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A Tapestry of Riddling Links: Universal Contiguity in A. S. Byatt's "Arachne"¹

María Jesús Martínez Alfaro

- ¹ It is generally agreed that the postmodern critical consciousness is particularly sensitive to the phenomena of textual transformations and shows a definite preference for rewriting as a frame for critical discussion. As Matei Calinescu points out, "rewriting" is a "relatively new and fashionable term for a number of very old techniques" (1997: 243) but it is, undeniably, and as he himself remarks, what most critics and readers in general have in mind when dealing with much contemporary literature. Whatever the search was for only a few generations ago, the hunt now is "for secret sources, implied models, parodies, and other forms of declared or oblique rewriting" (248). It need not be argued here that the "originality" of present-day art lies in the way in which it makes use of second-hand materials. Writing over and against what has been written, subscribing and, simultaneously, questioning other forms, expressing the new through the old and the already-known, this is what constitutes the essence of most postmodernist literature, a literature which is both enjoyable and disquieting, playful and serious and, above all, aware of its own palimpsestuous (intertextual) quality.
- ² Certain historical periods have proved to exert a greater attraction than others on postmodernist writers and readers alike: the Restoration, the eighteenth century, and, above all, the Victorian era. The interest in the latter has even led to the rise of a new genre, which Sally Shuttleworth first called "the retro-Victorian novel" (1997) and which is now commonly referred to as "the neo-Victorian novel". What I have noticed of late (which does not mean that the phenomenon is that recent, but simply, that this is something I have been thinking about for a relatively short time) is that many writers are looking back farther and beyond the historical periods mentioned above in order to find inspiration in ancient myths and legends. As Marina Warner (2002: 210-11) has pointed out, Hellenic and Roman narratives have fed writers for millennia,

but there is indeed "a fresh surge of hunger for revisionings [of these ancient narratives], attested by many contemporary writers' inventions and versions". Thus, there is Christopher Logue's *War Music* (1997), a combination of translation, adaptation and new poem inspired that builds upon Homer's *Iliad*; Barry Unsworth's *The Songs of the Kings* (2003), a retelling of the events prior to the Greek army sailing for Troy particularly reliant on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*; Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1991), a play which conflates Sophocles and the troubles in Northern Ireland; Ted Hughes' best-selling *Tales from Ovid* (1997), containing twenty four tales in verse translated from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; the American poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *The Throne of Labdacus* (2000), an elegiac meditation on the story of Oedipus uttered by a poetic speaker that enters the mind of the oracular god Apollo; the Canadian Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998), a verse novel about a gay love affair between Heracles and the ancient monster Geryon; Marina Warner's *The Leto Bundle* (2002), a novel inspired by the figure of the female in permanent exile (Leto was made pregnant by Jupiter and had to escape the wrath of his wife, Juno) and whose plot sweeps from mythological times to the Middle Ages, to Victorian Europe, and then to the present day; Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles: A Novel* (2002); etc. More names could be added to the list, but these, I think, are enough to illustrate my point.

- 3 In an essay entitled "Old Tales, New Forms", A. S. Byatt (2000: 123) approaches this resurgence of ancient narratives as part of a more general movement in which other literatures besides those written in English participate. This is, she says, something she found out as early as 1990, when she was chairperson of the judges for the first presentation of the European Literature Prize. By then, she had spent eleven years teaching English and American Literature, and was curious to know what was going on in contemporary Europe, of which she and her writing were also a part:

I can remember the moment when I realised I had discovered a pattern of forms and ideas new at least to me —and at the same time as old as Western literature. I began to read Roberto Calasso's *Le Nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* [*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*] late one night in bed in the summer on a French mountainside. I was still reading at dawn, hanging over the edge of the bed, and what I was reading was something I already knew —the Greek myths retold at a gallop, sensuous and immediate, and at the same time threaded through with brilliant and knotty reflections on the relations of myth, story, language and reality.

Looking at the other books that excited me among the entries I began to discern a general European interest in storytelling, and in thinking about storytelling. (Byatt, 2000: 123)

