Latin commentators, e.g., Serv. on Verg. *Ecl.* 6.5 (*deductum dicere carmen*): *tenuē: translatio a lana, quae deducitur in tenuitatem*. The expression is thus taken to have stylistic implications, e.g., Macrobius *Sat.* 6.4.12: *deductum pro tenui et subtili eleganter positum est*; see Meyers 1994: 4–5 and Eisenhut 1961: 91–92, although the latter argues the figure was first derived from the thinning of the voice; cf. the comments of Gilbert 1976: 111 on Cornificius fr. 1 Morel.

⁶⁸ Van Tress 2004: 51–54, quote from 51. Heyworth 1995: 73–75 notes the etymological linking made by Greek of ῥαψῳδός from ῥάπτω, to stitch or string together, and suggests that *deductum* is Virgil’s rendition of ὑφαίνόμενος as well as of λεπταλέος; cf. Schmitt 1967: 300–1 and esp. Nagy 1996: 61–63, 86. R. F. Thomas 1983: 106–9 draws connections between Callimachus’s aesthetic and weaving, noting the poet’s “awareness of the metaphorical potential in this activity,” and his “fascination” with woven objects.

⁶⁹ For a recent and thorough review, see Van Tress 2004: 26–28, 43–71. The programmatic nature of *deduco* was recognized long before it was determined to be significant for Ovid’s poem: see Reitzenstein 1931: 34–35. Important discussions of the meaning of *deduco* in Ovid and other Latin poets (as well as its relation to “Callimachean *leptotēs*”) include: Eisenhut 1961; Due 1974: 95 (who seems to be the first scholar to draw attention to the stylistic implications of the word in the prologue [opposing *perpetuum*], citing Virgil’s sixth *Eclogue*); Ross 1975: 19, 26; Gilbert 1976; Kenney 1976: 51–52; Knox 1986: 10–14; Hinds 1987: 18–21; Hutchinson 1988: 334n115 and Kovacs 1987: 461–62 with n7 (who are almost alone in denying that “*deducite* has anything to do with Callimachean ideals of slowness” [Kovacs 1987: 461; although he does accept the secondary meaning of “spin out a literary composition like a thread”]; see the response of Heyworth 1995: 73n57, as well as O’Hara 2004/5: 150n5, who dismisses Kovacs’s objections as “inconsequential”); Myers 1994: 4–5; Fabre-Serris 1995: 35–40; Zetzel 1996: 77–79; Wheeler 1999: 26 with 216n48; Holzberg 2002: 116; Keith 2002: 246.

even a reclusive “spinster” like one of the Minyides). As we have seen, these “old wives’ tales” would be dismissed as unsophisticated fictions by an elite audience, but therein lies the delightful irony. Ovid acknowledges the humble nature of familiar, oral, mythological narrative while simultaneously linking it to the most refined manner of storytelling available to a Roman poet in the Augustan age. The poet weaves together allusions to both the highest level of literature and (what elite culture clearly considered) the lowest: Hellenistic poetics (Callimachean “fine style”) and female storytelling (humble “spinning” of “old wives’ tales”) become intertwined with *deducere* and the Minyides. Ovid’s poem then can be seen not just as a negotiation of a refined style and epic pretensions—a tension between a *deductum* and *perpetuum carmen*—but also as a sophisticated epic treatment of *fabulae aniles*. In this sense, Ovid, as a spinner of mythological narrative (should the gods grant his request), is in competition not just with Hellenistic writers of myth and historiography and the epics of Ennius and Virgil, but with something even more familiar to the average Roman—female narrative. His epic can be read, then (among many other things), as one very, very long evening’s worth of home-spun tales.

By conjuring up wool-working in crucially programmatic positions, Ovid may be making an allusive nod to his popular source—and competition—in just as cryptic a fashion as he does to his more “refined” literary antecedents.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The audiences for popular entertainment and for “high” literature were the same. Tarrant 2002: 21–23 reminds us that Ovid differs from Callimachus and his Roman followers in that he “shows no interest in restricting his work to the attention of a cultivated few.” I strongly suspect, as do many others, that other popular traditions, esp. mime and pantomime, played important roles both as sources of material and inspiration for Augustan poetry, including the *Metamorphoses*. There were itinerant storytellers of the kind we meet in Apuleius; see Scobie 1969: 21–28; 1979: 233–44; 1983: 11–15. For mime, see Owen 1924 on *Tr.* 2.497, 519; McKeown 1979; Fantham 1983: 200–1; Wiseman 1985: 192–98; Griffin 1985: 12–13; Fantham 1989. Horsfall 1970: 331–32 sees evidence of the influence of mime in Ovid’s treatment of the Calydonian boarhunt (*Met.* 8.260–525). Pantomime, with its emphasis on mythology, was probably even more important for the *Metamorphoses*; for general discussions, see Friedlaender 1908: 97–117; Jones 1986: 68–75; Roueché 1993: 31–47; Lada-Richards 2004; and esp. Molloy 1996 passim; the list of themes and subjects of pantomime performances (Appendix I, pp. 277–87) reads like a table of contents for the *Metamorphoses*. On Ovid and pantomime, see McKeown 1979: 79; Cameron 2004: 229–30; and esp. Galinsky 1975: 67–69, 139; 1996: 265–66 for the pantomimic qualities of Narcissus, the rape of Philomela, and the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs. Galinsky focuses on the “untragic” nature of Ovidian narrative and its tendency towards sensationalism. I have wondered if there is a connection between what appears to be one of Ovid’s unique preferences in presenting myths—the silencing of

