Clio - Women, Writing and the (Original) Web

Clio takes up the needle of female storytelling, as we unroll our canvas to include the Muses' sister-subjects, the Sirens and Sibyls and other shamanic authoresses, in the embroidering of this tale. Calliope left us at a cult encounter with muses on wheels: a 1980s roller-disco at the postmodern end of a timeline that started with Plato. (Please consider reading her chapter first; in the event that this sounds crazy.) Otherwise, let's go on with the second sister, overseer of historical writing, traditionally depicted with a parchment scroll. If Calliope's article suggested a linear structure of divine inspiration in its chronology, this next is such a latticework of allusions as to be a web, woven by the spinsters of time's ingenious plot.

My novel, *Translating the Muse's Tale*, introduces the same material, strung in a paragraph on page two: 'Philosophers, prophets, psychics have seen it; sibyls, sirens, shamans have sung it. Tale tellers have spun it in a global web since your world first turned, and now the translation twists those multiple female vocals into a single thread again.' Mainstream modern fiction rings to that seductive song; *The Song of the Siren* by Philippa Carr (1979), *The Sirens of Baghdad* by Yasmina Khadra (2006) and *The Secret Life of a Teenage Siren* by Wendy Toliver (2007) are concordant with the hum of a divine spinning wheel; men use its semiotic power, too, like Kurt Vonegut in his 1959 Sci-Fi classic *The Sirens of Titan*.

So, we are swiftly led by a muse on wheels but many of her sister subjects don't have proper feet. Sirens, mermaids; the muses of the sea, have beautiful faces but the bottom-halves of birds or fish. They are related to our Helicon nine, being daughters of either Melpomene or Terpsichore, according to mythology. Somewhere in the stories, Hera encourages them to compete in a singing contest (Graves, 1960, p.245). The Muses always win musical competitions, as we saw in chapter one; there, they scored eyeballs but here the trophies are feathers plucked from the Sirens and woven into crowns. A marble sarcophagus from third century Rome, now in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, depicts this triumph of Muses over Sirens; a sobering scenario, presided over by Zeus, Hera and Athena, the goddess of embroidery[1]. When the Sirens lost their feathers and could no longer fly, they grew fish tails; an evolutionary link to mermaids stitched into the creation saga.

In the Odyssey, the difference between Sirens and Muses is crucial for Homer, as the former use their creative powers to seduce and destroy his hero, but the latter inspire his

[1] This can be seen here; http://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/524177873/

whole work. [2] His listeners must trust the Muses' word, but suspect the Sirens of lying. Even 'Pythogoras exhorts us to consider the Muses more pleasant than the Sirens, teaching us to cultivate wisdom apart from pleasure' (Regier, 2004, p. 47). In this theory, the Muses show higher artistic principals, and moral superiority; aiming only to inspire men, not destroy them with beautiful song.

Their relative pedigrees can be read in the stories; the Muses' divine authority comes straight from Zeus but the Sirens have no lineage in an Olympic family tree. The Muses are famously virgins; the Sirens, a more experienced archetype, with a lasting appeal in literature and art, though their original appearance takes up a mere 35 lines of the Odyssey (only eight of which are their provocative song.)

Both are recorded in the same mythological body; Robert Graves gives their names. His sources disagree whether there were two, three or four, but offer vivid characters such as *Thelxepeia* (soothing words) *Thelxiope* (persuasive face) and *Peisinoe* (persuading the mind) for the roles (1960, p.361, p.408).

The Sirens' promise is that they know the whole story; all that has happened, all that will. The Sirens' threat is that if they tell it, Odysseus' own tale will be overwhelmed. He is warned, before he meets them, by the witch, Circe; 'Those who pause to listen do not reach home' (Fitzgerald, 1965, p.200). Homecoming is the whole point of the Odyssey's plot, the only way for Odysseus to achieve *Kleos*, the fame and glory of a proper epic hero; *kleos* that every muse aims to obtain for her artistes (Cohen, 1995, p. 84). It's the happy ending of fairy tales; but if the Sirens' song is heard instead, all the heroes will drown in some distant sea and never be famous, all the bards will die without glory.

Whatever the words were to this dangerous song, Ulysses had to hear them. He blocked the ears of his crew with beeswax: they bound him to the mast, with orders that no matter how desperately he begged to be untied, they would not release him till they were far away from the siren singing; they would only tie him tighter. A strange fact, one root of the word siren is *seirazein*; to bind with a cord (Graves, 1992, p.611). Tangled in the tale, spun in a story of his own telling, Odysseus heard the Sirens' song (in book VII, lines 185-190) and survived:

> "'Come here,' they sang, 'renowned Ulysses, honour to the Achaean name, and listen to our two voices. No one ever sailed past us without staying to

[2] In her learned comparison of Sirens and Muses in *The Odyssey*, Lillian Doherty discusses this narrative anomaly in detail, hinging on Homer's invocation of a singular muse at the critical moment in the epic poem; 'daughter of Zeus' (Cohen, 1995, p. 84).

> hear the enchanting sweetness of our song- and he who listens will go on his way not only charmed, but wiser, for we know all the ills that the gods laid upon the Argives and Trojans before Troy, and can tell you everything that is going to happen over the whole world' (Fitzgerald, 1965. P. 205).

He wants to hear it. Odysseus signals to his men to untie him, but the Argonauts remember their bond and row faster. The narrator is not unravelled here. The Sirens' power is lost in translation. [3] In Italian, French and Spanish, siren is the word for mermaid, tying the two as closely in etymology as they are in mythology. And in English literature, those same 'timeline' poets who may or may not have invoked Calliope and Clio as aids to creativity seem to know the imaginative song of the muses of the sea; even if T.S. Eliot primly protests, about the mermaids in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'I do not think that they will sing to me' (1969, p.16).

