

# Unravelling Mythology: Mythological Figures Who Spin

by MIREIA ROSICH

<sup>1</sup> See CIRLOT, Juan Eduardo, *Diccionario de símbolos*, Ed. Siruela, Barcelona, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> HOUSTON, Jean, *La diosa y el héroe*, Editorial Planeta, Buenos Aires, 1993, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> HESIOD, *Theogony*. Chief source for exploring the cosmogony and theogony of Greek culture.

<sup>4</sup> HESIOD, *Theogony*, 217 and 901f. Hesiod describes them as the daughters of Night and Darkness and also as the daughters of Zeus and Themis. It is common to find more than one version.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>6</sup> Their original names are Moīpai, *Parcae* and *Nornir*, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Homer speaks of the Moirai, or Fates, as destiny, while Hesiod speaks of three figures.

<sup>8</sup> The sisters of the Moirai are the Horae, who also number three. Other figures like the Graces and the Gorgons are further examples of the many female triads.

<sup>9</sup> It is also catalogued as “Las Parcas”.

In many myths and fairy stories, spinning appears as a symbol of creation: it is to fashion the very thread of life. In these tales, spinning, singing and dancing<sup>1</sup> are magical actions that create and sustain life. Mythologies and religions are packed with symbols of this sort that must be disentangled exactly as if we were unravelling a thread. As Jean Houston says, “A myth is something that never was but that is always happening”<sup>2</sup>. The poetic and symbolic language that is used in all traditions when trying to address subjects of great importance is the only one that takes us to the boundary between the human and the divine, the visible and the hidden. Spinning and unravelling are highly symbolic in their own right. This paper sets out to look closely at the mythological figures who spin and to give examples of how they have been represented at different periods in the history of art.

## The Moirai: Spinners of Destiny

In Ancient Greece, the symbology of thread is part of the very mystery of life. In their account of the creation of the universe<sup>3</sup>, everything emerges from chaos. From out of the chaos came the original creatures, which gave human form to abstract concepts that frightened human beings as they stood helpless before the immensity of nature. The Moirai, or Fates, were the first spinners. They were the immediate daughters of Night (Nyx) and Darkness (Erebus)<sup>4</sup> and they personified the destiny of each person. No law or god, however strong he or she might be, could change destiny because the natural balance of the universe cannot be upset. As a result, even Zeus feared the Moirai<sup>5</sup>. The three Greek Moirai have a Roman counterpart in the Parcae and a Norse counterpart in the Norns<sup>6</sup>. These three<sup>7</sup> female deities – triads are very typical<sup>8</sup> – are tasked with regulating the life of mortals as symbolised by a thread. Clotho would spin the thread with a spinning wheel; Lachesis would spool and measure the length of the thread; and the third and most fearful sister, Atropos, would raise her golden shears to snip the end of the thread. *Atropos*<sup>9</sup> is the title of



Atropos, or The Fates, Francisco de Goya, 1819-23. Museo del Prado.



The Fates, Alfred-Pierre Joseph Agache, 1885. Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille.

*Ariadne and Theseus*,  
Niccolò Bambini, c. 1680-1700.



**10** Originally, it hung in the house known as the “Quinta del Sordo” (Villa of the Deaf) purchased by Goya on the outskirts of Madrid. For more information, see SÁNCHEZ CANTÓN, Francisco Javier, *Goya y sus pinturas negras en la Quinta del Sordo*, Barcelona, Vergara, 1963.

**11** Goya painted his series of “Black Paintings” in the Quinta del Sordo. *Idem*.

**12** Alfred-Pierre Joseph Agache (1843-1915) was a French academic painter. See MARTIN, Jules, *Nos peintres et sculpteurs, graveurs, dessinateurs*, Flammarion, 1897, p. 11.

**13** The symbol of the wheel of fortune is frequently used in antiquity and the Middle Ages. See CHEVALIER, J. and GHEERBRANDT, A., *Diccionario de los símbolos*, Barcelona, Herder, 2003.

**14** Between 3000 and 1200 B.C., the culture known as Minoan emerged on Crete. The culture was called Minoan because its discoverers connected it to the ruins of King Minos' Palace of Knossos and the well-known legend of the Minotaur.

a Goya painting, now hanging in the Prado Museum<sup>10</sup>, in which the Moirai appear represented with the painter’s hallmark style, familiar from his “Black Paintings”<sup>11</sup>. In a work by Alfred Agache<sup>12</sup> entitled *Les Parques* (or *The Fates*), the onlooker can see the three different tasks and the spinning wheel, which is also analogous with the wheel of fortune<sup>13</sup>. Is it chance, coincidence or the divine will that lies behind everything? Whichever it may be, it always turns, like a wheel.