- 4 The frequent recourse to ancient myths and legends on the part of contemporary writers perfectly fits the pattern Byatt refers to in the quotation above. In this context, it is not difficult to understand the appeal exerted in the last decades by Ovid, especially by his *Metamorphoses*. Ovid is one of the greatest storytellers in ancient literature, but, beyond that, the very concept of metamorphosis seems to be at the core of present-day literary practices: already-existing material is time and again pressed into new ways of telling the world/the self, in which the unitary, the discreet, the permanent, simply do not obtain. Tales of metamorphoses embody both the transformational force affecting stories, which shift forms like the characters in Ovid's poem, and also the transformational power of storytelling itself.
- 5 Antonia Byatt's "Arachne", which constitutes the focus of this article, is part of an anthology entitled *Ovid Metamorphosed* (2001), which somehow doubles the idea of metamorphosis back on itself by turning the stories in the classical poem into the

object of the same shape-shifting force they tell about. Its editor, Philip Terry (2001: 15), quotes Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun when, in the introduction to their anthology of new poetic translations —*After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (1994)— they write: "Ovid is once again enjoying a boom". This "boom", Terry explains, continued with the publication in 1997 of Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid*. In the preface to his best-selling work, Hughes approaches Ovid's poem in the light of a change of paradigm: the *Metamorphoses* is contemporaneous with the birth of Christ, this being a time when belief in the Roman gods had collapsed and Christianity was still some way off. Thus, the editor of *Ovid Metamorphosed* invites us to connect this view of Ovid's work as emerging from the psychological gulf that opens at the end of an era with the fact that the Ovidian "boom" to which he relates his own collection is taking place, precisely, at the turn of the century. Thus, the renewed interest in Ovid's work makes sense in the context of the gulf that opens at our own *fin de siècle*, as if the dynamics of metamorphosis were in tune with our postmodern times. In fact, metamorphosis in Ovid's poem is something that happens at critical moments, and, similarly, it seems that tales of metamorphoses have often been resorted to through the ages as a vehicle for expressing conflicts and uncertainties. Moreover, many of the concepts that critics have used to describe postmodern fiction are not very different from Ovid's techniques: play, irony, repetition and parody, heterogeneity, disjunctive style and difference, disruption of borders, nesting (stories within stories), plurivocity, ambiguity, and a view of the self and of meaning as if in constant flux, inapprehensible, unstable, constantly becoming other.

- 6 Convinced that it would be an impossible task for a single author to try and rework Ovid's stories by him/herself, Philip Terry asked a number of writers to contribute to his collection by writing whatever they liked, so long as there was some connection with the work of Ovid. The range of stories and variety of tone is wide, thus recapturing something of the heterogeneity of Ovid's literary production. As to Byatt's "Arachne", this is not a short story in the traditional sense, but, in the editor's words, "a mixed genre narrative weaving together elements of autobiography, essay, art history and sheer story telling" (Terry, 2001: 3). There is much in Byatt's piece that recalls what Italo Calvino referred to as "universal contiguity" in an essay entitled, interestingly, "Ovid and Universal Contiguity" (in *The Literary Machine*). It is the purpose of this article then, to see how this idea of universal contiguity applies to a postmodernist narrative that builds on one of Ovid's stories of metamorphoses in order to produce a beautiful tapestry of interconnected tales.
- 7 The poetry of the *Metamorphoses*, Calvino says, is mainly rooted in the "indistinct borderlands between diverse worlds" (1989: 147). Even at the most basic formal level, Ovid's organisation of his material tends to underline this fact. Thus, the end of a story rarely coincides with the end of one of the books into which the poem is divided. As Calvino explains, this is a technique to whet the reader's appetite for the next instalment, but it is also an exponent of the work's contiguity, which would not have been divided into books were it not because its length required a certain number of scrolls (160). The universe of the *Metamorphoses* is full of tales in which terrestrial forms and stories blend with celestial forms and stories. This contiguity between gods and human beings is just an illustration, an instance, of the contiguity between everything there is: gods and goddesses, men and women, fauna, flora and the mineral world. Moreover, the connections between gods, men, and nature do not imply, in Calvino's words, a definite "hierarchical order, but an intricate system of interrelations in which

each level can influence the others [...]. Myth, in Ovid, is the field of tension in which these forces clash and balance" (150).

