

The Arachne Myth in Oral and Written Literature

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### Recommended Citation

Pedrosa, José Manuel. "The Arachne Myth in Oral and Written Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 7.1 (2005): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1253>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1253)

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**CLCWeb Volume 7 Issue 1 (March 2005) Article 2**  
**José Manuel Pedrosa, "The Arachne Myth in Oral and Written Literature"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss1/2>>

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**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 7.1 (2005)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** In his paper, "The Arachne Myth in Oral and Written Literature," José Manuel Pedrosa explores the folktale about a person who prides himself being the most intelligent individual and whom the gods punish with a metamorphosis into spider. Pedrosa discusses similar myths in existence in modern oral traditions and in literary works such as the Bible, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Quran, and García Márquez's masterpiece *Cien años de soledad*. The universality of the myth is underlined by the existence of a folktale registered among the Bubi people of Equatorial Guinea. Not known about it until the twentieth century, the oral transmission or survival of this tale proves of extraordinary importance and the reason why the Bubi text may be considered a rare record and a true jewel capable of providing valuable information about the folk myths and basic beliefs that have inspired many geniuses of Western literature.

**José Manuel PEDROSA**

### **The Arachne Myth in Oral and Written Literature**

Translated from the Spanish by Marta Guirao

In this paper, I discuss and examine the Arachne myth in selected versions from Ovid and García Márquez to the story told by the Bubi people of Equatorial Guinea. I begin with an example in oral literature, with "La araña y los desgraciados" ("The Spider and the Wretches"), recorded by Benigno Borikó (1939-1981) along with twenty folk tales belonging to the Bubi people of Bioko Island, in Equatorial Guinea:

There exist in Equatorial Guinea two types of spider. One of them is large, the size of a crab. It is hairy, and a reddish-black colour. It is poisonous, and its bite is fatal for many. This one we will exclude from our story. The other one is small. It usually lives under *nipa* roofs, and in any case it moves freely along house walls. Its own house is a complicated tangle woven out of its webs. It is a dark grey colour and harmless as far as people are concerned. We will call it the grey spider. This is the spider in our tale. Originally, the spider was human and lived among people. It was quite clever and perceptive. It had a sharp mind, and it enjoyed discussing the most elevated subjects. One day, it got to thinking about the problem of the wretched: How can it be that there are so many wretched people in the world? The lame, the deaf, the blind, the one-armed, the one-eyed, the mute, and so many others as miserable as these.... Who is to blame for it all? This man, whom we know today as the grey spider, resolved to do a sort of survey of all miserable people. And so, he began asking them. A lame man: "My friend, how did you come about losing the balance of your legs? / I don't know ... All I know is that it is God's will that I be lame. / A deaf man, by way of signs: My friend, how come you can't hear? / God wills it so.... / A one-armed man: My friend, how did you lose your arm? / I don't know, but it was God's will that I be one-armed. / A man mute from birth, by way of signs: / My friend, how come you are mute? / I have been since birth. / So you are not to blame. / No. / Who is, then, to blame? / I don't know. In any case, it is God's will that I be mute." / And so our good man continued, asking all of them, and each one would reverentially bring up God's name. But our man believed that one should not resign oneself to hardship in such a fatalistic manner, believing that everything is God-given. And, if it is God-given, one should ask Him why so many misfortunes were meted out to innocent people. This idea became so obsessive for him that he spoke with the village chief in order to organise a meeting with the whole village and especially with the poor wretches. The chief acquiesced and they fixed a day for this meeting, which would take place in the village square. On that day, everyone went out to the village square. Once there, our good man launched into a speech that sounded a good deal like a harangue and was indirectly against God and in defence of so many wretches. His speech towards the end went so: "And so if God is of such goodness and wants only our well-being, why does He bring such undeserved punishment on so many? Why don't we demand an explanation of His strange behaviour? And ultimately, to get to the bottom of things, who is God?" There was a long silence. At the end of this silence, a small insignificant man emerged from the crowd. He walked to the middle of the square, where our good man was waiting for an answer to his questions. Without a word, the little man caught up our man by the neck, crushed him, and hurled him across the square. Our man smashed into the wall of a nearby house, and on the wall there appeared a kind of stain, a residue which even so remained something alive and moving: our grey spider, which, in humiliation, still runs along the walls of our houses in Equatorial Guinea. A long time ago, / the grey spider / was a person. / Its name was Sipaera. / Now its name is Riboboteka. (Borikó 63-65).

