

21 Niobe

Arachne's remarkable skill, but she could not tolerate the mortal woman's disrespect. Because Arachne had taunted the gods with her scornful sense of humor, Zeus's grey-eyed daughter tore apart her tapestry and struck her three times upon her forehead with the shuttle.

Arachne, in defeat and despair, knit a rope around her neck and tried to hang herself. However, the Great Goddess took pity upon her and prevented her suicide by catching her falling body. Yet she did not release Arachne from further punishment. "Live, wicked wretch," grey-eyed Athena commanded, "but hang forevermore. Let my curse remain even upon your children and their children to the end of all your race."

As she left, Zeus's great daughter sprinkled Arachne with juice taken from the leaves of a poisonous aconite plant. As the drops touched Arachne, they completely altered her appearance. Her flowing hair shed and fell to the ground. Her nose and her ears vanished. Her head shrank, and the rest of her body diminished also, until all that remained of her was a large belly with spiny, jointed fingers where her legs and arms had been.

Thus, like the other mortal women who had offended the gods, Arachne found herself transformed. As a spider,³ she would weave eternally.

1. A rocky hill near the Acropolis in Athens, which became the location of the first Athenian court, composed of an aristocratic council of elders.
2. Poseidon flooded the region of Attica in his rage over his decision, and the Athenians continued to honor both gods.
3. Arachne has donated her name to the family to which spiders belong: the arachnids.

INTRODUCTION

Niobe, like Arachne, brought destruction upon herself. She, too, had achieved an extraordinary kind of excellence, in the birth of her many beautiful and handsome children, and like Arachne, Niobe became too proud of her achievement. It made her unreasonable. She insisted that she was a goddess. This is another indication of the temporary madness (*ate*) that comes from *hybris*. Her foolish attitude and her outrageous behavior brought ruin upon her and her family.

THE MYTH

Everyone in Lydia and Phrygia, on the west coast of Asia Minor, was discussing Arachne's arrogant actions and grotesque punishment. The news was so spectacular and intimidating that it traveled west, across the Aegean Sea to the Greek mainland. There, Niobe, the queen of the Boeotian city of Thebes, also heard about Arachne. The news should have impressed Niobe, first because she had known Arachne when they were young maidens in Lydia, and also, because Niobe's personality was very similar to Arachne's. However, possibly because this similarity was so great, Niobe did not learn from Arachne's experience. Consequently, her own arrogant attitude brought about her ruin and the ruin of her family. Niobe had much to make her arrogant: Her father was King Tantalus of Lydia; her husband was King Amphion of Thebes; and most important to her, she was the mother of fourteen glorious children.

Niobe's arrogance worried the daughter of the blind Theban prophet, Teiresias, who was similarly gifted in prophecy. Being concerned about the vengeance that the deathless gods take upon those mortals who do not honor them adequately, the prophetess walked through the streets of Thebes crying:

"Women of Thebes, dedicate sacred rites to the power of great Leto and to her mighty twins, Artemis of the Raining Arrows and Apollo of the Silver Bow. Mix sweet-smelling incense, and bind your foreheads with sacred wreaths of laurel. Great Leto bids me to offer you this counsel."

Every woman in Thebes hastened to obey the urgent summons, paying tribute to Leto and her deathless children. They wound the sacred laurel leaves around their foreheads; they fed their sacred fires with incense; and they prayed to the immortal gods as the prophetic had commanded them.

Queen Niobe appeared among the female worshippers with her royal guard in attendance. She was the picture of beauty and wealth in her gold-embroidered Phrygian cape. However, her fair face was clouded with rage. Her long hair trembled with her anger as she observed the religious ceremonies with haughty eyes and increasing fury.

"Women of Thebes!" she exclaimed. "You are mad to prefer the deathless gods to the mortal ones! Why are you worshipping Leto instead of your earthly queen? Leto is nothing but a feeble creation of mortal minds. She is invisible and impotent, whereas I am the daughter of King Tantalus of Lydia, who was the only mortal ever invited to feast with the immortals on Mount Olympus. My mother, one of the Pleiades, is the daughter of the great Titan, Atlas, now the mightiest mountain, on whose high shoulders the starry heavens rest. Zeus is both my grandfather and my father-in-law."

"My power commands both Boeotia and Phrygia across the Aegean Sea. My royal palace contains infinite riches. As if all this were not sufficient reason to worship me as a divine being, look at my face. I am as beautiful as any of your deathless goddesses."

"Finally, as the jeweled crown of all my joys, I am the mother of seven beautiful daughters and as many handsome, accomplished sons. When they marry, I will have twice as many children. Is this not ample justification for my pride? Is it not ample reason for you to worship me?"

"How dare you then worship Leto before you worship me? No one else respects her. Neither the sky nor the seas gave this banished goddess refuge. Even the earth refused to give her a place to bear her children. She was nothing more than a vagabond until the floating island of Delos accepted her and gave her its unstable land beset by waves. Moreover, after all her wanderings, she only gave birth to two children, whereas I have fourteen."