- 8 The poetry of "Arachne", I would say, lies in a similar clash and balance, contiguity and blending, tension and interrelation, between the different elements that make up Byatt's piece. Moreover, these elements generate in turn so many echoes that the intricate web they constitute seems to be only a part of that which the reader may continue to weave just by tracing the references that the narrative contains and/or by adding his/her own connections to the subject of spiders and weaving, as the author herself does. Interestingly, one reaches the end of the narrative without actually being given "a sense of an ending". What one gets, instead, is a feeling that the piece could be much longer, as if Byatt's contribution were just long enough to show that there is no end to possible connections.
- 9 There are four main narrative threads in Byatt's "Arachne", distinguishable by the use of different typefaces. The effect is that of a patchwork, as if the text was a quilt made up of various pieces and materials. Thus, what the reader finds are sections of varying length, each separated by a blank space from the following section, which is invariably written in another typeface. Each of these four typefaces alternates with the others throughout the narrative, a fact which logically confronts the reader with the challenge of finding out the rationale that accounts for the use of a certain typeface in each specific fragment: from the very start, one realises that there must be something that ties together the sections that look the same on the page. This formal fragmentation also produces the same effect as the Ovidian stories left in mid-air at the end of each book: the reader anxiously waits for the next instalment, while simultaneously becoming aware of the curious ways in which the themes dealt with in the sections written in the same typeface intertwine with those explored in the rest. In strict order of appearance, the first narrative thread is that of autobiography, and so, the first person singular is used in these sections to tell about the author's girlhood and schooldays, her interest in Greek myths, her grandmother's skill at embroidery, her failed attempts to learn, etc. The second thread is the scientific one: these sections focus on real spiders and comment on their anatomy, the features and abilities of different species, the properties and composition of spiderweb.... The third thread leads the reader back to Ovid, since it consists of a retelling of the conflict between Athena and Arachne as presented in the *Metamorphoses*, and a description of the weaving contest between them, followed by the goddess' decision to transform the girl into a spider. The fourth thread is that of Velázquez's *Las Hilanderas*: a description of the painting and of its various interpretations, with a special emphasis on the by now generally accepted view of the work as a version of the fable of Arachne.
- 10 In a sense, then, one can say that the change in typeface is also a change of subject. In another sense, though, there are also noticeable differences between the sections in which the same typeface is used. For instance, what I have called the autobiographical thread begins with the author's childhood experiences, but as the narrative advances, it evolves into a reflection on literary spiders. This is still connected with the author, as these literary spiders are, in some cases, spiders in her novels (there is Christabel's writing of spiders in *Possession*) and, in other cases, spiders she has read about in other writers' work (Thomas Browne, Pope, Swift, Emily Dickinson, etc.). Written in the same typeface, we also find a description of an exhibition of tapestries by Danish women which Byatt visited in 1998, and whose technique —similar to Byatt's— consisted in

mixing tradition and novelty by having resort to classic and uncommon/unexpected materials (silk, wool, but also plastic strings, feathers and slivers of wood). Moreover, and as pointed out above, if there are differences within the overall coherence of each narrative thread, there are also all kinds of connections and parallelisms between what is told in sections written in different typefaces. Thus, the retelling of the conflict between Athena, goddess of weaving, and Arachne, the proud mortal that dared to compare her art to that of the goddess, is paralleled by the description of Velázquez's painting; the description of the tapestries that Athena and Arachne wove during the contest intended to settle down the matter of who was better at weaving has a counterpart in the description of the tapestry in the background of *Las Hilanderas*: a recreation of the Rape of Europa, which is, in turn, one of the scenes in Arachne's tapestry, according to Ovid's poem. Women weaving appear in the myth, and in the painting, but they are also part of the author's family: there is her grandmother, who was a dressmaker and who "could, as I could not, make huge raised furls of satin-stitching, whorls of petals whose colours were dappled and shot with light and shadow, not real flowers, but with an original shifting brilliance"²; her aunt, an infant teacher who used to teach little boys in her class to sew, as well as little girls; and, above all, her great-aunt Thirza, whom the author refers to as a "mythical figure" that she always remembers among exquisitely bright tablecloths and cushions embroidered on ivory satin (A 139). As she grew older, Byatt wrote a story entitled *Racine and the Tablecloth* in which "Thirza stood for my ordinary origins, and her own bright work, for women making things in snatched time" (A 139). And all this leads the reader to so many other things in the narrative: the colours and the brightness of the embroidery are the colours and chiaroscuros in *Las Hilanderas*, and also the colours of the different species of spiders, the radiance of spider's webs when they catch light and look like morning dew on green hedges, or their dull greyiness in the corner of an uninhabited house; the author's ordinary origins are also Arachne's, as Ovid's account of the myth begins precisely by emphasising the ordinariness of the girl; Arachne's rebelliousness is also that of the young Byatt when listening to her headmistress imply that making tablecloths was a useful occupation for a girl, while writing was not; this head-mistress is the nay-sayer, like Athena when she makes it clear to Arachne that there are dreams a girl like her cannot have; Arachne's thread is the writer's narrative line, her skill at weaving is the author's (Ovid's, Byatt's) skill at writing; weaving becomes one with writing (spinning yarns) but weaving is also a pre-eminent figure of women's work... Human and animal, art and nature, myth and reality, male and female, fact and fiction, science and storytelling, writing and weaving, painting and literature, each different and each blending with the other, as the sections in "Arachne": Byatt's version of universal contiguity.