Priest and poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins, reaches a spiritual peak in 'A Vision of the Mermaids' (Gardner, 1964, p.18), while George Barker has a deep conviction in 'They Call to One Another' that he has heard them. The submarine source of song is hard to catch:

> 'But sometimes morning fishermen
> drag up in the net
> bits of bright glass or the silver comb
> of an old vanity set
> or a letter rather hard to read
> because it is still wet
> sent to remind us never… to forget
> the mermen and the mermaidens
> in the prisons of the sea'. (Sweeney, 2001, p. 94)

This protégé of Eliot, writing in the 1940s, reiterates their captivity: in the 'green and salty dens', the voices of imagination are tied like their long-time sailor-love to the tale. Prophet and poet, John Donne (1573-1631), suggests that one must learn to hear the sound of the Sirens:

> 'Goe, and catche a falling starre
> Get with child a mandrake root
> Tell me, where all past yeares are,
> Or who cleft the Divil's foot,

3 For a creative writer, the most promising part of the story must be the dialogue that follows the sirens' song. Once unplugged, the Argonauts would have wanted to hear what Odysseus heard and he may have repeated it word for word without sending his men over the side, which implies the magic was in the music.

Teach me to heare the mermaides singing.'
(Grierson, 1960, p.8)

Yet, showman and psychologist, Shakespeare doesn't need that teaching; in the words of Antipholus of Syracuse, from *Comedy of Errors* Act III, Scene II, he says: 'O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note,/ To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears./Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote' (Shakespeare,1975, p.355).

Perhaps only he and Ulysses, in all the history of stories, have unclogged their ears and heard the song that comes from somewhere, deep as the cleft in the devil's foot. In time, the fish-tailed sisters fit a Christian tradition better than the Sirens with their half-bird half-beautiful woman look. Less harpy, more sibylline; the modern mermaid tales play on the sacrifice angle.

In Hans Christian Anderson's definitive telling, the Little Mermaid wants an immortal soul. She swaps her lovely tongue to get a pair of legs; though every step feels sword-cut. Her object is the handsome prince, whose love will make her live forever; as a mermaid she has three hundred years, though on dying will become nothing but sea foam. But for humans, the three-score years and ten gives way to eternity, with the option to live again. This is the theology of fairytale; and Hans Christian Anderson's original version shows a mermaid's progression from the primal waters to the airy heaven of his happily ever after.

Tongue cut out, she is mute, not muse. For her ruse to work, the Prince must fall in love with her; or the Little Mermaid will die the day after he marries another. And indeed, he does love her but without conversation, without her song, he is not in love with her. Visual beauty, physical grace; in his 1836 telling of the tale Anderson describes 'Ariel' as a sort of sexy pet. An extraordinary twist; the perfect bride must speak. And the Sirens must be silenced.

Homer clearly states there are two, though in fine art there are often three and up to six Sirens represented in some erotic pre-Raphaelite scenes. [4] Hans Christian Anderson says his little mermaid is the youngest of six sisters. With these numbers, the voices of inspiration become a chorus. Despite Doherty's suggestion that a singular muse has more clout than nine (Cohen, 1995, p. 84), the mermaid song will multiply as this chapter moves on.Their azure sea now reflects the cerulean ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where five famous sibyls are frescoed. Like the Sirens they could foresee the future.

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[4] See John William Waterhouse, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, 1891; Henrietta Rae, *Sirens*, 1903; Herbert Draper, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, 1909.

Interwoven with the prophets in Michelangelo's frescoed web are the Eritrean Sibyl, the Sibyls of Delphi and Cumae, the Libyan Sibyl and the Tiberian. Each is shown with a book or a scroll, reminiscent of Muse Clio. Their proximity to Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Co. gives a biblical authority to these female figures of prophecy. The Sistine pillars uphold the Establishment line on divine inspiration.

Their roots go deep into its history. In Book Three of the *Oracula Sibyllina,* the Erythraean Sibyl seems to foretell the Trojan War, and the fact that a poet called Homer would write about it (Parke, 1998, p. 4). But the Christian Fathers later co-opted the Sibyls' sayings as columns for the early church. Hermas, brother of Pius, Bishop of Rome in 148 AD, had a well-publicised vision of a 'venerable lady' on the road to Cumae; 'an aged woman in shining garments with a book in her hand' who came to give him a message from God. 'I said to her: "Lady, I cannot remember so much; but give me the book to copy"; then 'I took it, and copied it all, letter by letter, for I could not work out the division into syllables' (Parke, 1998, p. 153). Apparently, after fifteen days of prayer and fasting, he was able to interpret the writing. But then, in a follow-up vision, Hermas learns that the old woman he took to be The Sibyl actually represents The Church (Parke, 1998, p. 153).

The first Christian emperor, Constantine, leaned heavily on the Sibyls' writing to hold up his new religion. This is a transcript of one of his speeches, originally in Latin: 'The Erythraean Sibyl… having become filled with a genuinely divine inspiration, prophesied in verse what would happen about God and clearly by the initial letters of the verses, which is called an acrostic, revealed the story of the coming of Jesus' (Parke, 1998. p. 165). St. Augustine also spoke of the foresight of 'The Sibyl, or sibyls, and Orpheus and I know not what Hermes…' (Parke, 1998, p.169) translating the ancient Greek acrostic into Latin and paraphrasing the oracles of Erythraea or Cummae, he wasn't sure which, for the Roman faith.

Catholicism writes them in to itself, but their origins are pagan. The Delphic Sibyl is said, in one legend recounted by Plutarch, to have been brought up by the Muses, raised on Helicon. The Sibyl's rock, where she first sat and prophesised is just downstream from the Hippocrene spring (Parke, 1998, pp. 113-114). That is the closest connection between Muses and Sibyl recorded; but there are other powerful resonances.