Similar questions arise: is the poet appropriating, challenging, improving upon, stifling, acknowledging, contaminating, or merely “alluding to” women’s tales? Morgan 2003 has argued that Ovid anticipated his critics’ railing against his “pandering to puerile instincts” by filling his text with irresponsible minors. Similarly, Wheeler has recently suggested that Pythagoras’s speech may be a “pre-emptive” parody aimed at the possibly polemical reception of the *Metamorphoses* among the “didactic-philosopher poets intent on demythologizing epic.”⁷¹ Does the poet also anticipate criticism for dealing with what some may have regarded as feminine narrative by placing women (and references to wool-working) directly into the text as storytellers? And perhaps these “spinning” tales lend support to the numerous scholars who have found in Ovid’s artists a symbol of creative expression struggling against an authoritarian regime. For what better image could there be of both self-containment and submission than women’s weaving and story-telling, which has always “provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness” (Parker 1989: 11)? In exile, Ovid compares his crime to that of Actaeon (*Tr.* 2.103–8), but perhaps in his punishment he is bound more closely to that of the Minyides: after weaving together splendid tales, he ends his life at the edge of civilization, forced to live in a place filled with barbaric speech and the language of wild beasts (*Tr.* 5.1.55–58), where he must squeak out his poetry in feral Getic (*Pont.* 4.13.17–38).⁷²

This revivification of traditional tales of the sort commonly dismissed by the elite also illuminates the epic’s consistent interest in narrative itself as

his metamorphosed characters—and the silent fate of the same mythological figures in pantomime. See Wulich 1974 for Ovid’s use of characters, settings, and actions commonly found in popular narrative, and Cameron’s evidence for the general popularity of myth among the Romans (2004: 228–33).

⁷¹ Wheeler 2009: 156; cf. Sharrock 2002b: 152–53 for Ovid’s foreknowledge of the criticisms of the “sincerity” of his amatory poetry. Casali 1997: 25 concludes his study of Ovid’s anticipation of criticism in the *Ars* in similar fashion: “Every poet knows (or thinks he knows) in advance what critics will look for in his work. It is particularly useful to bear this fact in mind in Ovid’s case. Ovid not only knows what his reader will look for in his work, and not only writes for a reader-commentator, for a reader who is interested in the ancient equivalent of the footnote; but he plays with this reader of his, anticipating the notes in the text, and preparing hermeneutic traps for him, interesting ‘problems,’ created only in order to be discussed.”

⁷² Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 165 with n33 observes that although Ovid continues to write in Latin in Tomis, he no longer “narrates” stories. For Ovid’s life in Tomis, see Rădulescu 2002: 69–105.

is so frequently commented upon in recent scholarship.⁷³ There was a long literary tradition of rejecting mythological themes, stirred up by Virgil (G. 3.3–8) and quite popular in later poets.⁷⁴ Ovid himself refers to traditional mythological tales as *mendacia vatum* (Am. 3.6.17; cf. Fast. 6.253), and twice makes long lists of mythological stories for the explicit purpose of challenging belief (*credulitas*) and compiling poetic topics that can't be believed (*fecunda licentia vatum*, Am. 3.12.41; cf. Am. 3.12.19–44; Tr. 4.7.11–20). He even summarizes his own epic (*maius opus*) as a collection of “bodies turned into shapes not to be believed” (*in non credendos corpora versa modos*, Tr. 2.64).⁷⁵ These are, of course, the very charges, indeed the same vocabulary, used against *fabulae aniles*.

All of this must remain speculative, of course. But for now we may perhaps feel more confident about the potentially important role women played in transmitting traditional tales in general. Women appear to have been famous, even infamous, for recounting familiar mythical narratives. At the very least, they could be realistically depicted as doing so. We may never be in a position to understand the actual influence of female story-telling on writers of the classical world, but I like to imagine Ovid's acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize for literature ending, in Oscarsque fashion, with something like: “And finally, I would like to thank those who inspired my interest in myth: Homer, Euripides, Callimachus, Parthenius ... and my nurse.”

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⁷³ “However, there is one point on which the interpreters seem to be unanimous, and that is the dominant importance of narrative in the *Metamorphoses*.” This was as true in 1973 when E. J. Kenney first wrote it as in his updated review in 2002 (Kenney 2002: 58; the original 1973: 117); cf. Rosati 2002: 291 on the “decisive role of story-telling in the interpretation of the *Metamorphoses*.”

⁷⁴ See the discussion with references in Kenney 2009: 144.

⁷⁵ See Boyle 2007: 357.

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