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Title	Arachne in Marlowe's 'Ad amicum corruptam' (Amores 2.5)
Author(s)	Reid, Lindsay Ann
Publication Date	2018-09-20
Publication Information	Reid, Lindsay Ann. (2018). Arachne in Marlowe's 'Ad amicum corruptam' (Amores 2.5). Notes and Queries, 65(4), 495-497. doi: 10.1093/notesj/gjy154
Publisher	Oxford University Press
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjy154
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/14661
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjy154

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ARACHNE IN MARLOWE'S 'AD AMICAM CORRUPTAM' (AMORES 2.5)

When, at the close of the sixteenth century, Christopher Marlowe's rendition of *Amores* 2.5 posthumously appeared in *All Ovids Elegies* (the earliest vernacular translation of this work to have been published in Europe and a text that was destined, as M.L. Stapleton observes, to remain 'the standard English *Amores* until the Glorious Revolution'), it was given the title '*Ad amicam corruptam*' [to his unfaithful mistress].¹ This pithy summation of the poem's supposed genesis is, perhaps, apt, given the central dramatic situation recounted in this Ovidian elegy. *Amores* 2.5 depicts the frustrated poet-lover's involvement in a love triangle of sorts: he has drunkenly caught his mistress Corinna sharing '*inproba...oscula*' [shameful kisses] with another man (2.5.23).²

Upbraided for her infidelity by Ovid's poetic persona partway through *Amores* 2.5, Corinna responds to his righteous outpourings of indignation with an epic flush—a perplexingly attractive change of hue that is itself famously modelled upon an anterior Virgilian simile used to describe Lavinia's complexion in the *Aeneid*:

*at illi
conscia purpureus venit in ora pudor,
quale coloratum Tithoni coniuge caelum
subrubet, aut sponso visa puella novo;
quale rosae fulgent inter sua lilia mixtae,
aut ubi cantatis Luna laborat equis,
aut quod, ne longis flavescere possit ab annis,
Maeonis Assyrium femina tinxit ebur.
hic erat aut alicui color ille simillimus horum,
et numquam visu pulchrior illa fuit.*

¹ M.L. Stapleton, *Marlowe's Ovid: The 'Elegies' in the Marlowe Canon* (Farnham, 2014), 6. I cite the text of Christopher Marlowe's '*Ad amicam corruptam*' from *The Collected Poems of Christopher Marlowe*, eds. P. Cheney and B.J. Striar (Oxford, 2006).

Parentetical references are by line number.

² Except where otherwise specified, I cite the Latin and corresponding English translations of the *Amores* from *Heroides; Amores*, ed. and trans. G. Showerman, rev. G.P. Goold (Cambridge, MA, 2002). Parentetical references are by book, poem, and line number.

[But she—her conscious face mantled with ruddy shame, like the sky grown red with the tint of Tithonus' bride, or a maid gazed on by her newly betrothed; like roses gleaming among the lilies where they mingle, or the moon in labour with enchanted steeds, or Assyrian ivory Maeonia's daughter tinctures to keep long years from yellowing it. Like one of these, or very like, was the colour she displayed, and never was she fairer to look upon.]
(2.5.33-42)³

Turning to Marlowe's sixteenth-century English rendition of these Ovidian *comparanda*, we discover that something rather surprising has happened: the mythological Arachne infiltrates Corinna's blush. The relevant lines in Marlowe's '*Ad amicam corruptam*' read:

A scarlet blush her guilty face arrayed,
Even such as by Aurora hath the sky,
Or maids that their betrothed husbands spy;
Such as a rose mixed with a lily breeds,
Or when the moon travails with charmed steeds,
Or such as, lest long years should turn the dye,
Arachne stains Assyrian ivory.
To these, or some of these, like was her colour,
By chance her beauty never shined fuller.
(34-42)

What are we to make of what has long been identified as Arachne's 'extraordinary' presence in Marlowe's translation?⁴ The easy answer—and the one that has been favoured by the Elizabethan author's nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century editors, is that Marlowe read the reference to *Maeonis femina* at *Amores* 2.5.40 and was reminded of (or possibly even confused by) the fact that the same adjective is applied to Arachne elsewhere in the Ovidian canon. After all, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Roman poet's first reference to this ill-fated artist specifically identifies Arachne as Maeonian (6.5).⁵ I

³ For Ovid's Virgilian model (i.e. the blush of Lavinia), see Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII; The Minor Poems*, ed. and trans. H.R. Fairclough (Cambridge, MA, 1966), 12.64-9.

⁴ A. Dyce, ed., *The Works of Christopher Marlowe*, rev. ed. (London, 1876), 328 n. §.