Roman poet Tibullus has her say (to Aeneas), 'I sing the truth; so may I continue to chew unharmed the consecrated laurel, and my virginity last forever' (Parke, 1998, p.76). Laurel was also used by the muse priestesses for its slightly psychedelic effect; burning bay leaves, or breathing gases from the rocks may also account for those prophetic trances. In

sexual abstinence, too, the Sibyl seems more akin to the Muses than the Sirens. Unlike the truthful Sibyl, though, the Muses admit to lying, and the Sirens probably do too.

In Virgil's *Aeneaid* we meet the Sibyl in her Cummaean grotto; at a fault line in fact and fiction, where this actual cave system in Italy and the story told nearby are the only evidence we have of her existence. Writing in 19 BC, Virgil draws on legend; the tale was already told of an old woman, high on 'hydrocarbon gases from bituminous limestone' [5], living in a devil-hoof cleft in the cliff, doing divine inspiration:

> 'The mad prophetic Sibyl you shall find,
> Dark in a cave, and on a rock reclin'd.
> She sings the fates, and, in her frantic fits,
> The notes and names, inscrib'd, to leafs commits.
> What she commits to leafs, in order laid,
> Before the cavern's entrance are display'd:
> Unmov'd they lie; but, if a blast of wind
> Without, or vapors issue from behind,
> The leafs are borne aloft in liquid air,
> And she resumes no more her museful care,
> Nor gathers from the rocks her scatter'd verse,
> Nor sets in order what the winds disperse.
> Thus, many not succeeding, most upbraid
> The madness of the visionary maid,
> And with loud curses leave the mystic shade.'
> (Stevenson, 2009)

In this translation by Dryden, the word 'museful' is noteworthy, though the notes the Sibyl leaves are sometimes out of order. Famously unreliable, her fictitious role is more useful here, helping Aeneas plot his way through the underworld on his quest. For this true hero's journey, she places the leaves in careful order. In another retelling too, in Bullfinch's *Mythology*, Book 31, the sibyl is muselike, under the leadership of Apollo:

> 'As Aeneas and the Sibyl pursued their way back to earth, he said to her, "Whether thou be a goddess or a mortal beloved of the gods, by me thou shalt always be held in reverence..." "I am no goddess," said the Sibyl; "I am mortal; yet if I could have accepted the love of Apollo I might have been immortal… I took a handful of sand, and holding it forth, said, 'Grant me to see as many birthdays as there are sand grains in my hand.' Unluckily I forgot to ask for enduring youth… I have lived seven hundred years, and to equal the number of the sand-grains I have still to see three hundred springs and three hundred

[5] At the similar site of the Delphic Oracle, 'archaeologists were convinced that these vapours are only a myth, as no evidence for them could be found, and … gaseous emissions from rock only occur in conjunction with volcanic activity. However, recent geological research indicates that the site of the oracle shows young geological faults, and it seems plausible that these emitted in ancient times light hydrocarbon gases from bituminous limestone which do have an intoxicating effect' (de Boer et al., 2001, p. 707).

> harvests. My body shrinks… and in time, I shall be lost to sight, but my voice will remain, and future ages will respect my sayings."' (Hare, 2008)

By her voice she will be known. In and out of the oral tradition, told and retold; this myth echoes along our literary time-line too. T.S. Eliot uses the Sybil's wizened form to show the old poetic order giving way to modernism in 'The Wasteland'; 'when the boys asked her "What do you want?" she answered, "I want to die."' This echoes Petronius who spins the same image in his *Satyricon* of the withered old seer 'hanging in a jar' (Eliot, 1969, p.59). And G.M. Hopkins interweaves the pagan with Christian inspiration in his poem 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' (Gardner, 1964, pp. 104-105).

Modern day wise-woman and writing giant, Marina Warner tells how the Sibyl of Cumae predicted the birth of Christ by a virgin; but when He was born, not to her as she'd presupposed but to another much younger mother, this early blue stocking fled to the mountaintop in disgust. There she made a long 'last stand of paganism' in Italy, more Siren than St. Mary. Medieval tales set in the sibyl's Umbrian grotto have her as a kind of fairy queen whose underground caverns ring with magical wisdom. They're penetrated by Guerino, 1391's action hero, who soon discovers Sibilla's secret; on Saturdays, she and all her beautiful handmaidens turn into horrible monsters. 'He learns of it when he peeps and sees their deformed nether limbs under their skirts' (Warner, 1994, p.4-5). Down below, a resonance with the scaly tails or feathered talons of her mythic sisters.

In a sequinned tapestry of ideas, the plots and characters cross-refer. Another modern woman who, like Marina Warner, writes along the line spun between creative and critical idioms is Michele Roberts. In her novel, *The Book of Mrs Noah*, this academic authoress works on and plays with sibylline words:

> 'I…prowl along the bookshelves until I find the leatherbound brass-cornered volume that is the index to the sibyls and their works… I run my index finger down the columns, pausing over particular names. The Nubian Sibyl… the Bombay Sibyl… the Brixton Sibyl. I … have read their works in a tumult of sorrow, laughter, rage. They've come, in the past, to give talks at the public library where I used to work. But I see that opposite their names I have scribbled G*one out of town.* So. What about some of these others? The Babble-On Sibyl… the Deftly Sibyl ... the Re-Vision Sibyl. I'll try them. I scribble down the shelf-marks…, then hunt… until I find the corresponding numbered boxes which I lift out and put on my desk' (1987, p. 21).