In his notes, which were appended to this etiological tale, Borikó explains: "In Bubi, there are two names for the spider. *Siapera* is the oldest name. Apparently, *Siapera* was a real man who lived in a Bubi village. He was very wise and would help everyone over difficult matters. Everything went wrong for him from the very day when he started pondering the problem of hardship: Why do so many innocents suffer such calamities? Why are so many good and kind people poor? Why do so many children die when they have done no wrong? But the worst of all was his reaction against God ... The second Bubi name for the spider is *Ribobo-teka*. According to Bubi mythology, from the moment that *Siapera* was disrespectful to God, he lost his place as the most intelligent being. By losing his place he also lost his intelligence and turned into this tiny animal that lives on walls, under roofs, and eats any little flies that happen to come by" (Borikó 66). This story, rooted in the remote insular oral tradition of the Bubis of Bioko island in Equatorial Guinea, could pass for one more among the many etiological tales contained in the ample oral repertoire of this people, just one more story in the tradition of so many other etiological tales and myths of origins which are still so relevant in many cultures of sub-Saharan Africa. But for us, it has an added interest in that it is also an extremely rare and suggestive parallel to the Graeco-Latin myth of Arachne, which, as far as I know, has no other oral and folk versions in any other part of the world. In order to consider both the similarities and differences between the Bubi tale and the Graeco-Latin myth,

let us remember how the great French mythographer Pierre Grimal summarises that most celebrated version of Arachne's myth, recorded by Ovid in book VI of his *Metamorphoses* (lines 1-145) in the Latin of the nascent Christian era:

Arachne was a Lydian maiden whose father, Idmon from Colophon, was a dyer. The young woman had earned a great reputation as a weaver and embroiderer. Her tapestries were so beautiful that nymphs from the surrounding countryside would come and admire them. Because of her skill, people would say she was a disciple of Pallas Athena, the goddess of weavers and embroiderers. But Arachne did not want to owe her talent to anyone but herself, and she challenged the goddess, who accepted the challenge and materialised in the form of an old woman. At first, Athena only warned her and advised her to be more modest, or else risk the wrath of the goddess. However, Arachne's answer was insulting. The goddess then showed herself and the competition began. In her tapestry, Pallas depicted the twelve gods of Olympus in all their majesty, and in order to caution her rival, in each corner she illustrated one of four episodes showing the defeat of those mortals who dare defy the gods. In her fabric, Arachne portrayed indecorous loves of Olympic denizens, such as Zeus and Europa, Zeus and Danae, and so on. Her work is perfect, but an infuriated Pallas rips it up and strikes her rival with the shuttle. Feeling affronted, Arachne hangs herself in desperation, but Athena does not let her die, and instead turns her into a spider who will continue to weave at the end of her thread. (Grimal 43-44)