- 11 It is clear to anyone that has read anything by Byatt that her mind is naturally inclusive. As Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds put it in the introduction to a volume on Byatt's work, "nothing is too large for her, and nothing too small. But everything is connected and inclusive. One idea will always lead on to another as nothing comes to her singly" (2004: 5). Her work gives us access to an often overwhelming breath of reference and systems of thought: literature, philosophy, history, painting, entomology, biology, biography, law, etc. Autobiography is not so frequent, though. As Byatt admits, "one of the imperatives of my kind of very, very limited autobiography is that it shouldn't really talk about the fountains within."³ And yet, she admits that "unexpectedly and for me unusually" the first person singular

resorted to by the narrator in "Arachne" "briefly coincides with this woman" (in Chevalier, 1999: 17, 18). It is true that the first person is there, but it is also true that it is never there for long, as if the narrative gave formal expression to the author's being unused to (and surprised at the eruption of) autobiographical writing. If the text is woven as if by a spider, the spider is present but she does not stay at centre of the web. On the contrary, as soon as it meets the author, the narrative moves away from her (away from the "I" of the narrative voice), as if in a constant attempt to bring in "things other". And this, which refers to a particular narrative piece and to this first-person singular working in it as a simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal force, also holds good when it comes to Byatt's understanding of her involvement with writing. Thus, she sees herself

as a person who is, as it were, the meeting point of a lot of things coming in, which then, on the whole, come out. There is a sort of flow of light coming in and of light emitted, whereas if it all comes in and you can't release it, it destroys you. There is a sense in which, if I can't write, experience becomes intensely oppressive, and this is to do with connections, and the connections go through me [...]. It isn't personal, in a sense. Really, it is the sense of a whole string of connections coming through you, and it is almost your duty to add to them to complicate them, to put your little bit in and send them on their way. (in Chevalier, 1999: 19-20)

- 12 Things come to her, but she never stays in things just as things do not stay in her: she lets them go, even if slightly changed. This is the eternal flux of metamorphosis, a metamorphosis that is in turn linked with the recurrence of myth, with the development of stories and of art as a whole, as if there was a never-ending thread of connections, of version of versions, and reworkings, and retellings. "Arachne" is also about this thread: the thread that links Byatt with Ovid and with those that have reworked his stories of metamorphoses in between; the thread tying together female weavers in classical myths and tales, and Byatt's family, and the Danish women weavers in the exhibition she visited in 1998 (referred to as "Northern Arachnes", A 155), and women working with textiles since ancient times.... Also Velázquez, of course, is "in a line, a thread, of emulation, of reworking from Ovid to Titian to Rubens" (A 143). He made a version of the Ovidian tale in *Las Hilanderas*, but he also reworked, within this painting, Titian's *The Rape of Europa* or, even, very probably, Rubens' copy of Titian's version of the mythical story.⁴ As Byatt says she herself does when writing, Velázquez also put his little bit before he sent all these things back on their way. He added the painting of light on textiles, he added the spinners.
- 13 Byatt does not substantially alter Ovid's version of the myth in "Arachne", which is the technique used by other contributors to the collection.⁵ Her rewriting consists, rather, in combining the fable of Arachne with things other than Ovid's story, just as in her other works she combines literature with things other than literature (or not so "other", after all). Thinking of it, it seems natural that of all the stories of metamorphosis she could have chosen, Byatt should decide on Arachne's. To begin with, the metaphor of the tapestry fits perfectly within this idea of connections, which is also at the core of spiderweb architecture, and even, ultimately, at the core of the image of the labyrinth: both are, after all, beautiful designs and dangerous traps. Similarly, the narrative in "Arachne" seems to teasingly oscillate between scrupulous patterning and random improvisation, between ordered coherence and lack of design, between reassurance and disorientation, between sameness and difference. Arachne meets Ariadne.⁶