The sibyls' most famous story, the selling of the books, generally claims Cumae as its star. The Tarquinius Superbus, Last King of Rome, was approached by a strange old lady offering him nine scrolls for sale at a colossal price, says H.W. Parke, currently the last word

on sibylline prophesy. ‘When the king refused, she burned three volumes and offered him the remaining six for the same price. The Tarquin mocked her as mad; so she burnt three more, and repeated the same offer for the remainder. At this point the king grasped that something serious was involved, and bought the three surviving rolls. Whereupon the woman departed never to be seen again’ (1988, p.77). Thomas Bullfinch, mid-Victorian story recycler, says the scrolls contained the destinies of the Roman state. They were kept in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, and allowed to be inspected only by specially trained oracle readers.[6] How much cleverer would one have to be to read the other six volumes of wise words, never to be seen again when they went up in smoke on that allegorical bonfire.

The hardest evidence for divine inspiration so far, then, is the stone-carved Sirens on a Roman tomb, or the Sibyls painted in wet plaster on the Vatican ceiling. Two Sirens, five Sibyls; more sisters are needed to match the Muses in number (nine), as well as inspirational power. There is one female archetype bound tighter to the language of story-telling; the original Spinster.

To spin a yarn, weave a plot, untangle a tale; the web has been a metaphor for narrative structure since stories began. Now it evokes images of a worldwide network of writers and words, a gossamer grid of electronic connections and intersections; but the web idea was there before we put fingers to keyboard, chalk to slate or even drew lattice lines in the sand with a stick. Using Clio’s needle, then, let’s trace a literary history of spinners and weavers and find the beginning of the thread.

In the creation myths of the Hopi, Sioux and Pueblo Indians ‘Spiderwoman’ made the world. Authoress of The Dreaming, she wove her beautiful but deadly web with the same skill as the storytelling mothers and grandmothers who spun the silk of culture and continuity throughout aboriginal Indian communities (Leeming, 1994, pp. 256-257).

Her twentieth century offspring is famously male; it’s Spiderman who saves the post-industrial world. The result of a scientific experiment gone wrong; Peter Parker can claim an eight-legged father figure in Anansi the Spider, an archetypal trickster from the stories of West Africa and the Caribbean. This character stars in novelist Neil Gaiman’s recent hit *Anansi Boys* as the spider god reappears in modern America. We must follow the female line

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6 He quotes Young, in the Night Thoughts, on this political wisdom: ‘As worldly schemes resemble Sibyl's leaves,/ The good man's days to Sibyl's books compare,/
The price still rising as in number less’ (Hare, 2008).

of descent from Spiderwoman, though, for that is where we find, in images of spinning and weaving, some inaugural metaphors for writing.

In ancient Greek myth, Arachne is turned into a spider for boasting that her creative powers are greater than those of the goddess of embroidery herself, Athena. She, who oversees warfare and wisdom as well as weaving, warns the girl against showing off; but, encouraged by friends and fans, Arachne challenges the goddess to a competition. Mortal and Olympian weavers set up their looms side by side and work all day at the warp and weft of their life-size scenes. Athena's show her father Zeus in all his power and glory, wielding thunderbolts and lightening, punishing humans who dare to criticise him. Arachne's depict him disguised as a bull, a swan, a shower of golden coins; a cunning adulterer who seduces unsuspecting maidens (Rose, 1953, p.112).

Her admirers gather round and gasp in delight as scenery and characters come to life. It's not just what she weaves, but the way she does it that is so exquisite; spinning the gossamer threads with a musical hum, sending the shuttle back and forth with the grace of a dancer. Arachne isn't wrong; she is the world's best weaver. But Athena is not of this world, and her skill is superhuman. When they stop at the end of the day, Arachne only has to take one look at the goddess's loom to realise she could never beat the creator at her own game.

In her shame, Arachne crawls away, and stringing up a length of her silk prepares to hang herself. Athena takes pity on the girl who is, after all, the image of her; and turns her into a spider, so that she can spin and weave till the end of time. I'd been telling this story to Creative Writing students for several years until one day a young woman stayed after class to say that wasn't how it finished. She knew a different version of the tale, in which Arachne's work was better than Athena's. In this 1980s recounting by Anthony Horrowitz it is not in sympathy but a jealous rage that the Goddess turns Arachne into a spider (Horrowitz, 1985, pp 46-47).

Even 'the oldest stories in the book' have alternative endings; and morality tales can give mixed messages. My preference, both as a writer and a teacher, is for the version in which a human artist may still aspire to a perfection that is just out of reach and a supernatural patron who is kind rather than cruel. But Arachne insists, like the creative writing textbooks I began the essay to Calliope with, that inspiration isn't divine.

The arachnid's thread leads to another weaving woman of Greek mythology. Philomela was the daughter of King Pandion of Athens; her sister Procne was married to King Tereus of

Thrace. He fancied his young sister-in-law and contrived to get her sent to Thrace, in this ancient horror story best told by Ovid. The king rapes Philomela as soon as she lands on his shore and so that she can tell no one of his crime:

> '… he seized her tongue
> With pincers, though it cried against the outrage.
> Babbled and made a sound something like "Father"
> Till the sword cut it off. The mangled root
> Quivered, the severed tongue along the ground
> Lay quivering, making a little murmur,
> Jerking and twitching, the way a serpent does
> Run over by a wheel, and with its dying movement
> Came to its mistress' feet…'
> (Ovid, 1955, p.146)

As Tereus leaves her under lock and key, and goes to tell Procne her sister has died on the journey, early feminist mythologer Edith Hamilton takes up the story: 'Philomela's case looked hopeless. She was shut up; she could not speak; in those days there was no writing. It seemed that Tereus was safe. However, although people then could not write, they could tell a story without speaking because they were marvellous craftsmen, such as have never been known since. . . . Philomela accordingly turned to her loom. She had a greater motive to make clear the story she wove than any artist ever had. With infinite pains and surpassing skill she produced a wondrous tapestry on which the whole account of her wrongs was unfolded. She gave it to the old woman who attended her and signified that it was for the Queen.