### Ariadne: The Thread of the Labyrinth

Crete is a large island that was home to the enigmatic Minoan culture<sup>14</sup>, which is related to King Minos.<sup>15</sup> Ariadne gave a thread to the hero Theseus that saved his life because it helped him to find his way back through the intricate tunnels of the Minotaur’s cave after he had slain the beast. Ariadne and her thread are crucial because they enable Theseus to accomplish his feat and break the curse by tying one end of the thread to the labyrinth door and unwinding it as he goes forward. Curiously, few artists have depicted Ariadne herself carrying the thread. She is shown doing so, however, in a painting by the Italian Niccolò Bambini, where we witness her giving the spool of thread to the hero in the foreground<sup>16</sup>. Most painters and sculptors, by contrast, have frozen her at the moment when she awakens on the island of Naxos and realises that Theseus has abandoned her<sup>17</sup>. Yet the importance of Ariadne’s thread should not be forgotten, nor should what it symbolises about the inner labyrinths of all human beings.

**15** See GRIMAL, Pierre, *Diccionario de Mitología Griega y Romana*, Paidós, 1981. For classical sources on Ariadne: see Apollodorus, Plutarch, Pausanias or Ovid, to name but a few.

**16** Niccolò Bambini (1651-1736) was a Venetian artist of the early Baroque period.

**17** Ariadne escapes with Theseus, but he leaves her behind on the island of

Naxos. Most artists depict her abandonment: Tiepolo, Angelica Kauffman, Frederick Watts, John William Waterhouse and others.



### Athena: Patron of Weavers

**18** In fact, she is the daughter of Zeus and Metis, the goddess who personifies intelligence. Zeus had devoured Metis while she was pregnant. GRIMAL, *Op. cit.*

**19** The chryselephantine sculpture, which was made to represent Athena in the Parthenon, stood more than 12 metres high. It was the work of Phidias (fifth century B.C.), who is regarded as the greatest sculptor of Ancient Greece.

**20** Athena “symbolises wisdom, civilisation, the political community of the city, the spiritual and manual activities that must be carried out with intelligence: philosophy, poetry, music, and she is also the patron of handicrafts, such as the art of weaving”. MOORMANN, Eric M, *De Acteón a Zeus: temas de mitología clásica*

One of the most important gods in the Olympic pantheon is Athena, who sprang directly from the head of Zeus<sup>18</sup>. She gives her name to the city of Athens, over which she presides as protector. Venerated in the Parthenon with a gigantic sculpture made by Phidias<sup>19</sup>, she is a complex goddess linked to a host of myths and characters. Of interest here is her role as the patron of arts and crafts<sup>20</sup>, specifically of weavers and spinners. Athena is a master not only of literal weaving, using threads, but also of symbolic weaving, as a weaver of thoughts. She instils cunning in Odysseus and Penelope, among others<sup>21</sup>.

The Panathenaic Games, which were held in her honour, were one of the most important festivals in the Greek world. The most solemn and splendid part of the ceremonies was the procession to the Acropolis. A special robe (a *peplos*)<sup>22</sup> was brought to the goddess as an offering. Months before the ceremony, virgin girls known as *arrēphoroi*<sup>23</sup> were selected to take part in the weaving of the garment<sup>24</sup>. Making textiles stood as the quintessential example of women’s work and great care was taken in the training of girls and in the sanctification of the art.

*en literatura, música, artes plásticas y teatro*, Madrid, Akal, 1997.

**21** Athena appears at various points in *The Odyssey* to give them instructions. This is analysed symbolically in

HOUSTON, *Op. cit.* p. 222.

**22** This is a common garment worn by women throughout Ancient Greece.

**23** This is addressed in great detail in BURKERT, Walter, *El origen salvaje: ritos de*

*sacrificio y mito entre los griegos*, Barcelona, Acantilado, 2011.

**24** To finish the work, many other women would later join in. *Op. cit.* Burkert.



### Arachne: The Invisible Thread

<sup>25</sup> The myth is set out in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, VI, 5, among other sources.