It is clear that the narrative development of the Bubi tale and the Graeco-Latin myth shows substantial plot differences and that the ancient version which is available to us via Ovid's sophisticated hexameters is much more adorned with novelistic detail than the shorter, more condensed Bubi version from Bioko island. But between the two versions there are also remarkable coincidences in narrative structure and in certain plot devices which deserve close analysis. At the core of the plot, in both versions, there is the blasphemy of a boastful, impious and foolish mortal against the divinity. In both stories, the mortal berates or reproaches the god or goddess (whose identity is initially concealed) for the flaws which are perceived in the divinity's works, whether they be creatures or tapestries. In the Bubi text, the mortal's criticism refers to the fact that God has allowed the existence of "the lame, the deaf, the blind, the one-armed, the one-eyed, the mute, and so many others as miserable as these." In the classic text, the mortal censures different gods' vices and misdeeds, which left behind an equally deplorable string of victims: in her tapestry Arachne denounces the abuse suffered by the hapless Europa, Asteria, Leda, Nictaide, Danae and Mnemosyne, who were deceived by Jupiter; Canace, Theophane and Melanthe, who were Neptune's victims; Ise, whom Apollo let down; Erigone, taken in by Bacchus, and so on. In both tales, it is not just humans but more specifically the most fragile among humans (the sick and the women), who are the dispossessed, helpless and grieving victims of the gods' irresponsibly selfish behaviour. Another most amazing coincidence linking the two tales is the fact that the divinity listens to the mortal's blasphemy in the guise of an old, weak or vulnerable being: "a small insignificant man emerged from the crowd" in the Bubi story, while in the Ovidian text Pallas pretends to be an old woman, adding false grey hairs to her temples and even using a stick to hold up her feeble limbs (see Borikó 386). The divine opponents' simulated frailty serves to highlight dramatically the momentous power they will display when they finally reveal their identity, striking and violently punishing the blasphemous mortal. We may remember that in the Bubi tale, "without a word, the little man caught up our man by the neck, crushed him, and hurled him across the square. Our man smashed into the wall of a nearby house." In Ovid's work, the goddess strikes the forehead of Arachne the Idmonian three or four times with her shuttle.

The striking and hurling, however quick, violent, or crushing, are not fatal in either case because the divinity prefers to keep the offender alive, even if metamorphosed into a spider. In the Bubi story, the man "smashed into the wall of a nearby house, and on the wall there appeared a kind of stain, a residue which even so remained something alive and moving: our grey spider, which, in humiliation, still runs along the walls of our houses in Equatorial Guinea." In the classic myth, Arachne "tied a cord around her throat. A placated Pallas held up the hanging woman and addressed her thus: Remain alive yet, but forever hang, impudent girl, and let the same punishment be ordained for all your progeny, that you may not be free of anxiety for the future!" Just as is the case in almost all etiological tales, in both stories the newly-acquired status is faithfully translated to the qualities that will thence be developed by every succeeding generation. In this sense, we must remember so many other myths of origins from all over the world where a pun-

ishment, a curse or a metamorphosis that is suffered by an ancestor is inherited and assimilated as a key identity feature by his or her whole lineage. Among these myths is the foundational narrative of Genesis in the Bible, where Adam and Eve's (and the snake's) new status as suffering and anguished mortals -- their punishment for having rebelled against Yahve -- will be fatally transmitted to every succeeding generation (see Pedrosa, "Los padres maldicientes"). It seems clear that, in spite of the incredible distance separating the Bubi folk tale and the classical myth in Ovid's poetical rendition -- a distance not only chronological (two thousand years), but also geographical (Europe on the one hand, central Africa on the other), cultural and stylistic -- the coincidences between the two are so striking and coherent that we are led to consider some type of link between them, some common dependency, like extremely rare and excentric branches of one same ancient narrative trunk producing blooms which are surprisingly alive (as the Bubi tale demonstrates), although their outlines may not be entirely clear to us due to a lack of other analysable parallels.

To these texts we might add some others which, although they may perhaps not be absolute parallels to the mythical-narrative edifice of our Arachne story, do appear to be closely connected to it and shed light on its meaning and ideology, as they all relate the spider to punishment for blasphemy and boastfulness, to rivalry and rebellion against creators, and to the fragility of mortal vanity as opposed to the infinite power of the gods. For instance, in the Bible's Book of Job, the irreverence and arrogance of mortals, which ultimately amounts to nothing before God's greatness, is compared to a spider's web, impressive but unable to resist the world's attacks nor God's wrath:

This is the portion of a wicked man from God, / And the inheritance which tyrants receive from the Almighty. // Though his sons are many, they are destined for the sword; / And his descendants will not be satisfied with bread. // His survivors will be buried because of the plague, / And their widows will not be able to weep. // Though he piles up silver like dust / And prepares garments as plentiful as the clay, // He may prepare it, but the just will wear it / And the innocent will divide the silver. // He has built his house like the spider's web, / Or as a hut which the watchman has made. // He lies down rich, but never again; / He opens his eyes, and it is no longer. // Terrors overtake him like a flood; / A tempest steals him away in the night. // The east wind carries him away, and he is gone, / For it whirls him away from his place. // For it will hurl at him without sparing; / He will surely try to flee from its power. // Men will clap their hands at him / And will hiss him from his place. (27: 13-23).