> 'Proud of bearing so beautiful a gift the aged creature carried it to Procne, who was still wearing deep mourning for her sister and whose spirit was as mournful as her garments. She unrolled the web. There she saw Philomela, her very face and form, and Tereus equally unmistakable. With horror she read what had happened, all as plain to her as if in print' (1969, pp. 270-71).

The Little Mermaid could have used this technique when she lost her tongue, too, and needed to convey the truth to her loved one; but needlework wasn't learned by the muses of the sea. In a tragic finale, the two sisters make Tereus eat his own son; then all three are turned into birds, eternally swooping in counter-revenge. Philomela, of course, becomes a nightingale.

Whether the heroine is transformed into spider or bird, her wordless protest is still heard in the 'voice of the shuttle', reclaimed by modern feminist theory: 'When Philomela imagines herself free to tell her own tale to anyone who will listen, Tereus realizes for the

first time what would come to light, should the woman's voice become public…But as the mythic tale, Tereus' plot, and Ovid's own text make clear, dominance can only contain, but never successfully destroy, the woman's voice. . .' (Klindienst, 1984, p. 31)

Her resistance is repeated, in the patterned fabric of cultural history, by the character of Penelope. In Homer's epic poem, the wife of Odysseus waits twenty years for him to return from the siege of Troy. Her palace is full of admirers, all trying to persuade her he's never coming back and she should choose one of them to be her husband instead. Penelope sits working at her loom. 'My lords, my Suitors…restrain your ardour,' she says, in book II, lines 95-99, as she weaves a magnificent funeral shroud, 'do not urge on this marriage till I have done this work, so that the threads I have spun may not be wasted' (Fitzgerald, 1965, p.32). The men wait patiently till the 'delicate piece' is finished, but what they don't know is that every night, by candle light, she undoes the work completed each day, unravelling the rows of intricate colour, buying the time for her husband to make his way back to her.

This unpicking is Penelope's resistance to an ending; by undoing the rows of woven cloth she is literally avoiding closure. The analogy of embroidery and tale seems to be holding and we can follow the thread further. In her history of fairy tales and their tellers, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), Marina Warner picks up the theme of weaving and the web as key to the origins of narrative. Here we see the spinners and spinsters, gossips and grandmothers, epitomised by the figure of Mother Goose, as keepers of the received wisdom of the past, unfolding the plots of the future.

The root of the word fairy is the Latin 'fata'; the Fates being three goddesses of destiny who were not unrelated to the muses, all descended from daughters of Chaos. Apparently, they would '…spin a woollen thread on a distaff, on a spindle, and with their fingers, on account of the threefold nature of time: the past, which is already spun and wound onto the spindle; the present, which is drawn between the spinners fingers; and the future, which lies in the wool twined on the distaff and which must still be drawn out by the fingers of the spinner onto the spindle, as the present is drawn to the past' (Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologies* in Warner, 1994, page 15).[7]

Warner goes on to show how 'the structure of fairy stories, with their repetitions, reprises, elaboration and minutiae, replicates the thread and fabric of one of women's

[7] Other sources suggest that the Irish 'fahr ree', loosely translating as spirit people, is where 'fairy' comes from (Curran, 2006, p.236-237). This opens further avenues of research, to the Celtic healing goddess Brigid, a spinner; the Scandinavian Valkyries as women weaving on a loom, with severed heads **for weights, arrows for** shuttles, and human gut for the warp; and the Germanic myth of the spinner Holda, whose patronage controls the weather, women's fertility, and unborn children.

principal labours – the making of textiles from the wool or the flax to the finished bolt of cloth' (1994, page 23). Just as the sea-shanty got its rhythm from the heave-ho of the rigging, the dip and pull of the oars, the fairy tale was accompanied by the hum of the spinning wheel, the rattle of the loom. The old wives, the wet nurses, illiterate women of no social standing but a major role in childcare, were the original authors of these stories.

Mother Goose is the muse of Charles Perrault, the French scholar whose 1697 volume of fairy tales contain the first written versions of many classic plots (*Contes de ma Mere L'Oye* in Warner, 1994, p. xii). She is pictured with the distaff, often seen as a phallic symbol, on the frontispiece of early editions of these tales (Warner, 1994, p. 37); warning children of the world's dangers. Don't talk to wolves, don't be greedy, selfish or leave trails that can be eaten by birds, don't pretend to be a princess unless you can prove it with a pea.

Perhaps the most famous of the spinning princesses is Sleeping Beauty. In her story a jealous 'fate' puts a curse on the privileged child: at the age of sixteen she will prick her finger on a spindle and die. Though the king and queen rid the land of spinning paraphernalia and disguise their precious girl as a peasant, the curse is fulfilled exactly as it was foretold. Traditionally, this plot has been seen as a warning against uncontrolled sexuality; the father, mother and prickly bushes alike protecting the daughter's virgin fortress from the threat of penetration.

In fact, the earliest tellings of this tale had no spindle. Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on a sliver of flax in the woods, and is raped by the Prince who finds her unconscious there. Twins are born while she sleeps and only when one tries to nurse on her finger and sucks out the splinter does she wake (Warner, 1994, pp. 220-221). So, no needle as such, at this point in Clio's discussion. Both Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm use the distaff euphemistically for their more innocuous versions of the story.

There is another phallic object we could liken the spindle to; what if it doesn't represent a penis, but a pen? The injunction would then be against literary representation, the Grimm's own written intervention in an oral tradition. The muses Calliope and Clio, with their frequent props the scrolls and books, carved or painted in their feted hands, have already started to celebrate the word on the page; so must be guilty of this too, the phallogocentricity of 'Eng Lit'. They stand accused by another of Grimms' spindle-wielding princesses, the heroine of Rumplestiltskin.