- 14 There are, however, other figures/stories in classical mythology related to the image of the thread and that of weaving: to the already-mentioned Ariadne, one could add the names of such female characters as Philomena, Penelope.... But what makes Arachne's myth different, what definitely presents it as a logical choice in the light of the all-inclusive dynamics of Byatt's enterprise, is that this specific episode in Ovid's poem can be said to contain, in a sense, all the tales in the work that contains it. The *Metamorphoses* is a miscellany, a summary of the world. If Ovid's poem is about the contiguity and blending of everything there is, the *mise en abyme* in Arachne's tale turns it into the illustration *par excellence* of universal contiguity. Where is this *mise en abyme*? In the tapestries woven by the story's protagonists.
- 15 As Italo Calvino points out, in "the vast catalogue of myths that the entire poem in fact is, the myth of Athena and Arachne may in its turn contain two smaller catalogues aimed in opposing ideological directions" (1989: 151). Ovid describes with minute detail the tapestries woven by each contender. Athena depicts the great figures of Olympus with their traditional attributes, the main gods in all their splendour and grandiosity, while on the corners she includes four scenes portraying four divine punishments inflicted on mortals who challenged the gods. Arachne concentrates on the cruel and lustful behaviour of Olympian deities, the guileful seductions of Jove, Neptune, Bacchus, Apollo... all slipping into different forms, all wicked and deceptive. The two tapestries contain characters and tales that appear in the poem (the selection is representative enough to see it as standing for the poem as a whole). Moreover, they contain images of metamorphoses within a story of metamorphosis, and they show, in a condensed form, the contiguity of divine, human, animal, vegetable and mineral worlds illustrated by the *Metamorphoses* in general, as well as by the tale which contains it in particular. It is clear that, as Calvino says, Athena's and Arachne's smaller catalogues are aimed in opposite ideological directions. Athena concentrates on the grandiose and powerful side of divinity; Arachne on the cruel, lascivious and predatory one. Athena tries to induce respect, reverence, fear; Arachne incites to irreverence and moral relativity. The precision with which Ovid describes the working of the looms might suggest a possible identification of the poet's work with the weaving of a tapestry. But which? Who wins the contest in Ovid's poem? Whose side is the poet on, Athena's or Arachne's? And Calvino answers: "Neither one nor the other". Anyone who inferred from this episode that the poem as a whole should be approached from the point of view suggested by Athena's tapestry —since Arachne's challenge is cruelly punished— would be as mistaken as anyone privileging Arachne's position —since the poetic rendering favours the guilty victim. Byatt also refers to this significant ambiguity in Arachne's story and agrees with Calvino when he concludes that Ovid's poem contains all the stories, all the images, all the meanings, without deciding how they should be read (151-52). This is, he says, the ambiguity proper of myth, whose nature, Byatt explains in "Arachne", is that of "a fluid, endlessly, interconnected web" (A 143).
- 16 If myth is ambiguous by nature, if Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be read in different ways and no reading is superior to the other, if the final meaning of Arachne's story cannot be taken for granted, it should not come as a surprise that the relationship between this particular episode in Ovid's poem and Velázquez's *Las Hilanderas* should exhibit a similar indeterminacy, which is in turn intensified by the way Byatt deals with it. The painting is obviously about women's weaving but, once the connection is established in Byatt's narrative, the reader somehow expects to be explained how Velázquez's work

can be viewed as a version of Arachne's myth. However, this is something that s/he should find out for him/herself. *Las Hilanderas*, Byatt points out, depicts the fable of Arachne but it is, above all, a painting about vision and skill (A 146). Thus, she chooses to focus on that —on the painter's technique, the combination of colours, the different planes, the effects of light and shadow, etc.—rather than account for the painting as a retelling of the contest between Athena and Arachne. The fact that the painting is a reworking of the myth is mentioned more than once in the narrative, but mentioning is not the same as elucidating. This may be part of a strategy intended to involve the reader in the story: by suggesting a link without developing the connection, the narrative invites him/her to become an active participant, to search for the connection him/herself. When looked at from a different angle, though, the sections on *Las Hilanderas*, the detailed description of the painting *qua* painting (technicalities included), can be said to be a metacomment on two different codes —those of painting and writing— and on the complementarity of the imaginative processes one may associate with the experiences that each of them afford to the onlooker and the reader, respectively.

- 17 Painting has to do with images on a canvas, writing, with words on the page. But just as images tell a story, so can words paint images to the reader's inner eye. Reading Ovid's elaborate and vivid description of Athena's and Arachne's tapestries, one gets involved in the kind of imaginative process that starts with the word and ends with the visual image. Yet the reader of "Arachne" is not reading Ovid, but Byatt's (rather faithful) reproduction of Ovid's description. This implies that what the reader experiences when reading Byatt is barely similar to what she experienced when reading Ovid. In a word, both Byatt (in reading Ovid) and the reader (in reading Byatt) move from the words on the page to the mental image of what the tapestries were like. The case is different with the sections on *Las Hilanderas*, since here Byatt's intertext is not a literary work but a painting in the Prado Museum, reproduced in hundreds of books and internet pages. Accordingly, the imaginative processes reader and author get involved in seem to run in opposite directions: in describing *Las Hilanderas*, Byatt begins with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression; in reading her detailed description, the reader imaginatively returns to the painting, creates a visual image by using her words as a point of departure.
- 18 There is a word in Italian, Calvino says, which does not exist in English: the adjective in question is "icastico" and it applies to whatever evokes a clear, incisive, memorable visual image (1996: 55). Byatt's writing on *Las Hilanderas* could be described with that adjective, which means that "Arachne" surely complies with one of the values —visibility— that Calvino suggested should be saved for twenty-first century literature. In the list that he puts forward in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he includes visibility, as he explains, in order to "give warning of the danger we run in losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colours from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of images" (92). However, in spite of (or, perhaps, "because of"?) the highly visual quality of Byatt's prose, my first impulse when I finished reading "Arachne" was to look for a reproduction of Velázquez's painting in order to conflate both. Word and image were there, in front of me. "Which one works better?", I asked myself, aware of the fact that this question lay at the core of a long and complicated debate.

