

The Weavers

Listen, child. Take two heavy branches, about a head taller than you. Lean them on a wall, three strides apart. String between them the prepared cloth, careful not to tangle the long threads hanging from it. Tie on to the ends of the threads clay weights and roll up the threads so that the weights swing close to the floor. This is your warp.

HELEN dia

I hold purple death between my fingers. Working women tore up little snails and crushed their fragile shells to a fine dust. They boiled it up from the stretched and twisted fibres of a sheep. They have been permanently seared with colour. Now I manipulate it in my hands, pushing and pulling as it bends to my will. Beyond, the screams and crashes of battle play the tune to rhythm I beat, intertwining. There is true violence in my hands.

In one hand, take up this beating stick. Pick out every other one of the hanging threads and pull them towards you. Pull with all your body. In your other hand, hold up the slim wood with your threads wrapped around and push it between the gaps of your warp. This is your weft.

PENELOPE períphrōn

My work is perfect. They stare in awe at its beauty. I know this, though I can no longer see it. My hands know exactly what they are doing. The patterns of my craft are traceable on my palms. I know that I must be tired. That my back must ache, and my arms and my neck and the soles of my feet. I must be eating, shitting, breathing. Yet I do not witness it. All change I know is twice a day, once at dawn, once at dusk. My hands switch, then switch again. Night, day, night, day, night.

CIRCE polypharmakos

I thread spells and herbs and spirit between the colours. True beauty can be found in my process. There is something so tactile about it, it provides connection between my divinity and the mortal earth. It is just I and my creatures and plants and dust, ground between my shining hands.

HELEN

The violence that runs through me is like that of cruel Aphrodite, ruthless Goddess. There is something divine in it, in me. I channel this into my work, the colours and textures clashing harshly like swords against shields in battle; the sword is thrust so strong the many-layered shield tears away into a ragged hole and becomes useless. So, my work carries potent force. I work fast, becoming one with the process, scenes of death and hope and inexorable destiny manifesting under my hands.

And so you pick your weft between your warp. over and under and over. Try to get a rhythm: let your hands take control. Give it a tempo, like the pulse of a dying animal. It pants hard, life slowly sinking out, and its heart beats again and again until it finally ends. So, you must find the rhythm in your whole body as you work.

PENELOPE

I know I was not made for this. As a child I was always brighter than the rest. Somewhere I am conscious of mind's potential, its incredible speed. Quick-witted, they called me. Now that epithet is reserved for others. Quite rightly – never have I felt so slow. My mind is full of senseless mist, divine. I can only vaguely wonder for what I am being punished. And so, I sit passive, waiting.

You are ready to enter different tones and shades: as detailed as you like. The is a world you can depict; the only limit is your skill.

CIRCE

As I sit at my handsome work my mind frees and opens, widening. The fibres run rough under my hands. I can smell the crushed-up lives I used to colour it. My beating-stick drums, muffled by the bouncing threads. Sitting there I can invent and imagine, a smile ready at my lips. I am completely balanced, most myself.

Be careful! As you work, do not let your mind stray from what is before you. Do not let the hanging threads twist or swing, don't let them get wrapped up in each other. Don't confuse the warp and weft, the variegating tones. Don't beat in a wrong thread, a wrong colour. Do not blunder.

HELEN

My hands blur before me. Beyond the impenetrable walls the cries and clatter grow louder, just keeping up with me. All at once I feel something grow strangely loose. I pause (outside quietens), and check my threads. One feeble line has snapped in half and hangs sadly disattached from the solid weight so far down. Darkness engulfs it. I know, in a low guttural cry, it has reached its destiny. So many ends. This one not inexorable. I understand the great grief this end will create.

PENELOPE

Suddenly my eyes sharpen on something. Two threads cross where only one should. I trace it back, far up in my work. The angry error stares out at me. It is new and glaring bright for all the world to witness. My breath catches in my windpipe, and I realize what this signifies. You see, I had always secretly believed in my trick so avidly. I had thought myself genius. But now I had jeopardized it all by a simple slip of the hand: what I should be incapable of. But I am not, no one is.

CIRCE

I notice in the corner of my eye something a little off. Between a blooming white flower and a snorting boar lies a single streak of red. An accident. I gaze at it, and it tells me its tale. I see how the red drips from root to pig. I smile.

Do not blunder.

HELEN

Grief engulfs me – one death, amongst so many. I feel a distant sense of responsibility, hanging over me, a massive weight. Faces of women as they lament distant loss, cradling orphan children. Women like me, women suffering. A torrent of tears.

PENELOPE

Fear strikes a shiver through me. My perfection lost. If my mistake is noticed, it will be over. My utter consistency is what held it all together. My mind crawls, writhing from the consequences. I try to hold myself to ground. I send out a prayer to Athene – so wise. My mind flashes and grows with conceits.

CIRCE

Excitement jolts me alert. I work at my imagined spells. Tracing the fine red line under my finger. Myths and stories hum in my mind, witchcraft brewing at my fingertips. A prophecy shapes inside of me. I know what I will do. It will be a mark of power – a mark of immortality.

There are certain tricks – with time your whole body will become aligned with your craft. It will begin to creep inside of you, like the instincts of a mother lion, she knows exactly how to defend her young, and will stop at nothing to protect them from attack, though she does not know the significance of what she does. So you will feel the work coming from some place deeper within you than your heart and mind.

HELEN

There is nothing I can do. Not now, not ever. I must graft on a makeshift new thread – the change is bulging and obvious. And so the battle outside will continue raging, an ugly end is one in a multitude.

PENELOPE

Lightly I pick out the error. With the most delicate of movements, I thread it carefully behind. To me it seems so obvious, botched. But I remember in the fading light: a woman's eye is like no other. I am safe in their ignorance.

CIRCE

A laugh arises within me. A simple slip has crafted a whole story, a mythology in my mind. My fiery divinity rises ever stronger within me. What amusement this will be.

And so you work on, child. Beat on, fibres folding. This is your power. This is your warcraft.

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