<sup>26</sup> The scene of the fable of Arachne appears in the painting's background. Athena is the figure wearing the metal helmet, her chief attribute.

<sup>27</sup> This painting has been addressed by many authors. See: ANGULO, Diego, *La mitología en el arte español: del Renacimiento a Velázquez*, Madrid, Real Academia de Historia, 2010, pp. 215ff.

<sup>28</sup> King of Orchomenus. Eponymous with the Minyans, a name borne by the inhabitants of a region of Boeotia at the time of Homer. Op. Cit. GRIMAL.

<sup>29</sup> Dionysus was also called Bacchus (Βάκχος in Greek, *Bacchus* in Latin).

<sup>30</sup> The Bacchants, also known as *Bacchae* or *Maenads* or

As a great weaver, Athena is linked to the myth of Arachne<sup>25</sup>, a mortal who dared to challenge Athena to a contest and boasted that she was a better weaver. The insolence of a woman is usually punished by the gods with violence. Even though Arachne's ability was proved in the contest, Athena took offence and struck the girl with a shuttle. Distraught, Arachne tried to hang herself. The goddess, however, stopped her and turned her into a spider. Now she will always spin a beautiful, but invisible thread. A famous work by Velázquez known as *Las Hilanderas*<sup>26</sup> (*The Spinners*) depicts the scene in the background, where the viewer can distinguish Pallas Athena by her helmet<sup>27</sup>.

### The Minyades: Challenging Dionysus

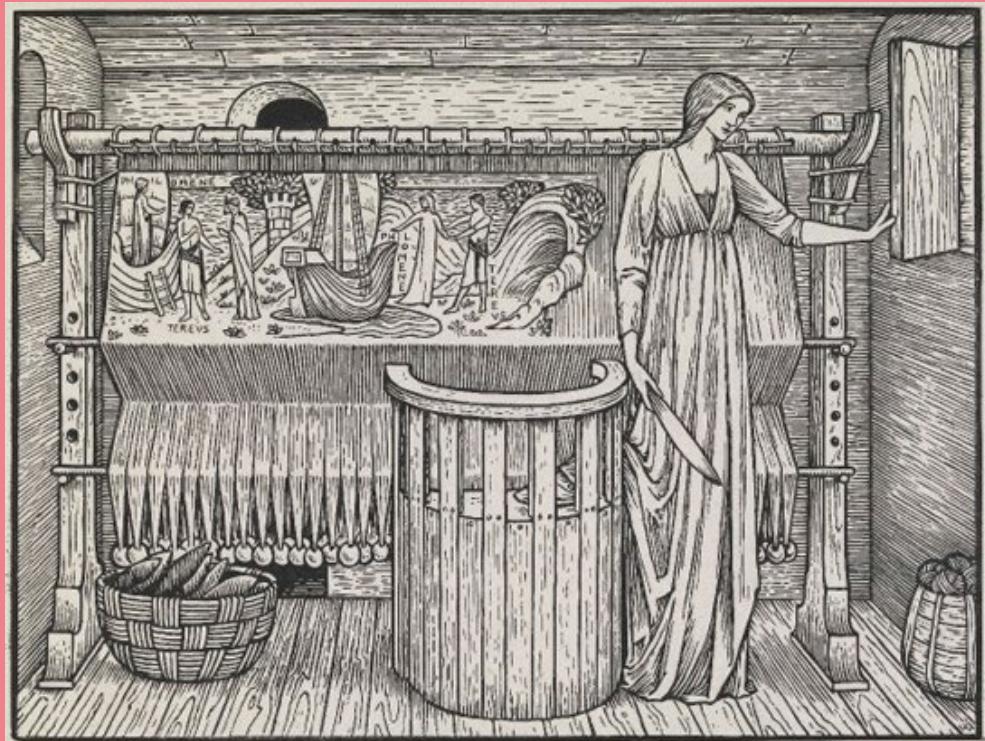
Clearly, the gods were not to be angered, because their wrath would fall inexorably on human beings. Precisely because they remained at home embroidering, the three daughters of Minyas<sup>28</sup>, known as the Minyades, were punished by Dionysus (or Bacchus)<sup>29</sup>, who would not stand for their failure to attend the festivals of his worship in the role of Maenads or Bacchants<sup>30</sup>.