"Who doubts that I am happy? Who can doubt that I shall remain powerful? I am so rich and powerful that adversity cannot hurt me! No matter how much Misfortune might destroy, she would have to leave much more behind, so much do I possess. For example, suppose that a few of my children were to die. I have so many of them that Misfortune

could not possibly reduce them to a small number. Even then I could compete successfully with your Great Goddess, Leto. Her unimportant accomplishment of two children almost brings upon her the shame of a childless woman."

"So, women of Thebes: Remove your laurel wreaths, and turn away from these foolish religious rites."

The timid Theban women regretfully obeyed their arrogant queen. They stopped their sacred observances and removed their sacred laurel crowns. Yet, in their hearts they continued to adore their deathless goddess, Leto, and her immortal children, the Archer Goddess and the Lord of the Silver Bow.²

Meanwhile, high on Mount Cynthus, great Leto observed this insult to her divine honor and became enraged with Niobe. The goddess immediately sought her twin children and shared her impassioned fury with them.

"I am filled with grief and fury. Niobe of Thebes has publicly humiliated me. She is causing mortals to question my power as a goddess. Unless I am revenged, I shall lose all religious honors among mortal men."

"Furthermore, this cursed child of Tantalus dares to consider her own mortal children superior to you. She even calls me childless because I have borne only the two of you, whereas she has fourteen children. May she become childless as retribution for her wicked words."

Leto would have pressed on with further furious complaints, but far-shooting Apollo interrupted her. "Stop," he declared. "We have heard enough. More talk only will delay our planned revenge." His twin, Artemis, spurred by quick anger, agreed.

Then the children of Leto, Apollo of the Silver Bow and Artemis of the Golden Arrows departed from their aggrieved mother and glided swiftly through the air down to the Boeotian city of Thebes. They concealed their shining divinity beneath dark clouds and landed secretly upon the towering walls of the city. Apollo planned to make his long silver bow sing as he shot the seven sons of Niobe. Artemis would then rain her golden arrows down upon Niobe's seven daughters. Nothing diverted these deathless gods from their divine vengeance.

The spacious plain which lay in front of Thebes was dusty from the trampling hooves of the horses which young men daily exercised there, and from the tracks of chariots driven by other young men as they practiced their skills in warfare. Here the deathless twins found two of Niobe's seven sons. Wearing clothes of Phoenician purple, the young princes sat upon golden saddles as they practiced their riding skills.

Ismenus, Niobe's oldest child, was the first victim of the divine assault. He was reining his horse as he rounded a corner of the riding area when an arrow flew through his breast. He gave a sudden cry, and the reins

dropped from his dying hands. He slipped slowly off his horse and sank down upon the sand, lifeless.

Next, Niobe's son, Siphilus, heard the rattling sound of the arrow case and frantically tried to outrace his own death. However, his effort was in vain, for the arrow overtook him and struck him from behind, penetrating his neck and throat. Because he had been leaning low over his horse's mane, he plunged headlong over the head of his blood-smearred horse and died upon the sand.

Phoedemus and young Tantalus, having completed their own exercises, were practicing their wrestling skills. With well-oiled limbs they pressed against each other's power, their athletic bodies locked in an embrace. One arrow pierced both of the brothers' bodies as they stood locked in one another's mighty grip. Together they cried out in pain and fell bleeding upon the sandy earth, breathing their last.

Their brother, Alphenor, observed what had happened to the wrestlers and horrified, rushed to help them. However, he was too late. As he embraced their cold corpses, furious Apollo aimed his silver bow once again and severed the thread of Alphenor's life.

Niobe's sixth son, Damasichthon, was killed by a double wound. After being shot in the knee, he had bent over in an attempt to dislodge the arrow, when a second arrow fatally pierced his neck.

The last son, Ilioneus, in great terror raised his arms in prayer to the immortal gods. He addressed his plea to all of them since he did not understand the cause of this divine retribution.

"Oh deathless Olympians," he pleaded, "have pity upon me and excuse me from your fatal arrows!" Far-shooting Apollo heard the prayer, but his oath of divine vengeance was irrevocable. However, he made certain that his arrow killed Ilioneus instantly and painlessly.

When Niobe received word that her sons had been destroyed in their prime by shining arrows, she recognized the handiwork of Leto's mighty children. She was amazed that the deathless gods would dare to touch her sons, and enraged that they could and would wield such power.

Niobe's husband could not bear such sorrow. Hoping that death would release him from his plight, he plunged a dagger into his own breast and joined his sons in the kingdom of the dead.