Also in the Qur'an, the "house of the spider" is linked explicitly to the fatal weakness of arrogant humans who turn away from God and who will eventually be chastised by Him. This text exposes more clearly the futile rivalry that is established with the divinity by conceited humans in terms of skill and wisdom. This approach is remarkably coincident with the deepest ideological core of the mythical-narrative edifice of the Arachne story: "Those who accept other masters beside God are like the spider and its home; the flimsiest of all homes is the spider's web, if only the impious knew. God knows all that they worship beside Him. He is the Almighty, the Most Wise. We cite these examples for people, but none understand them except the wise" (29: 40-43).

But neither the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition nor the Muslim Qur'anic one are the only ones to have exploited the motif of the proud spider, nor of the fragility of its work -- especially its "houses" -- when exposed to the divinity's great power. In fact, there is a widely-known animal story, catalogued as number 283D in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's catalogue of universal tales, that shows additional analogies with the stories that concern us here. It narrates a competition between the spider and a wiser, more skilled creature, and arrives at the conclusion that the "spider's house" is a work of lesser quality. The most frequent plot of this story-type has been summarised thus in Aarne and Thompson's catalogue: "The spider laughs at the silkworm working so slowly. The silkworm says that his work is valuable, whereas that of the spider is of no good." Another story that spans different folk traditions, catalogued as number 836 by Aarne and Thompson, dwells on the convention that the blasphemer's house is inferior, even if it is not compared in this case to a spider's, and that God is almighty: "Pride is punished. The rich man boasts that God has not the power to make him poor. While the man is at church, his property burns and he returns home a poor man." On the other hand, several folk traditions in India also take up the motif of the spider's works surpassed by those of a superior, more skilful and wiser demiurge. This motif has been discussed thus: "Far from being only a symbol of weaving, the spider in fact also serves

to reflect the fragility of earthly works, and how they depend on the weaver. Cosmogonic creation is symbolised in the act of weaving, but this act requires the weaver to remain continuously in contact with the work, which depends on him and is constantly created by him. This theme appears especially in Indian myths that often tell of a primordial Weaver and a cosmic spider. What we need to retain from this is, on the one hand, the umbilical cord connecting the creator and the creature, and on the other hand, the cosmic unification produced by the establishment of links between the four points of the compass. The creature is tied to its Creator; a kind of golden chain binds them together" (Grimal 43-44). But we may still find surprises in the repertoire of literary documents where the main character is metamorphosed into a spider as punishment for having defied God's given rules and morality norms. The following lines were penned by Gabriel García Márquez. In his unsettling story "La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada," there is a quick reference to a suspicious metamorphosis from woman into spider, within the context of a fair: "Amongst the stateless and gadabouts of the throng there was good Blacamán, perched upon a table, calling for a real snake so he could test on his own person an antidote of his devising. There was a woman who had turned into a spider because she had disobeyed her parents; for fifty cents she would let anyone touch her to see that there was no trickery, and would answer any questions put to her about her misfortune" (136).

