STORIES AT THE LOOM: PATTERNED TEXTILES AND THE RECITATION OF MYTH IN EURIPIDES*

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> Neither in stories at the loom nor in common talk have I heard that the children of gods partake of happiness for mortals.[1]
>
> *Ion* 507–08

In this passage from Euripides' *Ion*, the chorus speaks of listening to stories while manufacturing textiles. For modern readers, the significance of contrasting "stories at the loom" with "common talk" or other modes of

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1 Kovacs 1999.379 translates the first part of the phrase as: "Neither in story at my loom nor in song have I heard it told that . . . ," adding in a footnote: "I give the sense that seems to be required." Jerram 1896.30 similarly reads ἐπὶ κερκίσιν as referring to the tales told while weaving. Lee 1997.81 offers a slight variation: "Neither at the loom nor in the telling of stories have I heard that children born to mortals from gods have a share in good fortune." In spite of this variation, the tone of the passage suggests that the activity of textile production is assumed to occur in an environment where such stories are told to or by the weavers.

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discourse is not immediately obvious. However, recent studies concerning traditional means of textile production indicate that this passage and others like it reflect a curious interrelationship between narrative, song, and textile manufacture, the implications of which reach far beyond the concerns of Euripides' chorus.

The idea of women working at a loom while reciting stories of myths to relieve the boredom of the hours invites a rather positive image of such activity (Barber 1991.292). Modern observers note that working a loom is a profoundly monotonous activity, one that is not generally considered enviable. Indeed, in regions of India, anthropologists report that the widespread preference for male children grows into a belief that the difficulty and tedium of weaving is simply the undesirable fate of women.[2] However, throughout Euripides, women described in the act of weaving, either directly or inferentially, are often paired with a specific reference to the recitation of myths as opposed to other types of conversation.[3]

In the parodos of Euripides' *Ion,* Creusa's young female servants admire the mythological scenes that decorate the temple of Apollo at Delphi. In the first antistrophe, one of the girls recognizes the image of "shield-bearing Iolaus," whose story is familiar to her as one she has heard while she weaves (196–200):

> ἆρ' ὃς ἐμαῖσι μυ-
> θεύεται παρὰ πήναις,
> ἀσπιστὰς Ἰόλαος, ὃς
> κοινοὺς αἰρόμενος πόνους
> Δίωι παιδὶ συναντλεῖ;
>
> Is it he whose tale is recounted to me as I sit at my weaving, the warrior Iolaus, who bears with the child of Zeus all his labors? (courtesy S. Nix)

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2 Parikh, Garg, and Menon 1991.68–69.

3 All of the passages in Greek tragedy that describe women in the act of weaving come from Euripides. They include *Ion* 196–97, 507–08; *Hecuba* 471; *IT* 221–24, 811–17; *IA* 788. Twice in the *Bacchae* the loom (ἱστός) is mentioned, but in neither instance do we see or hear of women weaving. Pentheus claims that he will either sell the Bacchantes or keep them as slaves for the loom (514). In a perversion of the conventions of women weaving, Agave tells her father Cadmus that she has left her shuttle at the loom (1236) and gone on to greater things: seizing wild animals with her hands.

Μυθεύειν is frequently used throughout Greek literature in the context of telling and recounting stories. Πήνη means "weft," or as here in the plural, "web" or "weaving." When taken together, the phrase ἐμαῖσι μυθεύεται παρὰ πήναις could mean that the story was being told while the women worked at the loom or that the story is described on the weaving. The first reading better reflects the absolute sense of μυθεύεται, "to say, speak," and the preposition παρά,[4] although these interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

Passages from other plays by Euripides demonstrate that stories are recited by women as they work together at a loom. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the chorus of Chalchidian women say that Lydian and Phrygian women tell tales while at their looms (παρ' ἱστοῖς / μυθεῦσαι τάδ' ἐς ἀλλήλας, 789–90). Again, we see the connection between the verb μυθεύειν and weaving; here Euripides uses the Homeric word for loom, ἱστός. The specific conversation between the women involves the legitimacy of the story, referred to as φάτις (795) and μῦθοι (799), that Helen was born of Leda and Zeus. The text leaves open the possibility that the women retell the story while they weave or that the story of Helen is in fact being depicted on the cloth.