- 19 As J. Hillis Miller (1992: 159) points out in *Illustration*, the relation of picture to word has by now become a distinct topic for theoretical and historical investigation, but this issue was the object of explicit theoretical reflection already in the eighteenth century, for example in Denis Diderot's "Lettre sur les Sourds et Muets" (1751), an essay that ends with a comparison of poetry, painting and music as ways of representing a dying woman. "Is a picture worth a thousand words?", Miller asks, and he comments on different positions on the subject as illustrated by a wide range of authors. There is, for instance, Mark Twain's passage in *Life on the Mississippi*, which Miller quotes to illustrate Twain's argument for "the helplessness of picture without word". Miller explains it in the following terms:

A picture presents something, but what that something is cannot be known for sure unless the picture is labelled, placed back within the context of some diachronic narrative. The interpretation of picture is, for Twain, necessarily verbal. Without some explicit indication in words of what frozen narrative moment the picture represents, the spectator vibrates back and forth among contradictory alternative stories [...]. This is just what Benjamin was to argue in the essay on "The Work of Art" [...]. In order to be comprehensible, both say, a picture must plainly illustrate a story. Words are necessary to indicate what story it is. (Miller, 1992: 60-62)

- 20 Interestingly, part of the confusion involving the interpretation of Velázquez's *Las Hilanderas* has to do with the labelling of the painting. Velázquez painted it around 1658, for a friend named Pedro de Arce, a *funcionario* in the royal palace. For over two centuries, no connection was thought to exist between the painting and Arachne's myth: the picture was believed to represent a scene from everyday life. Thus, in the inventory of Luis de la Cerda, IX Duke of Medinaceli, who in 1711 surrendered the painting to the royal collection, the work is listed as "*Mujeres que trabajan en tapicería*". In the inventories of royal collections the subject was also identified as a view of women at work in a tapestry factory: it first appears as an entry in an inventory dated 1772, where it is referred to as "*Una fábrica de tapices y varias mujeres hilando y devanando*", while two years later, in 1774, it appears as "*quadro llamado de las Hilanderas*". No theme other than this was discovered in the work, that is, till the twentieth century. The key year in the recovery of the mythological subject is 1948,⁷ when the renowned archival researcher María Luisa Caturla published an inventory of the original owner, Pedro de Arce, dated 1664. In this inventory the painting is listed as "*La fábula de aragne*". Later articles by Diego Angulo Íñiguez (1948) and Charles Tolnay (1949) definitely confirmed that *Las Hilanderas* was a version or an illustration, however original, of an episode in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Brown 2003).
- 21 In this case, at least, the history of the interpretation of the painting supports Twain's and Benjamin's view, as shown in the quotation above, that words are necessary to point out what the picture is about: it was the discovery of the label attached to the painting in the original owner's inventory that definitely threw light on the mythological connection. And, probably, it is also true that this label is still necessary to mark out the link between the scene depicted by Velázquez and Arachne's myth. However, the fact that the subject of the painting was identified did not solve the problem of interpretation. As Jonathan Brown points out:

Far from ending discussion of the painting, the retrieval of the subject opened a new chapter in the historiography of *Las Hilanderas*. Velázquez's composition is highly allusive and ambiguous. By virtue of his original conception of the antique text, the artist raises questions which both demand and frustrate attempts to answer them. Who are the women in the foreground? Who are the elegantly-

dressed females who accompany Minerva and Arachne? Why did Velázquez reverse the logic of the composition, placing the climactic moment of the story in the distance instead of in the foreground? And what is the purpose of the quotation from Titian's *Rape of Europa*? By a cruel paradox, the correct identification of the subject only obfuscated the significance of this masterpiece. [...] It would be tedious to review and analyze in detail the myriad of interpretations that have been inflicted on *Las Hilanderas* over the last six decades. Their authors assert with absolute conviction, on the basis of the assembled evidence, that they have unlocked the "secret" of this masterpiece. Unconsciously, however, they make the opposite point —that no single interpretation can possibly be sufficient. (Brown 2003)