She's the peasant daughter of a miller; poor but so beautiful and good that her father thinks she's a match for the king's son. He boasts that she has the power to spin straw into gold. The prince is interested. His Highness locks the miller's daughter in a room full of

yellow bales and will only let her out in the morning if a transformation has occurred. For two nights, the girl manages to buy the help of a mysterious goblin man, with the ring and necklace her dead mother left her. By the third night, she's out of heirlooms and has to promise the ugly, elfin helper her first born child. Luckily, three nights of labour are enough to secure her place in the royal family; and the miller's daughter thinks no more of her supernatural assistant till the baby is born and he appears to claim his prize.

The moral of this story is 'don't show off', as it is in Arachne's, but that is just the beginning of our fall into self-consciousness and literacy. Using the spindle as a pen again, we can see writing as an alchemical process, turning straw into gold, the raw material into reading matter. The miller's daughter writes an alternative future for herself with this magical tool.

Her happy ending requires great verbal skill, though. She has to guess the goblin's name and goes through the every-day authorial experience of trying to find the right word. Exhausting her own vocabulary, it is another boast that ends this plot just as one began it. The goblin is overheard gloating that she'll never guess his name is Rumplestiltskin. [8] Divine inspiration is seized by the indelible pen of representation, in the hands of this dwarf with a giant ego. Now the spindle of oral storytelling is set against that inky penis of the literary canon.

Behind the famous names of Grimm, the voice of one of the female fairytale tellers can still be heard. Not, this time, the anonymous nursemaid, garrulous grandma or sibilant sibyl of the oral tradition; but a fashionable Parisian writer and contemporary of Perrault, Jeanne-Marie L'Heritier. 'Her style could never be read as the voice of the people; she writes the flowery and learned prose of a *precieuse* from the aristocratic salons of the Sun King's Paris' (Warner, 1994, p.174). Her *Ricdin-Ricdon*, the predecessor of Rumplestiltskin, acknowledges the spinning of the tale as well as the spinning in the tale, with a literary awareness beyond the scope of a common folk story.

[8] A third Grimm tale, The Spindle, the Shuttle and the Needle, concerns an orphan heroine who inherits the eponymous spinning and weaving equipment from her godmother. The handsome prince, looking for a bride, comes to her village on his quest to find a woman who is neither rich nor poor but both the richest and the poorest in the place. He passes her by on his tricky mission, seeing only a humble cottager occupied by a menial task. Her magic spindle pursues him, though, her shuttle and needle go after him; spinning a golden net around him and drawing him back down a path woven with fertile imagery to her door (Northvegr, 2007). Somehow this imagery seems shared by the weaving women and the writing men, whose pens turned the raw stories into gold prose.

Our theme of weaving is given the same sophisticated treatment in another of L'Heritier's original plots. *La Robe de Sincerite* (a prototype for Hans Anderson's The Emperor's New Clothes written over a hundred years later) is a gown that tells the truth. It will 'reveal to a married man whether his wife is faithful, to a brother his sister's chastity, to a son his mother's, and so forth: if the woman in question is pure, the pictures of virtuous women will be visible in light on the black cloth of the robe when she puts it on. If the embroidery remains invisible, she is guilty (Warner, 1994, p.178). Woven by a wizard's daughter, the dress is a trick that exposes the husbands and fathers who pretend to see chaste images in public then punish their womenfolk for infidelity in private. (Penelope is one of the 'good girls' who is supposed to appear on the frock!) Warner concludes 'The adulteries and other crimes men fantasize when they see nothing in the robe represent the slanders levelled at innocent women; Herminie's collaboration with her father reveals the web of conflicting allegiances in which women are trapped; her woven tales and pictures, like L'Heritier's own writings, stand for her protest – the different story, the women's version' (1994, p.179). The needle pricks harder than the pen, perhaps, as female storytellers struggle with that hegemonic plot. Some of them simply don't trust 'divine inspiration', when it is pinned to men's paper. Arachne, Philomela, Penelope were close to the muses, indeed the *Odyssey* is circumscribed by them and the *Theogony* ascribed to them, but they resisted every word of their narration.

In my novel, *Translating the Muse's Tale*, the central character, a wannabe writer, actually meets the nine Greek goddesses of creativity. The imagery I use, as she waits at her computer for inspiration, meshes with the spinning and weaving themes in this essay, the trope of the web. There is lace and logic at its interface of creative and critical writing. The plot runs parallel to the argument; muses are invoked in that story too:

> '"Sometimes they whisper ideas to me," says Alleysun. She cracks her knuckles and spreads her fingers over the web of gossamer connections. Her computer is a tree made of glowing metalwork, with silver rods and tiny copper nuts and bolts making knots in the steel-spun trunk of a machine. There's an electric crown of leaves, thousands of wires sparking a viridescent haze; and between two branches, an illuminated tissue of fibre-optic filigree is strung. Between the muscular metal boughs, a cobweb message…
>
> '"Speak ladies; your servant is listening," the would-be author rattles the lettered beads strung on luminous lines. "They've spun me some threads, I can tell you. A world created by the weaver, perfected by the weaver's apprentice. A girl could be turned into a spider for daring to embroider the goddess's tale. She could prick her finger on the spindle and sleep for a hundred copyright years. But the

> Muses told me about a princess who could spin straw into gold and mustn't be surprised if I aspire to that too."
>
> "Those are great stories," Hazel agrees.
>
> "Oh, but the best thread is the one that leads out of the maze; Ariadne-style, avoiding the bullshit." The girl's fingers twitch on the cobweb keyboard. "Once upon a time… oh, come on, Muse, can't you come up with anything new?"' [Habens, 2009, p.222]

Samuel Richardson wrote what is widely considered the first novel, *Pamela*, in 1740. Pamela, Philomela; the same yarn is spun again. This time, though, the heroine doesn't sew; she protests in writing, secretly:

'My master asked me very roughly, as I passed by him in the entry leading to the hall, calling me *idle girl*, that I minded my pen more than my needle' (Richardson, 1980, p. 79).