Recent analysis of modern, non-industrialized textile manufacture in Anatolia, India, and Central Asia may explain why these women of Greek drama retell myths while they work at looms. Pile rug production consists of woolen or silk knots tied at the intersections of the warp and weft backing threads. Patterning in such textiles results from grouped variation of differently colored knots. Each individual design element is thus limited to the count sequences of knots associated with the related grid area of the textile's warp and weft. Horizontal and vertical numerical sequences of each design element associated with a particular decorative register of the rug must be controlled separately by the weaver as the design is rendered across the loom's length. Alternative methods of textile ornamentation, such as warp floating, consist of jumping the weft over prescribed numbers of warp threads.[5] As a result, the design elements of knot-pile carpets

4 Commentators on the *Ion* unanimously agree that the story is told while the girls weave, not pictured on the cloth: Verall 1890.20, Jerram 1896.14, Owen 1939.85, Lee 1997.181. The combination of μυθεύεσθαι with πήνη is unusual, occurring nowhere else in Greek literature.

5 Representations of standing looms, such as those depicted on a black-figure lekythos by the Amasis Painter (von Bothmer 1985.185–87) or a red-figure skyphos by the Penelope Painter (Geijer 1977), suggest that woven patterning on textiles would likely make use of

or weft-float ornamented textiles can be reduced to numeric codes corresponding to groups of knots of a given color or the number of warp threads overshot by those of the weft. Modern examination of traditional women weavers in non-industrialized regions of Northern India and Central Asia show that the individual design elements as well as the overall composition of the textile are controlled by the weaver through mnemonic devices embedded in songs and that such weaving songs consist of rhythmic chants that also appear to convey some sort of narration (Tuck 2006.543). As yet, it is unclear whether narration, rhythm, tone, or meter—or some combination of these factors—acts as the controlling agency in communicating changes in pattern. Nevertheless, recent studies involving the relationship between music and memory demonstrate that the human capacity for recalling musical structures is extremely exact and faithful in a way that other forms of memory are not, making it ideally suited to convey templates of other types of coded information requiring highly specific recall.[6]

One hypothesis concerning this phenomenon suggests that such mnemonic devices first emerged alongside the development of complex textiles among speakers of Proto Indo-European. As this population dispersed throughout Europe and Central Asia, they carried with them weaving technologies that then evolved separately into related but regionally distinct textile traditions, many of which preserve these song-like mnemonic structures to record and relate pattern information while weaving.[7]

Passages in Homer testify to a similar connection between song and weaving in the Iron Age Greek world. In the *Odyssey*, we see women not listening to or sharing stories in a group but singing as they work by themselves at looms. At *Odyssey* 5.61–62, Calypso sings while she weaves, as does Circe at *Odyssey* 10.221–23. In both passages, the nymph herself sings, ἀοιδιάουσ᾽ (5.61) and ἀειδούσης (10.221), while she weaves, ἱστὸν ἐποιχομένη(ς) (5.62, 10.222), rather than listen to song, as seems to be the case at *Ion* 196–97 and 507–08. In Book 10 of the *Odyssey*, the relationship

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weft float or similar techniques to produce designs. However, one limitation of weft floating involves the potential for snagging floated weft threads. As a result, textiles utilizing this technique tend to display densely packed ornamentation, akin to the textile motifs represented on Geometric Period Greek pottery: Barber 1991.365–72.

6 Jones and Boltz 1989, Peretz and Zatorre 2005.

7 Barber 1975. Tuck 2006 argues that the textile technology and the song-based mnemonic devices to record textile patterning had their origins in the region between the Black and Caspian Seas at a date earlier than the migration of Proto Indo-European speakers from that area.

between Circe's song and her weaving is obvious to Odysseus's companion Polites. While outside Circe's house, Polites recognizes that she is weaving because he hears her singing (Tuck 2006.541). However, the text of the *Odyssey* does not specify what it is the nymphs sing, only that they do.