And there is another story in the same book by García Márquez, this one entitled "Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes". In this one we are given further suggestive details about this type of metamorphosis: "It so happened that, at that time, the wandering fairs of the Caribbean brought to the village, amongst other attractions, the sad show of a woman who had turned into a spider because she had disobeyed her parents. The ticket to see her was not only cheaper than the ticket to see the angel, but it also entitled one to ask her all kinds of questions about her absurd state, and to examine her from all angles so no one could doubt the veracity of this horror. It was a horrendous tarantula the size of a ram, sporting the head of a melancholy maiden. The most pitiful thing, however, was not her preposterous appearance, but the honest misery with which she told all the details of her story: when she was hardly more than a girl she had sneaked out of her house to go to a dance and on her way back, when she was crossing the forest after having danced all night without her parents' permission, a frightful clap of thunder rent apart the heavens, and out of the breach there came a sulphurous bolt of lightning that turned her into a spider. Her only fare were the morsels of minced meat that kind-hearted souls tossed into her mouth. Of course a spectacle so charged with human truth and dire retribution eventually outdid the contemptuous angel who hardly even deigned to look at the mortals" (14-15). In both of García Márquez's stories, our familiar motif of the human that is changed into a spider is inserted into a very different narrative framework from what we have seen so far: the woman is now exhibited as a fantastic freak in street fairs, and those who look at her are astounded and amazed. Two details, however, become suggestively relevant when we compare the texts with our earlier Bubi and Latin stories. In the first place, there is the fact that this extraordinary metamorphosis is presented as punishment for rebellion against parents, who in our modern secularized world are comparable to the mythical universe's parent-gods. Secondly, the metamorphosis takes place by way of a quick, violent, crushing lightning strike ("a frightful clap of thunder rent apart the heavens, and out of the breach there came a sulphurous bolt of lightning that turned her into a spider"), undoubtedly hurled out by some unknown divinity -- who in García Márquez's texts is more than implied though not identified. Significantly, in the Bubi text the mortal was also hurled by the divinity ("the little man caught up our man by the neck, crushed him, and hurled him across the square"), while in Ovid's text, Athena struck Arachne with the shuttle which "hurls" the yarn across the loom. Therefore, in all these stories, it is this combination of "hurling" and "striking" that appears to be at the basis of the three divinity-ordained punishments which result in the metamorphosis of mortals into spiders.

All of this again evokes suggestive similarities with other literary texts belonging to very different times and traditions. In the ancient Babylonian *Poem of Gilgamesh*, for instance, Gilgamesh rebukes the seductive Ishtar thus: "You loved Ishullânu, / Your Father's Gardener, / Who was always bringing you // Baskets of dates / And provided you with abundant food / Every day. // You

lifted your eyes to him / And went to him. // 'My little Ishullânu, / Let us enjoy your strength. // Put out your hand / And touch my vulva.' // But Ishullânu said to you, / 'What do you want from me? / Did my mother not cook for me, // Or did I not eat? / You can only offer me // Loaves of dishonour and disgrace, / And rushes would be my only covering // Against the cold.' / You listened, // As he said this, / And you hit him, / Turning him into a toad" (Bottéro 148-49). And we might also recall the passage in Book Ten of Homer's *Odyssey* where the sorceress Circe offers delicacies to and then strikes Ulysses's companions, turning them into pigs: "When she had given it to them, they drank it in one draught, and immediately she smote them with her staff, and penned them in the sty of the swine. They had the head and voice, the bristles and the shape of swine, but they kept their human mind" (237-40). Along these lines, old Graeco-Latin tales about the mythical Phoenix recount how, when it felt near death, it would fly from the heavens and crash against the earth, emerging thereafter as a new young phoenix (Van den Broek 159). There are countless other stories in many modern oral traditions where a knock causes a metamorphosis. Thus, in several stories by the Russian Alexandr Nikoláievich Afanásiev we find the following: "As soon as they arrived at the palace there was a clap of lightning, the roof caved in, the ceiling opened up and an eagle came flying in. It hit the floor and turned into a dashing young man ... He took the bird home, perched it on a little window, and waited. After a while, the turtle dove put its head under its wing and slept. He lifted his right hand and tapped it gently, whereupon the turtle dove turned into a lovely maiden, so beautiful that one could not imagine her nor remember her; one could only find her in fairy tales!" (*El pájaro de fuego* 153, 69).