She's supposed to be sewing a waistcoat for the boss who sexually abuses her. It should probably be a fertility tapestry of silk buds and blooms like we've seen in other spinning stories. Instead, Pamela uses her writing skills to save her virtue, in a series of letters and diary entries that validate her position of resistance. At this point in patriarchy, does the Muse reclaim her rights, the authority she had first by the Helicon spring? Perhaps putting words in place of stitches tightens up the relations of inspiration.

Another female unraveller of the political fabric is the 'The Lady of Shalott' (1842). Set against the mythical backdrop of Camelot, in the legendary poem by Tennyson, this lady is trapped in a tower; cursed never to look out of a window and see the world as it actually is. A mirror, the symbol of reality and illusion, is angled to show what lies beyond the castle wall as she sits at her enchanted loom; and 'There she weaves by night and day/A magic web with colours gay' (Rhys-Jones, 1996, p. 11).

This Platonic formula for the making of art has been familiar to poets and philosophers alike since before the spinning-wheel was invented. Not the author of her own fate, or the originator of the curse, the Lady's job is simply to translate the world outside her window into stitches in her tapestry, the matrix of the real into the warp and weft of her colourful fabrication; but 'I am half sick of shadows' said The Lady of Shalott (Rhys-Jones, 1996, p.12).

It's Sleeping Beauty syndrome, as she waits to be woken from the dream with a kiss. Then one day in her mirror the Lady of Shalott sees Sir Lancelot, a knight in shining armour, riding past on his white horse. She turns from the looking-glass to see him for real, to look through the window to see him in the flesh. In this move from reflection to fact, the lady breaks the spell, the mirror, the structured support of the loom, with its cross-beams and correct tension:

‘She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro’ the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look’d down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack’d from side to side;
‘The curse is come upon me,’ cried
The Lady of Shalott.’
(Rhys-Jones, 1996 p.13)

It is easy to spot in the blooming water-lily, the helmet and plume, symbols of a maturing sexuality; with the euphemistic term ‘the curse’ for menstruation seeming to follow that same thread. We might also recognise in the plume, that feather pen of power, the inked nib of self-expression thus far denied the sex whose stories are told in stitches, whose art is made for wearing, for sitting on.

It is tempting to see, too, in the unstrung loom and unravelling threads of the Lady of Shallot, a crisis point in the history of storytelling. Mother Goose, the muse with a distaff, was spinning the tales from ancient times; Spiderwoman created the world. But in those last moments before modernism does the web of representation actually rupture? Does divine inspiration die?

The answer, like the question, is couched in fiction: Tom Thumb was killed by a spider. The archetypal little man of myth, a trickster like Anansi himself, wore a jacket made of cobweb but this couldn’t protect him from the spider’s poison:

"An oak-leaf hat he had for his crown;
His shirt of web by spiders spun…
"Here lyes Tom Thumb, King Arthur's knight,
Who died by a spider's cruel bite.”
(Altemus, 1999)

The story cuts its own thread. In 1895, Nietzsche said in *The AntiChrist:* ‘The Christian concept of a god …as a spider, the spinner of cobwebs… is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine that has ever been set up in the world’ (Kaufmann, 1982, p. 585).

If the cobwebs are corrupt, my thesis is; and certainly it has been warped to the female voices, nine at least, singing loud and clear. Spinning had been demonised long before

Nietzsche 'dissed' God. In the Roman Empire, laws banned women from holding a spindle in public. Unpicking the reasons would separate strands of gender and economics before any religious tangling: Clio weaves from philosophy to fairy tale in this chapter.

And the thread is endlessly re-tied. Jacob Grimm collected superstitions as well as stories: 'if, while riding a horse overland, a man should come upon a woman spinning, then that is a very bad sign; he should turn around and take another way' (*Deutsche Mythologie,* 1835).

Perhaps the worst thing about the web is the spider; but the act of spinning evokes some deeper fear than arachnophobia in men. In H.G. Wells *The Valley of the Spiders,* giant malignant arachnids attack his hero. Overwhelmed by the gossamer threads, it might be a threat of emasculation, of being trapped in the feminine net:

'His legs were swathed and encumbered with grey; he made ineffectual movements with his sword. Grey streamers waved from him; there was a thin veil of grey across his face' (Wells, 1970, p. 867).

In the early horror genre, the web remains a potent image; as does the spinner in H.P. Lovecraft's sinister tale *The Festival*. Here the now familiar 'bent old woman in loose wrapper and deep poke-bonnet sat back toward me, silently spinning despite the festive season…I could hear the creaking of signs in the wind outside, and the whirr of the wheel as the bonneted old woman continued her silent spinning, spinning' (Lovecraft, 1999, pp. 111-112).

Other horror stories by lesser known authors [9], manifest the same 'creaking signs'; and still use the hanging motif, whereby the hero is strung up by their own thread, that we saw originally in the myth of Arachne.

Spiderwoman threatens men, much as the Sirens did and maybe the sibyls. Women who know things are easier to silence than goddesses, whose still small voices aren't heard in the normal way. There are positive 'spinster' role models in children's stories, though. The 1950's classic *Charlotte's Web* shows a spider saving the life of a piglet by writing messages in her web (White, 1993, p. 90). And the earlier *Marigold in Godmother's House* (by Joyce Lankester Brisley, who may be better remembered for *Milly Molly Mandy*) portrays a magical world reached through spider web gates. While she stays with her godmother Marigold is allowed to wander at will in the enchanted grounds so long as she doesn't go through a gate; but the garden layout is disorientating and the little girl gets lost:

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9 Such as *The Spider* by Hanns Heinz Ewers.