*Thyiades*, were part of the large and frenzied following of Dionysus. The name Bacchant comes from Bacchus (see previous footnote). In the

world of art, the Bacchants have been highly represented, often covered in animal skins, wearing a crown of ivy like the god, and brandishing a

thyrsus. In classical literature, a key example appears in Euripides' play *The Bacchae*, an Attic tragedy of the fifth century B.C.

*Philomela*, Edward Coley Burne-Jones, 1896. British Museum.



<sup>31</sup> For more information on the Maenads and their rituals: PAUL VEYNE, François and LISSARRAGUE, Françoise, *Los misterios del Gineceo*, Madrid, Akal, 2003 and BURKERT, Walter, *Cultos mistericos antiguos*, Madrid, Trotta, cop. 2005.

<sup>32</sup> There are different versions of the sisters' punishment. See GRIMAL *Op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> The myth of Philomela is set out in PAUSANIAS, I, 41, 8f., APPOLODORUS, *Biblioteca*, III, 14, 8. OVID, *Metamorphoses* VI, 426.

<sup>34</sup> Procne, Philomela's sister, was able to sacrifice her own son Itys to punish her husband Tereus. She cooked her son and fed him to her unwitting husband. When he learnt what had happened, he snatched up an axe and pursued Procne and Philomela, who were rescued only when the gods turned them into birds. Sources cited in the previous footnote.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898) was an English painter and member of the Pre-Raphaelite

The festivals sacred to Dionysus were one of the few public appearances in rituals that were allowed to high-born women<sup>31</sup>. The punishment meted out by the god of wine for scorning him was to make vines and ivy grow from the chairs of the Minyades to give them milk and wine. Once they had imbibed, the young women fell deep into a mystical madness that led them to tear apart one of their own sons as if he were a stag<sup>32</sup>.

### Philomela: Embroidering Misfortune

A young child was also the scapegoat of a tale of adultery related to sewing. In this case, the protagonist is Philomela, an Athenian princess<sup>33</sup>, who was raped by her sister's husband. To conceal his attack, the brother-in-law cut out Philomela's tongue and shut her away in a cabin in the woods. Rendered unable to speak, she nevertheless wove a tapestry to tell her tale. When it reached her sister Procne, Procne took revenge by cooking her own son by the rapist and serving him as a meal to the man<sup>34</sup>. In a wood-engraving, Edward Burne-Jones<sup>35</sup> depicts Philomela shut away and standing by her loom.

### Homer's Weavers

Penelope is the most celebrated of the female figures who weave. To prepare a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes, her husband Odysseus' father, she weaves by day and unravels her work by night. With this activity, which was unimpeachable because it represented women's work par excellence, Penelope

Brotherhood, which was a British school of art in the late nineteenth century that reinterpreted many ancient myths and medieval legends.

*Penelope and the Suitors*,  
John William Waterhouse, 1912.  
Aberdeen Art Gallery.



**36** In the book by MOSSE, Claude, *La mujer en la Grecia clásica*, Madrid, Nerea, 1990, there are many reflections of this sort on the female characters in Homer.

**37** Circe was a magician or enchantress who lived on the island of Aeaea. She had magical powers and could turn men into animals. HOMER, *Odyssey*, X.

**38** Calypso was a nymph and queen of the island of Ogygia. She held Odysseus captive there for seven years, offering him immortality. *Ibid.*, X.

**39** Arete was the wife of Alcinous and mother of Nausicaa. They reigned over the island of the Phaeacians, *Ibid.*, VI.

**40** Helen, who was the wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, was kidnapped by the Trojan prince Paris. Her kidnapping set in motion the Trojan War, which is recounted in *The Iliad*. When the war ended, Helen was returned to the House of Menelaus. In *The Odyssey*, she is found back in Sparta.

**41** Telemachus, son of Odysseus, had gone to the court of Menelaus for news of his father, *Ibid.*, IV.

deceived her suitors for years<sup>36</sup> and was able to buy time for Odysseus to return home. The cunning of the hero has its equivalent in the cunning of the wife. Her iconography in works of art was established very early and the loom is the element that allows us to identify her at once. John William Waterhouse represents her at work on her weaving and besieged by her suitors. The archetype of the perfect wife and mother is fully joined to the fine art of weaving.