In the African oral tradition, the motif of metamorphosis by way of a blow, a crash or the hurling of some object is also recurrent. Some examples may be taken from different oral traditions in Equatorial Guinea: "I'll give you this little dog and this broom. Every time you hit the dog with the broom, it will become an enormous fierce dog" (Creus, *Cuentos de los Fang* 206); "In order to celebrate the end of the adventure, the boy went hunting in the forest. Suddenly, an enormous leopard appeared in front of him. He thought 'The leopard is my friend, I never shot at him'. But the leopard warned him 'Shoot, my friend, or else I'll pounce on you'. In the end, the boy shot at the leopard, and at that moment, in the place of the animal there appeared a handsome boy, who was in fact his wife's brother. They returned to the village and the king's son, the golden woman and her brother lived happily together from that moment on" (Creus, *Cuentos de los Ndowe* 196); "Her mother said 'Don't go out tonight, my daughter'. 'Mamma, let me be.' What did she do? The girl did go out. And someone struck her on the back and she became a ghost, and so she remained in that village" (Creus, *Identidad y conflicto* 36-38). A story is told among the Fon people of Benin that can be revealingly compared to all the texts we have so far considered, because it works in some way as a reverse version of the old myth of Arachne and Athena, with the motif of the blow also in the foreground. The Fon story is absolutely amazing for three reasons. In the first place, its main character is a spider which is called Yo. Secondly, this spider is up against its teacher and initiator, the wizard Zangan, in a gruelling contest of magic skill and wisdom which closely resembles the competition between Arachne and Athena. And finally, in the Fon story from Benin, the divinity also takes the form of an inferior being in order to punish its creature ("Zangan turned into a rat in order to kill Yo, the spider"), in the same way as in our other texts the all-powerful god took up the guise of an old man or woman. Even so, most remarkable is a new development in the Fon tale. It is not the master -- the divinity -- who defeats the creature that had always been subjected (as in the Bubi or the Ovidian versions), but the other way around: the disciple finally wins over this superior being, this demiurge by whom it was in some way created or at least initiated into the secrets of magic. Furthermore, the victory of the disciple over the creator is due to the disciple's skill in dealing blows -- the pupil is able to strike his master and not the other way around. The Benin texts thus appears as a kind of inverse reflection of the old story about the blasphemous creature who is finally punished ("stricken") by the almighty divinity:

My story soars, flies and hovers, and swoops on Yo, the spider. One day, Yo the spider decided to go and learn sorcery. It chose Zangan, the chief of the sorcerers. Zangan taught Yo almost all the skill of sorcery and Yo went everywhere with Zangan. Sometimes, other sorcerers would attack Zangan. Zangan would beat them all, as he was the best. One day, he said to Yo "You are my dearest apprentice. You are very obedient and helpful.

I will tell you a secret. When anyone asks you to hit them again, never ever do it.' Yo said 'Thank you, master Zangan! I will never forget it!' Yo the spider said goodbye to its master and became very famous in its region. Then Zangan became jealous and decided to teach Yo the spider a lesson. Zangan turned into a rat in order to kill Yo the spider. Yo quickly became a cat. The rat became a dog. At once the cat turned into a stick. The dog turned into fire. In a flash, the stick became water. The fire turned into a ram. Immediately the water became a butcher, who quickly slashed the ram's neck. The sorcerer ram fell to the floor and said to Yo the spider "Strike me again with the machete on the head, please." "You are already dead, and I won't strike you again, because I might bring you back to life." After a few minutes, the corpse of the ram turned into the corpse of Zangan, Yo's teacher, and Yo realised that it was its master who had tried to kill it. The moral of the story is that you should never hit anyone who asks to be hit. Most probably they are planning something, or they know they will come back to life. This was told me by my mother, because I love stories. So, every time I passed my exams, my mother would tell me stories and tales. I used to help her in the kitchen so I could hear her stories and yarns. (Interview with Laurent Fidèle Sossouvi, Cotonou, Benin, March 2001 in Madrid. The ending of his tale is extraordinarily interesting insofar as it reflects a traditional motif of "the second strike revives, the first kills" that has been documented in folk tales worldwide and catalogued by Thompson; see Armistead and Silverman; Pedrosa "Recetas").