For this reason, Euripides' consistent pairing of weaving with the recitation of mythological stories is all the more intriguing. As the texts suggest, women retell stories while weaving, and this means of retelling is differentiated from other modes of storytelling. If the processes of relating such myths were directly associated with patterning in the textiles as they are produced, then the recitation would necessarily embed numerical information pertaining to the thread counts of the woven pattern. Obviously, it is no longer possible to know what specific mechanisms were at work in conveying pattern related information, but metrical conventions or similar means of numerically sequencing narrative information are certainly potential candidates.

If true, it is inviting to speculate further that the retelling of such myths in the service of patterned textile production may have sometimes even related the design motifs themselves. Complex figural patterns on textiles are often represented on clothing in Attic black- and red-figure vase painting, and at least one fragmentary example of a complex "story cloth" survives from the region of the Crimea.[8] Perhaps most famously, the annual production of the peplos of Athena for Athens' Panathenaic festival resulted in a cloth depicting the myth of the victory of the Olympian gods over the Giants (Barber 1992). Once again, Euripides provides us a description of the garment.

At *Hecuba* 471, πήναις[9] refers to the peplos of Pallas Athena, which incorporates the image of Zeus destroying the Titans (466–74):

> ἢ Παλλάδος ἐν πόλει
> τὰς καλλιδίφρους Ἀθα-
> ναίας ἐν κροκέωι πέπλωι
> ζεύξομαι ἆρα πώ-

8 Barber 1991.379. These scarce fragments, dateable by their burial context to the fourth century B.C.E., are not woven tapestries but rather ornamented with painted colorfast dyes. However, Barber argues that such painted cloth served as an inexpensive substitute for the labor intensive and costly patterned textiles representing such myths.

9 Besides the two occurrences in lyric passages of Euripides, πήνη occurs nowhere in the literature of the fifth century, nor in Homer.

> λους ἐν δαιδαλέαισι ποι-
> κίλλουσ᾽ ἀνθοκρόκοισι πή-
> ναις ἢ Τιτάνων γενεάν,
> τὰν Ζεὺς ἀμφιπύρωι κοιμί-
> ζει φλογμῶι Κρονίδας;
>
> Or in the city of Pallas shall I represent in my weaving on the saffron peplos the horses of Athena with their beautiful chariot, with elaborate flower-dyed wefts, or (shall I represent) the race of Titans, which Zeus destroyed with his fiery blast?

While a connection between the recitation of stories and weaving is not as evident here as in *Ion*, nevertheless we see the link between mythological narrative and cloth. Two further examples from *Iphigenia in Tauris* attest to the depiction of myths on cloth.[10] At *Iphigenia in Tauris* 221–24, Iphigenia mourns that she neither sings to Hera with Argive women nor "at the beautiful-sounding loom" (ἱστοῖς ἐν καλλιφθόγγοις, 222) weaves the likeness of Pallas Athena and of the Titans. Iphigenia speaks of singing and weaving and does not appear to indicate that these two activities were performed separately from one another.[11] In the second example, the recognition scene between Orestes and Iphigenia, Orestes mentions two tapestries on which Iphigenia wove the stories of Atreus and Thyestes and Helios, respectively (811–17):

> (Ορ.) λέγοιμ᾽ ἂν, ἀκοῆι πρῶτον Ἠλέκτρας τάδε·
> Ἀτρέως Θυέστου τ᾽ οἶσθα γενομένην ἔριν;
> (Ιφ.) ἤκουσα· χρυσῆς ἀρνὸς ἦν νείκη πέρι.
> (Ορ.) ταῦτ᾽ οὖν ὑφήνασ᾽ σἶσθ᾽ ἐν εὐπήνοις ὑφαῖς;
> (Ιφ.) ὦ φίλτατ᾽ ἐγγὺς τῶν ἐμῶν κάμπτεις φρενῶν.
> (Ορ.) εἰκώ τ᾽ ἐν ἱστοῖς ἡλίου μετάστασιν;
> (Ιφ.) ὕφηνα καὶ τόδ᾽ εἶδος εὐμίτοις πλοκαῖς.

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10 *IT* 222 and 816 are the only other occurrences of ἱστός in Greek tragedy.

11 That the loom here is described as "beautiful sounding" also may be significant. At a minimum, the image seems to reinforce the idea that a description of the environment of textile manufacture would logically (to the ancient audience) also include a reference to the audible environment of weaving.