- 22 The conclusion is, then, the same as that reached by Calvino when considering the interpretation of Arachne's episode and, by extension, that of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. As was the case there, the possible interpretations of the painting need not be regarded as mutually exclusive; on the contrary, diverging interpretations can be said to co-exist and enrich one another, as do, no doubt, literature and painting. If one must not try to come down on either side of the contest in the myth, it is surely off the point to try and prove the superiority of word over image, or vice versa. In a farther illustration of what Calvino calls universal contiguity, then, what Byatt's piece ultimately suggests in this respect is that it is much more interesting to see how literature and painting connect with one another, how one complements the other. After all, it is practically impossible to read something without having images come to your mind or, conversely, to see a painting or an image of another type without having a narrative evoked by it.⁸ Both text and image are made sense of as a sign, and given the fact that the word "graphic" can refer either to writing or to picture, one cannot help wondering, as J. Hillis Miller does, whether the seemingly eternal "*polemos* within the graphic" can be counterbalanced by showing that the two parties are "different forms of the same thing, as blue and red are both light". But then, "What would this 'something' be?" (Miller, 1992: 75).
- 23 To Byatt this "something" has to do with the skilful delineation, on the artist/writer's part, of the visible and invisible worlds at the point where they touch (A 146). In one of the sections that make up "Arachne", Byatt remembers beginning her first novel with a description of air visible in heat, of light on a lawn. Similarly, she points out that she became interested in painting because she was interested in the mapping of the visibility of light (A 147). There is something in visible forms of light, threads, currents, or dust-motes floating in a beam from a window, which arouses our aesthetic sense, Byatt says, and she associates it with "the Platonic forms of perfection, the transcendent order whose shapes we discern in the solid world, and draw, paint or build" (A 146). This brings together, once again, the different threads in Byatt's narrative. *Las Hilanderas* is presented as a painting whose author has dexterously managed to map the visibility of light or, as has been pointed out above, as a painting about skill and vision. *Sight* and *vision*, the visible and the invisible, are intertwined here as they are in embroidery made on "transfers": shadowed shapes of flowers and leaves ironed on the linen on which the women in Byatt's family (and she herself) worked, ghostly lines of a pattern that she explicitly compares with neo-Platonic forms (A 139). According to the author, spiderweb —like sea-shells, like leaf-skeletons, or like the growth of branches from a trunk, and twigs from branches— are also visual reminders of the order inherent in the mess and excess of the world (A 147). And finally, the recurrence of myth is also the recurrence of certain patterns shaping

human life, patterns that "tell us that something remote is beckoning to us" (Calasso, 1993: 10). Thus, as Byatt points out in the very first paragraph of "Arachne", myths have always been alive and can still caught us up in their original power (A 131).

- 24 I must admit I was somewhat impressed by the word with which Ovid closes the *Metamorphoses*: "Vivam", that is, "I shall live". A daring remark, but definitely true. Did he know that the inexhaustible possibilities of his "raw material" combined with his artistry were a secure passport to posterity? Perhaps. Be it as it may, there is something in the repeatability of myths and stories that has to do with the battle against time, with that part of us which also wants to utter Ovid's "Vivam". Maybe the reason for this is that, as Byatt puts it, they are ultimately to do with death. That is why the interest in tales is something that the young have and the old rediscover: children love stories because they see themselves as infinite and immortal, while the old engage with tales knowing that they are finite, that the tales will outlive them (Byatt, 2000: 131-32). Thus, the universal contiguity of a narrative like "Arachne" is not only a contiguity between different subjects or different fields of knowledge. It is also an attempt to weave time in, out and around. The origins of myth get lost in time, and the same goes for the origins of spiders, which have been on earth for at least four hundred million years (A 148). But, in addition to (old) myths and (old) spiders, the reader of "Arachne" also comes across seventeenth-century Velázquez and Thomas Browne, eighteenth-century Swift, Pope and Edwards (the American poet and divine), nineteenth-century Emily Dickinson (disciple of Edwards), the twentieth-century childhood of Byatt, her contribution to a collection that saw light in the year 2000, the announcement made in an article published in the *New Scientist*, in the week when Byatt wrote this piece, that Quebec scientists plan to make biosteel from spider-silk—a biodegradable fibre strong enough to stop bullets—in the near future (A 157), etc.
- 25 What is past and what is to come, the vast and the small, fantasy and experience, mythological deities and spiders, all form part of the same thing in Byatt's universe, since, as she concludes, "what we see is a clue only to the force and the beauty, and the order and the complexity, of what we don't see. Gods, or spider-silk" (A 157). At a time of lost metaphysics, the black and white uniform lines of a short narrative can still powerfully suggest that there is an intriguing connection between the visions of the eye and those of the spirit, between the many colours and forms of what we can see and another world which has always been there, and which has been told many times in stories that are always the same and always different.