As we can see, all the texts and tales here appear as constellations of connected literary motifs whose final map widens towards the most unexpected regions and whose analysis could be prolonged almost to infinity. However, for reasons of space we needs must select only a few so as to at least indicate their vast potential for commentary. To this end, we might emphasise that García Márquez's texts, which appear to be so subtly yet firmly related to the rest of our documents, not only have further parallels in the work of the Colombian, but they are rooted in certain interesting Hispanic American realities and rituals. So for instance in *Cien años de soledad* we meet a character who, as a result of having disobeyed his parents, has become not a spider but a snake, and is consequently displayed at freak show fairs: "After wandering aimlessly among all forms of marvel machinery, with nothing catching his attention, he noticed something that was not a part of it: a very young Gypsy covered in bangles, almost a child, who was the most beautiful woman José Arcadio had ever seen. She was in the crowd watching the sad spectacle of the man who had been turned into an adder for having disobeyed his parents. José Arcadio paid no attention to this. While the questioning of the snake-man was taking place, he had made his way among the crowd right up to the front row where the Gypsy was, and he had stopped just behind her. He pressed himself against her back. The girl tried to move away, but José Arcadio pressed himself even closer to her. Then she felt him. She froze against him, trembling in surprise and fear, unable to believe the evidence, and finally she turned her head and looked at him with a quivering smile. At that moment two Gypsies put the snake-man into his cage and carried him inside the tent" (119). This type of story about humans changed into animals as punishment for rebelling against their parents is not an original García Márquez creation, as we could be led to believe. Exhibiting this kind of freaks (fakes, of course) in circuses or travelling fairs was until recently very frequent in certain Hispanic American countries, as I was told by a person from Mexico: "When I was a girl and lived in Hidalgo, I remember that in the village fairs of Hidalgo, Puebla and other central places, and even some villages in the southern part of Mexico, such as Coyoacán or Michoacán, they had tents with a man shouting for us to go in and see the snake-woman, who had been rude to her mother. I never did go into these tents because my parents didn't believe any of it, but I had a cousin who would do her snake-woman imitation. She would put her head right on the tablecloth so that was the only thing you could see, and she would lisp and hiss: 'When I was little I mistreated my mother, I raised my hand against her, and that's why I am like this now.' I don't know if they still have that at the fairs. My mother would also tell me never to raise my hand against her, as it would shrivel up. She is from Tamaolipas" (Interview with Claudia Carranza, from Reinosá, Tamaolipas, northern Mexico, in April 2003 in Alcalá de Henares, Madrid).

Guatemala has also seen its share of monstrous exhibitions like this, as suggested in these two testimonies: "The snake-man, well I have only seen [that they cart him around the fairs and] well, he has, and there is the head of the man or the woman, because it can be a snake-woman, a snake-man, and there is a body like a snake. I think that obviously it's a trick, right? There is a man hidden underneath, he's got his head out there. And there is the snake body, and somebody moves it. Because he didn't do that [obey his parents], he became a snake. [It's] like a curse for having been naughty at home. In my village, yes, in your village, they do come with the fairs. But



well, the children believe it, but because it's evident. But when you come in, you say: 'Hey, this is not a snake! And the man is underneath!' But that's what they say" (Interview with 28-year-old Alfonso Romero Sandoval, from Jutiapa, Guatemala, in November 2003 in Alcalá de Henares, Madrid) and "They say there are some children who turn into snakes] because they lie to their mother, or things like that. They lie to their mother, or they don't pay attention, or they don't do as they are told. Things like that. That's why they turn [into snakes]" (Interview with Ana Lucía Camposeco, from Quetzaltenango, Xelajú, Guatemala, in November 2003 in Alcalá de Henares, Madrid). The fact that in different Hispanic American countries the belief still exists that disobedience or rebellion against parents may result in metamorphosis into an animal (spider or snake) offers a suggestive contemporary counterpoint to the ancient (Ovid's) and distant (the Bubi's) myths in our analysis about mortals changed into spiders as a consequence of blasphemy against the divinity. It is possible that in the future we may be able to find other documents that will allow us to know more about the development of the Arachne myth in the oral and written modern tradition. We know that Ovid's version was widely known and spread throughout cultivated literature and arts in the Renaissance, the Baroque period and Modernity. A good example of this is Velázquez's celebrated painting *The Weavers*, which is a masterly and highly personal pictorial interpretation of the olden myth. And throughout the centuries, recreations of Arachne's sad story from the kernel of Ovid's immortal version have been part of most -- if not all -- mythographic handbooks and literary corpora dealing even in the most tangential way with classical mythology. However, we did not until now know much about the oral transmission or survival of this tale, and that is why the Bubi text may be considered an extraordinary record, a rare jewel capable of providing valuable information about the folk myths and basic beliefs that have inspired the best-known geniuses of Western literature.

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