

Report for Fiona Haarer, Hellenic Society Grant

Applicant: Fiona Henderson, The Northern Mythology Project (formally Orpheus in Newcastle)

Project: The Northern Mythology Project 2026: Arachne



This year The Northern Mythology Project focused on the myth of Arachne. Fifteen young people (aged 14-18) from the Newcastle area met up for two hours a week at the Lit and Phil library to learn the myth and plan a performance based on their own interpretation. Last year it was suggested that whichever myth the young people chose (selected via an instagram poll on our account @northernmythology) we should use a punk theme to bring the myth into the modern day.

The participants were profoundly affected by Arachne's story, especially the idea of a young woman, a worker, standing up to Athena and defending her craft. There were conversations about who classical myth "belongs to", and how young people feel they don't get access to these myths because they come from a working class background. When studying Ovid together there was a lot of discussion around the idea that Arachne gave voice to the voiceless, especially the "victims" of the gods. The young people drew parallels between Ovid's Arachne and their own experiences.

"Gods represent people, people in power, and they use this power against the marginalised"

"The world has never changed and so often it seems as though it never will. Those in power have always been oppressing and harming those they are supposed to protect, and worst of all they are now expected to"

"Not many people can name the gods, but everyone's heard of spiders"

The young people also got the chance to ask questions they might otherwise not have considered such as, "Were the gods real people to the ancient Greeks or did they just represent stuff?" and "Did Ovid put this story in *Metamorphosis* because he was a kind of artist too?" (referring to art and narratives, after discussing the connection between storytelling, performance and sewing through "*rhapsoidos*"). The ancient language aspect was something we would like to use more next year.

Ultimately the project included a zine, an original song, a comic and a performance inspired by Arachne. All of which was created and driven by the young people.

The tapestries were echoes of propaganda; Athena's was reminiscent of the 1930s, with "Obey the Gods" as a slogan, whereas Arachne's was done in 1980s punk style, with the slogan "*what have the gods ever done for us?*" painted on and individual textile pieces safety pinned to the tapestry, with the names of mythic figures who were let down or mistreated by the gods. The young people chose Leda, Cassandra, Ganymede, Theophane, Daphne, Medusa and Laocoon. Arachne's transformation was a huge technical part of the project. In order to achieve this we constructed eight "legs" which could be operated and moved by eight of the young people whilst "Arachne" stood in the middle.

The second last session was held in the **Metrocentre's Community Hub**, and the young people performed three times for members of the public passing by. This gave the young people a chance to practice the improvisational style of theatre used in the show. They retold the myth by "throwing" lines to one another, one person always started with the same line before making eye contact with another person who would have to pick up the next part of the myth, and on and on until the end. This meant that every person in the performance had to be able to recall and retell any point in the myth spontaneously. The young people worked so hard that by the end they knew the myth, and all their added details, inside and out. By practicing in public in the Metrocentre the entire myth took on a guerrilla theatre effect, and passers by could be heard discussing the huge spider emerging onto the walkways. The final performance was held in the **Alderman Fenwick's House**. The participants liked the format of having one day performing for the public and another "final" performance for families and friends.

"It's great because we keep talking about Greek myth to more people, but then we're literally putting it right in front of them"

"The Metrocentre performances were amazing because people just stopped to watch. Little kids and families"

The young people had a Q and A discussion at the end of the shows in which they answered audience questions on the myth and the project. This combination of learning, creating, performing and ultimately teaching has given them a more fleshed out understanding of Arachne, Ovid and myth in modern culture.

Their takeaway was that in the end Arachne won because spiders may be small and look unimportant, but no one can stop them weaving.

"To me the myth is challenging authority and rebelling against cruel leaders"

"Because it's all punk people don't think it's going to be about ancient Greece, which it kind of is but also isn't. The myth is happening here and now and if we don't learn it then we lose all this stuff about power and art"

"I literally never got to do this in school, which is so bad because this is, like, about the little people standing up and keep going"

"Arachne wins in the end. Cos she keeps spinning and weaving forever"

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Finances: the Hellenic society's funding of £285 made this project possible by covering the cost of materials and significantly contributing to the cost of workshop space. We appreciate all the help from the Hellenic Society.

Additional thanks to the Lita and Phil Library, The Metrocentre Community Hub and the Alderman Fenwick House.



Athena reveals her identity to Arachne



Arachne waving her tapestry in rebellion



Arachne performing the original song written and composed by the young people



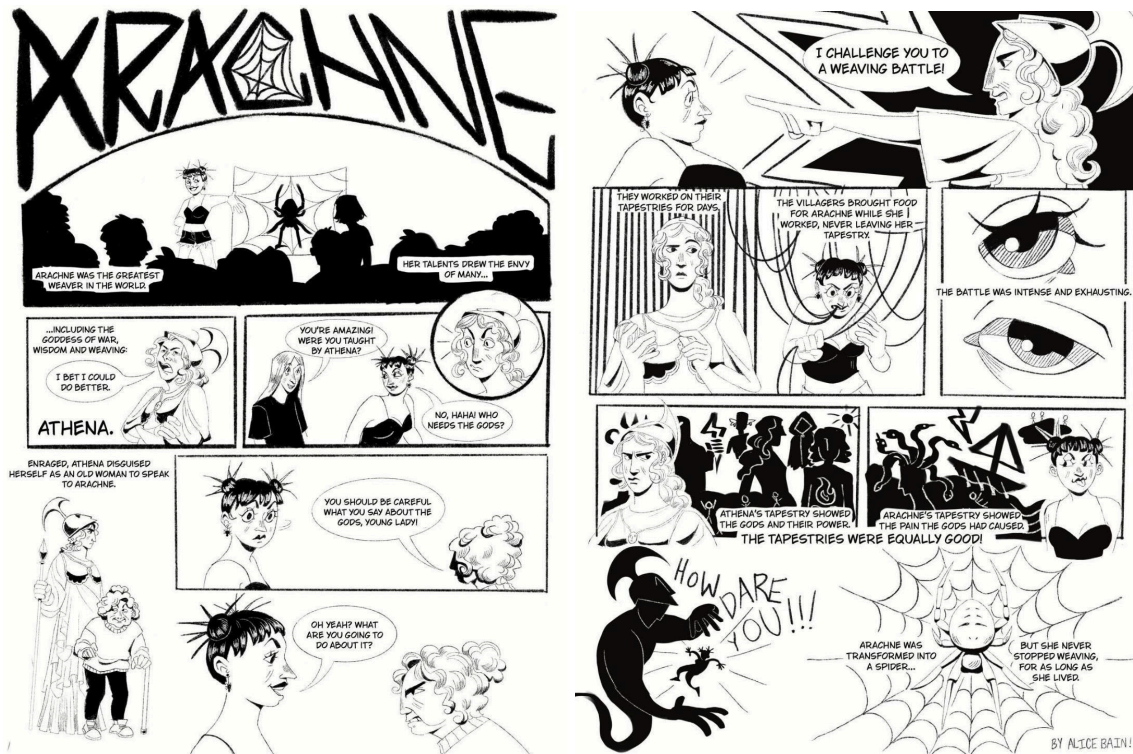
The zine and textile pieces created by the young people for the project, all were available to view by the audience at the end of the final performance



The young people's prop newspapers



The zine cover designed by two young people



An original comic designed by one of the young people



The table of Vivienne Westwood inspired textile pieces with the names of the mythic figures let down by the gods.
 "Weave your web!" was one of the slogans created by the young people



One of the young people adding the finishing touches to Athena's "obey the gods" tapestry