Niobe now was pitied even by her enemies. Divine vengeance had taken its toll so quickly. The day before, the queen had proudly walked the streets of Thebes arrogantly flaunting her wealth and power, suppressing great Leto's sacred rites. Now, the deathless gods had made Niobe a widow and bereaved mother of seven children. As Niobe fell upon the cold corpses of her beloved sons and kissed them all for the last time, she raised her arms to the sky and cried:

"Cruel Leto. Feast upon my grief. I am filled with anguish over the

seven lives you have taken from me. I hope my deep sorrow will satisfy your wild fury.

"Yet, do not think that you have won any victory over me. In the end, I will prove to be stronger than you. I do not have as many children as before, but I still have my seven daughters, and that is many more children than you have, vindictive goddess!"

Niobe hardly had finished speaking when the bow string vibrated again. Arrow-raining Artemis had begun to kill Niobe's daughters. At the ominous sound of the bow, every heart felt the chill of terror except Niobe's. Her arrogance made her stubborn and insensitive as she sat, stunned, in the presence of her seven murdered sons.

Niobe's seven daughters, clothed in long black robes of mourning, their long hair unbound, stood weeping before the funeral biers of their brothers. One daughter was unsuccessfully attempting to withdraw an arrow from her brother's side when she, herself, was suddenly struck. As she kissed her brother, she died upon his cold corpse, amazed by her fate.

A second daughter, who was trying to comfort her mother's grief, suddenly became speechless as she died breathlessly from an arrow in her throat. A third daughter fell to her death as she tried to flee from her fate, and a fourth fell upon the corpse of one of her sisters, making that lifeless body her deathbed. A fifth daughter was fatally struck as she attempted to run from her deathless pursuer, while the sixth died shrieking in terror over the deaths of her five sisters.

To shield her last daughter, Niobe threw her own body over the child as a protective shield.

"Oh save this child," she cried. "She is the youngest, the last of many, and the only one for whom I plead for life."

However, the Archer Goddess slew the daughter in the midst of her mother's plea.

There Niobe sat, surrounded by death. Her husband, her seven sons, and her seven daughters were all dead. Niobe was now the Queen of Sorrows. Hardened by her grief, she was a statue of desolation. The wind did not disturb a hair upon her head. The roses in her cheeks faded into the pallor of grief. Her eyes did not move in her lowered head, nor did her mouth move, or her pulse beat. Her neck lost its ability to turn, her arms to move, her feet to walk. As Niobe sat, completely lifeless and still, she became transformed into a statue of solid stone. Only her tears remained warm and liquid, as they streamed down her marble face.

A whirlwind swept Niobe away from Thebes and across the Aegean Sea to her own country of Lydia, where it placed her upon the summit of a great hill. There from her marble cheeks, tears of mourning flow eternally, night and day.³

Such divine revenge struck fear into every heart. With renewed zeal,

mortal women brought offerings to great Leto's sacred altars and proclaimed her awesome power.

1. Tantalus is best known for his famous punishment. In return for tricking the gods, he was chained forever to a tree in Tartarus, beneath luscious fruit he couldn't reach and up to his chin in water that turned to dust whenever he tried to drink it.
2. Artemis and Apollo.
3. There is a human-shaped cliff in Lydia which appears to weep in winter when the sun strikes its snowy summit and melts the snow.

REFLECTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Niobe and Arachne.
2. Arachne and Niobe meet in the market place. Role-play a conversation that would be consistent with each character.
3. Would Athena have punished Arachne if Arachne's tapestry *had* glorified the gods? Explain your answer.
4. Would Athena have let Arachne feel superior to all other mortals as long as she respected the gods? Explain.
5. Niobe was excessively proud of her possessions. Do you think wealth inevitably corrupts a person's values? Explain.

22 Erysichthon

INTRODUCTION

Erysichthon was another mortal who was punished for his *hybris* and *hê*. Like Arachne and Niobe, he caused his own ruin by his attitude and actions. Erysichthon had no respect for another's property and, in this case, the property was sacred to a god. When he was given an opportunity to change his ways, like Arachne, he refused. He saw no difference between himself and a god. In fact, he must have considered himself superior to the gods in order to have felt that he had the right to destroy the sacred grove.

His punishment convinced anyone who might have been tempted to lose sight of his mortal condition, that the gods did not tolerate *hybris*. Man must know himself and know his place in the universal scheme. Once again, the fact that the "punishment fits the crime" augments the appeal of this myth.

THE MYTH

Fair-weathered Demeter dearly loved her sacred grove of trees in Thes-saly, and spent many happy hours in its shade. Therefore, she became furious when Erysichthon, an impious young prince, decided to desecrate the sacred grove by building a palace with the sacred trees.

The prince gathered twenty gigantic servants, who together possessed the strength to uproot an entire city. He armed them with hatchets and with double-bladed axes and led them to great Demeter's sacred grove, commanding them to fell the trees. He announced that he himself would begin with the giant oak tree in the center, whose branches seemed to reach to the heavens. When he noticed that his servants reacted with reluctance, the prince announced that he would behead anyone who disobeyed his command.