(Or.) I will say first the things I have heard from Electra. Do you know of the strife of Atreus and Thyestes?
(Iph.) I have heard of it. The quarrel concerned a golden ram.
(Or.) Didn't you weave these things in a fine-textured web?
(Iph.) Oh dearest one, you are coming near my heart!
(Or.) And the image of the migration of the sun on the loom?
(Iph.) I wove that form also in a web of fine threads.

If myths retold while weaving incorporated embedded numerical devices related to textile patterning, and if the patterns produced were sometimes episodic images of myths, might then a ritualized, numerically organized means of retelling specific narratives, for example the Gigantomachy—distinct from other modes of storytelling—have actually produced a garment showing the same story? Returning to the servant girls of *Ion* as they look upon the metopes of Delphi's Temple of Apollo, they first identify the Labors of Heracles by reference to stories heard while weaving, then point to a scene of Bellerophon's combat with the Chimera, before finally describing scenes of the defeat of the Giants at the hands of the Gods. Athena's victory over Enkelados, Zeus's over Mimas, and Bromios's defeat of an unnamed Giant are all identified before Ion interrupts their sightseeing. In contrast to the image of the Labors of Heracles, the description of the story of the Gigantomachy does not enjoy immediate proximity to the reference to weaving. Nonetheless, if stories told at the loom are presented as the source of the chorus' recognition of the first image, it stands to reason that the audience is meant to understand that all of the images are known to the girls through the same source.

To an Athenian audience of the fifth century B.C.E., the narrative of the Gigantomachy was one element of a complex state mythology—one that was central to the defining annual celebration of the city, the Panathenaic festival. The signature event of the festival involved the redressing of the cult statue of Athena Polias with a newly woven peplos. It is presumably this very peplos that is described in the *Hecuba* passage quoted above.[12]

12 Barber 1992.111–12 argues that the available physical evidence of cloth manufacture in the Greek Archaic and Classical periods suggests that a supplementary weft float technique was likely used for the production of a story cloth such as Athena's peplos.

Thus the servant girls of *Ion* seem to suggest that specific images from the narrative of the Gigantomachy are recognized by virtue of storytelling associated with textile manufacture. Moreover, we know of the physical existence of a garment, woven by young Athenian women for the Panathenaic festival and ornamented with designs depicting this same story. While we lack specific textual evidence linking these two phenomena, perhaps Euripides' servant girls refer not only to narratives they hear while weaving, but to a specific form of narration that encodes pattern information that produces images of these very stories.[13]

Similarly, it is even possible that Helen's appearance in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, weaving a tapestry depicting the events of the *Iliad* itself (3.125–28), preserves an earlier expression of the idea of such stories told at the loom while weaving, embedded with the very numerical information that produces graphic images of those myths. It is tempting to see an echo of this idea reflected in Aristarchus, the second-century B.C.E. Alexandrian scholiast, who wrote regarding *Iliad* 3.125 that "from this cloth divine Homer took most of his story of the Trojan war."[14]

Given the nature of our available evidence, certainty on such a point seems unlikely, but further inquiry certainly is warranted. Nevertheless, the surprise expressed by Creusa's servant girls as they recognize their weaving stories translated into marble on the temples of Delphi is no less than our surprise to find that those same stories may have been put to such utilitarian purposes upon the looms of the ancient Greeks.

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13 The tradition of the manufacture of Athena's peplos evolves over many centuries, with the eventual development that two peploi were given to the goddess; see Mansfield 1985. The annual making of the peplos by groups of Athenian women working over the course of nine months was the significantly older of the two traditions. Professional male weavers would manufacture the sail-peplos used exclusively for the ritual procession of the Greater Panathenaia, celebrated every four years; see Barber 1992.117. The fact that Euripides seems to suggest that servant girls, i.e., slaves rather than free women of the state, know of a tradition of manufacture of such a sacred garment may simply be an example of dramatic license on the part of the playwright.

14 Perry 1898.175, 240. Perry believes Aristarchus's comment stemmed from his desire to rehabilitate Helen's reputation; Barber 1991.373. Regardless of Aristarchus's intentions toward Helen, it would seem that the comment presupposes the ability to reconstruct a narrative from a woven image, calling to mind the myth of Procne and Philomela.

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