⁵ I cite the Latin and corresponding English translations of the *Metamorphoses* from *Metamorphoses, Books I-VIII*, trans. F.J. Miller, rev. G.P. Goold (Cambridge, MA, 2004). Parenthetical references are by book and line number.

would alternatively suggest, however, that there may be a more complex network of intertextual associations underlying Marlowe's decision to recast the generic *femina* of *Amores* 2.5 as this more particularised mythological character.

In considering the implications of Marlowe's Arachne reference in '*Ad amicam corruptam*', it is of great significance that this Maeonian is herself suffused by a memorable blush in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. What is more, Arachne's chromatic display is triggered, not unlike Corinna's, because she has been apprehended by a hidden observer who has witnessed her doing something worthy of reproach. In Arachne's case it is not a confrontation by an offended lover, but rather by the goddess Minerva that stimulates her blush. Though in *Metamorphoses* 6 Arachne's companions are cowed into reverential postures when they recognise a goddess in their midst, we contrastingly learn of the gifted but imprudent weaver:

*sola est non territa virgo,
sed tamen erubuit, subitusque invita notavit
ora rubor rursusque evanuit, ut solet aer
purpureus fieri, cum primum Aurora movetur,
et breve post tempus candescere solis ab ortu.*

[Arachne alone remained unafraid, though she did turn red, for a sudden flash marked her unwilling cheeks and again faded: as when the sky grows crimson when the dawn first appears, and after a little while when the sun is up it pales again.]

(6.45-9)

Here we find Ovid recycling one of the very same *comparanda* with which he had earlier described Corinna's blush in *Amores* 2.5: Aurora (the goddess of the dawn) is, of course, the *coniunx Tithoni*, or spouse of Tithonus mentioned in that passage (2.5.35). It would therefore seem that Marlowe's translation is activating a multi-tiered classical allusion that calls attention to and capitalises upon Ovid's earlier auto-echo of *Amores* 2.5's imagery in *Metamorphoses* 6.

Arguably, it is not only the fact that Ovid's Arachne reprises a distinctively Corinna-eque blush that makes Marlowe's interpolation of her character so appropriate in 'Ad amicam corruptam', however. We might ask what motivated Marlowe to metamorphose a well-known *weaver* into *dye* of Assyrian ivory. In *Metamorphoses* 6, the threads with which Arachne weaves are twice referred to as having been dyed purple. At the outset of her tale, we learn that '*pater huic Colophonius Idmon / Phocaico bibulas tinguebat murice lanas*' [Her father, Idmon of Colophon, used to dye the absorbent wool for her with Phocaeen purple] (6.8-9). And later, once her contest with Minerva begins, Ovid's narrator once again reminds us: '*illic et Tyrium quae purpura sensit aenum / textitur et tenues parvi discriminis umbrae*' [There are inwoven the purple threads dyed in Tyrian kettles, and lighter colours insensibly shading off from these] (6.61-2). The threads of her Ovidian tapestry are therefore stained much the same *purpureus* as Arachne's blushing countenance, and this striking analogy between the female artist and her output is further underscored by a second celestially resonant simile portraying the effect of this Maeonian woman's work:

*qualis ab imbre solent percussis solibus arcus
 inficere ingenti longum curvamine caelum;
 in quo diversi niteant cum mille colores,
 transitus ipse tamen spectantia lumina fallit:
 usque adeo, quod tangit, idem est; tamen ultima distant.
 illic et lentum filis inmittitur aurum
 et vetus in tela deducitur argumentum.*

[As when after a storm of rain the sun's rays strike through, and a rainbow, with its huge curve, stains the wide sky, though a thousand different colours shine in it, the eye cannot detect the change from each one to the next; so like appear the adjacent colours, but the extremes are plainly different. There, too, they weave in pliant threads of gold, and trace in the weft some ancient tale.]

(6.63-9)

As Sarah Annes Brown has previously perceived, though the 'phenomenon is a different one' than we find in Ovid's earlier characterisation of Arachne's fleeting flush, nonetheless,

‘both descriptions evoke gradual changes of colour’.⁶ Furthermore, this dynamic renders Arachne herself as ‘a spectacle, work of art to be admired’, a ‘connection...strengthened by the fact that the blushing woman is such a conventional topos, emphasising woman as an aestheticized object.’⁷ We would do well to consider the fact that Ovid’s tale of Arachne relates ‘*nec factas solum vestes, spectare iuvabat / tum quoque, cum fierent: tantus decor adfuit arti*’ [And ‘twas a pleasure not alone to see her finished work, but to watch her as she worked; so graceful and deft was she] (6. 17-18). This reflexive relationship, too, seems to inform Marlowe’s ‘*Ad amicam corruptam*’, for just as much as Marlowe’s ‘Arachne stains Assyrian ivory’ to prevent ‘long years’ from ‘turn[ing] the dye’, our memory of her own Ovidian blush simultaneously renders this Maeonian woman—like Corinna—as yet another reddened object of erotic fascination.

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⁶ S.A. Brown, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes* (London, 1999), 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*