But the discreet and prudent Penelope, faithful wife of Odysseus, is not the only woman to appear at the loom in Homer's verses, although the plastic arts have not left as much evidence of the others. In *The Odyssey*, characters as enigmatic as the enchantress Circe<sup>37</sup> and the nymph Calypso<sup>38</sup> engage in weaving as well. Arete<sup>39</sup>, Queen of the Phaeacians, also spends her days weaving rich fabrics. Helen<sup>40</sup>, when she is taken back to the House of Menelaus, appears with a wicker basket of wool fleece and a spindle during the visit made by Telemachus<sup>41</sup>.

In *The Iliad*, Helen is weaving a large purple cloth depicting the Achaeans and Trojans<sup>42</sup>. Andromache is counselled by her husband Hector to return to her spindle and orders the slaves to join in the work as well<sup>43</sup>. Spinning and weaving are an intrinsic part of what is regarded as the female realm.

**42** HOMER, *The Iliad*, III, 125ff.

**43** *Ibid.*, VI, 490ff.



*Ulysses, Mercury and Circe*,  
Giovanni Stradano, 1572.  
Palazzo Vecchio. [See detail](#).



*Hercules and Omphale*, Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1537. Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum.

### Heroes Disguised as Women

**44** In the artistic iconography, Queen Omphale is represented with a lion's skin and club, typical attributes of Hercules, as if she has usurped his powers while the hero, by contrast, appears wearing women's clothes and weaving linen. One of the sources is DIODORUS OF SICILY, IV, 31.

**45** The painting *Hercules at the Court of Omphale* (1537) ("Hercules am Hofe der Omphale") has one version in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid and another in the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Brunswick, Germany.

**46** Marc Gabriel Charles Gleyre (1806-1874) was a painter of Swiss birth living in France.

**47** GRIMAL, *Op. cit.*

Precisely because of the inextricable association between women and the loom, men have picked up thread or spinning wheel when they need to disguise themselves among women. This is the case of Heracles (also known as Hercules) during his stay at the court of Queen Omphale<sup>44</sup>, where the great hero of twelve labours spends three years dressed in women's clothes and is represented weaving linen at the monarch's feet. The scene is also reflected in works by the artists Lucas Cranach<sup>45</sup> and Charles Gleyre<sup>46</sup>.

One might further ask whether Achilles engaged in weaving when his mother concealed him at the court of Lycomedes in Sciros<sup>47</sup> so that he would go unnoticed and not be carried off to the Trojan War. It is likely that he did. In this case, however, art has left no trace.



*Hercules and Omphale*, Charles Gleyre, 1862.

## Conclusions

**48** See FERNÁNDEZ, Olaya, *El Hilo de la Vida: Díosas tejedoras en la mitología griega*. Paper from the National University of Distance Education (UNED) in Spain.

**49** Carl Gustav Jung, Joseph Campbell, Marie-Louise von Franz, Christine Downing, Anne Baring, Jules Cashford, Marion Woodman and Jean Houston, to name but a few. There are many others.

**50** In Jungian psychology, this is the anima in the case of men and the animus in the case of women.

Spinning wool into yarn, weaving, managing servants and receiving visitors were all on the list of basic household tasks for women in Ancient Greece. The tasks reflected the social role of women. Generally, their lives unfolded within the home, which was known as the *oikos* and included not only the house itself, but also the entire estate, which would vary in size according to social status. As a result, many female characters used textile work for expression, coping, protection, worship and more. It was their territory and a host of studies have examined the subject from a feminist perspective<sup>48</sup>.

A more psychological approach to mythology, which is supported by many authors<sup>49</sup>, sees the act of weaving as a symbol for making the great tapestry of life. In this sense, the weave of fibres, both the warp and the woof, is fashioned out of life's great double dance: the male and the female (e.g., Penelope/Odysseus, Andromache/Hector and Hector/Omphale), the human and the divine (Athena/Arachne), the rational and the irrational (Minyades/Dionysus), and so on and so forth.

In addition, female figures appearing as silent weavers have been interpreted as corresponding to a person's anima<sup>50</sup>. While the hero's ego may be focused on frenetic action at the moment, he must return and merge again with his inner anima at some point. Both elements are fundamental to the story. Viewed under this prism, Penelope is Odysseus' anima and Ariadne is Theseus' anima (while Beatrice is Dante's and Dulcinea is Don Quixote's).

In short, unravelling mythology is a task that has no end. We can always return to it from a multitude of disciplines. ●