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NOTES

1. This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented as a contribution to the 28th International Conference of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies (Valencia, 16-18 December 2004). The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (MCYT) and the European Regional Development Fund, in collaboration with the Aragonese Government (HUM200400344/FIL).
2. "Arachne" 137. Hereafter the abbreviation A will be used in parenthetical references.
3. Fountains and springs are a recurrent motif in Byatt's work. These "fountains within" are of a different kind, since they are directly connected with the author's private life and experiences. Byatt's remark occurs in an interview and is preceded by the interviewer quoting Coleridge's lines: "I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passions and the life, whose fountains are within."
4. *The Fable of Arachne* is another painting by Rubens which Velázquez included in one of his works (it is one of the paintings on the back wall in *Las Meninas*).
5. To give some examples, Marina Warner's "Leto's Flight" freely adapts the story of Leto by deliberately confusing it with other stories (those of Leda, Romulo and Remo, Ulysses and even Bluebeard); Patricia Duncker's "Sophia Walters Shaw" is a sort of feminist dystopian fable based on the rape of Proserpine by Pluto, the god of the underworld, who here presides over an underworld of sex shows and grotesque sexual services; Cees Nooteboom's "Lessons" is a contemporary story of betrayal and love in a Dutch *lycée*, which both reflects and enlarges upon its source: the tale of Phaeton; etc.

6. Byatt mentions the title of a poem written by Christabel in *Possession* —“Ariachne’s Broken Woof”— and traces its title to a couple of lines in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Act V. This “Ariachne”, a curious mixture of Arachne and Ariadne, is also commented on by J. Hillis Miller in “Ariadne’s Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line”. Miller points out that the conflation of Ariadne and Arachne is also implicit in Ruskin’s *Fors Clavigera*, where the reader finds a discussion of the labyrinth as a structure inhabited by “the spider, or other monster in midweb” (in Miller, 1976: 59, emphasis added). As to Shakespeare’s “Ariachne”, Miller adds, the partial homonymy of the name reflects the relationship between the two stories. The tales of Ariadne and Arachne are similar, though not wholly congruent, and both involve the images of thread or of weaving. The same happens when it comes to the “hybrid” name, since Ariachne is and is not Arachne, just as is and is not Ariadne. The connection between these names ultimately calls attention to the “is-and-is-not” dynamics inherent in myth, that is to say, to the similarity and dissimilarity of stories in the same narrative line, as well as to the repetition with a difference of distinct myths (66).

7. There had been other significant discoveries in previous years, all leading to the same interpretation. Thus, in 1903, the English critic C. R. Ricketts observed that the composition depicted on the tapestry hung on the rear wall was a partial copy of Titian’s *Rape of Europa*; and in 1940, expert on Velázquez Enriqueta Harris identified the figures in the background as Athena gesturing towards Arachne, even if she mistakenly saw them as woven into the tapestry.

8. This is particularly true of Byatt’s prose, whose visual quality has already been pointed out, but this is also very much the case with *Las Hilanderas*. As Redondo Bonet (2004) explains, the composition of the painting is typically baroque, theatrical, as it were, in the sense that Velázquez divides his work in scenes that have to be approached not simultaneously, but in succession. This technique is slightly reminiscent of those medieval paintings whose sections, or groups, must be read in a particular order, like the pages of a book. Colour and light are dextrously used by the painter in order to create different planes, which are but different stages of a narrative.

ABSTRACTS

Le présent article naît d'une vogue de réécriture d'histoires mythologiques grecques et romaines illustrée, entre autres, par le recueil *Ovid Metamorphosed* édité par Philip Terry en 2000. Ce volume comprend aussi la nouvelle d'A. S. Byatt, « Arachné ». Replacé dans le contexte de l'intérêt renouvelé pour la mythologie classique, « Arachné » est étudiée par le biais de la « contiguïté universelle », concept que son auteur récupère chez Italo Calvino qui l'avait forgé pour expliquer la dynamique textuelle des Métamorphoses d'Ovide. Ainsi, « Arachné » se présente telle une tapisserie tissée de fils multiples et toujours liés entre eux. Il s'agit d'un genre narratif composite qui parvient à donner un aperçu des schémas récurrents des mythes classiques mais qui parvient aussi à prouver que certains auteurs sont toujours capables d'en réécrire les trames qui se suivent sans jamais être les mêmes. (Traduit par Emilie Cantin)

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