> ‘Presently, passing by a …thicket of bushes, she came upon a low gate leading into a path that soon twisted out of sight. It was a spider-web gate … so she knew that it belonged to her godmother.
>
> ‘“Oh, now I’m all right!” said Marigold thankfully, feeling sure that this would lead her back into the garden; and she put her hand to the iron catch. But then she remembered Godmother telling her so firmly not to go beyond the gates; … and, if she were lost, she really did not know … which side of this gate she was on – the inside or the outside’ (Brisley, 1952, pp.51-52).

Here is a postmodern sister of the Lady of Shallot as the boundaries of the story break down. For a moment, Marigold doesn’t know if she is on the inside or the outside of the garden gate. A crisis of interiority and exteriority is marked by this web. We see the same image used by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*: he refers to an ‘ideal text’ as a ‘network of voices’, using the terms interweaving and woven as he argues that ‘these voices (whose origin is ‘lost’ in the vast perspective of the *already-written)* de-originate the utterance’ (Seldon, 1988, pp. 299 – 302). The voices are back! We still don’t know who is speaking, and the speech itself is untrustworthy as Godmother’s rusty gate; but Barthes gives us the great ideas that come from nowhere, again.

In her poem, ‘The Spider’, Emily Dickinson refers to the ‘neglected son of genius’; but we have seen its silky connection to women writers and their writing, its steely links to the female founders of the oral storytelling tradition. It’s possible to go on following that trail of literary clues, from Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* where the cobwebs on the model ship in the abandoned boat house repeatedly point to the bottom of the mystery (Du Maurier, 2003, pp. 134 and 172); to Agatha Christie’s *Spider’s Web* which epitomises the genre of detective fiction with its sticky, concentric paths to truth. The thread I must use here will be most like Ariadne’s in the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, though: having tied it securely to the opening image it will lead me safely back out of a maze. (Though in many versions of Ariadne’s tale she also ends up hanging herself, when jilted by her lover, Bacchus.)

Spiderwoman, Sibyls, Sirens; can we establish a sorority of the muses? Five on the Sistine Ceiling, two on the Sirens’ Island, one recurring in a world wide web; this only makes eight. The ninth is a riddle.

For this chapter to Clio, their voices give another answer to the question of where ideas come from. In their view of divine inspiration, much has been told by a needle. And by Cleopatra’s needle, an obelisk inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphics from the reign of Thotmuse III, brought to London by the Victorians and erected on the Embankment, sits a

Sphinx and her sister on their granite plinth. Wordplay wins this argument; as wordplay started it.

Like the Sibyl, the Sphinx has a reputation that goes before her; driven by myth and wish, fuelled by fantasy but steered by fact. Willis Goth Regier describes her double origins in his seminal work, *Book of the Sphinx*:

> 'In Egypt is the Great Sphinx of Giza, flat on its belly amid ghosts of the gods. He has a very old name, *Horemakhet*, Sun on the Horizon. Its face is supposed to be the face of Pharaoh Chephren… from the golden age of sun worship, 4,500 years ago… In Greece is *Phix* the riddler, the singer, the strangler … She is chimera, half lion and half-woman; half four-legged, also and half two-legged, and perhaps partly bird' (Regier, 2004, p.3).

Apollodorus told her story, as did Hyginus; and the Phix plot is so powerful it eclipses the masculine persona of Horemakhet so that the sphinx eventually becomes exclusively female. 'The Greek Sphinx with her breasts and song is the sphinx of modern stories' (Regier, 2004, p.141).

Bacon and Bullfinch pen some definitive versions, again. Their monster 'dwelt on the ridge of a mountain near Thebes and infested the roads, lying in ambush for travellers, whom she would suddenly attack and lay hold of; and when she had mastered them, she propounded to them certain dark and perplexing riddles, which she was thought to have obtained from the Muses. And if the wretched captives could not at once solve and interpret the same, as they stood hesitating and confused she cruelly tore them to pieces' (*Wisdom of the Ancients*, n.d. p.280).

Bacon makes an analogy: the Sphynx is science, while the Muses represent the arts. The 'difficult questions and riddles' are meditations for the Helicon nine but 'when they pass from the Muses to Sphinx, that is from contemplation to practice, whereby there is necessity for present action, choice, and decision, then they begin to be painful and cruel; and unless they be solved and disposed of they strangely torment and worry the mind, pulling it first this way and then that, and fairly tearing it to pieces' (p.282). He sets art's divine inspiration against the divine irritation of science!

Then, in one of myth's most famous encounters, Bullfinch tells how Oedipus answered the Sphinx's riddle to become king of Thebes. She asked him: "What animal is that which in the morning goes on four feet, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three?" Oedipus replied, "Man, who in childhood creeps on hands and knees, in manhood walks

erect, and in old age with the aid of a staff." The Sphinx was so mortified at the solving of her riddle that she cast herself down from the rock and perished (Hare, 2008).[10]

Just like the Sirens; so mortified they threw themselves off the cliff, when Odysseus and his men sailed away from their song. The heroic acts are identical. Regier says; 'After Odysseus passed the Sirens and Oedipus passed the Sphinx, no one else need try. They solved the problem' (Regier, 2004, p.47).

Or did they? Psychoanalysts continue to worry at this archetypal relationship. Freud wrote to Jung that "Oedipus… means swollen foot, i.e. erected penis" and "The riddle of the Sphinx [is] the question of where babies come from" (p.140). Later Melanie Klein proposed that the Sphinx appears in infancy when the mother ceases to breastfeed. (p.142) But Otto Rank problematises the whole thing with his observation that the Spinx 'is a female being with a male member' (Regier, 2004, p.16) so 'does double duty: as "homosexual fixation" and as mother' (p.143).

In his *Book of the Sphinx,* Regier has a partial answer; 'Odysseus left the Sirens behind. The Sphinx is still there' (p. 47). Of Horemakhet's Saharan seat he says, 'Seven times have the ever-active sands buried the Sphinx; seven times it has been freed' (p.22) in a history that lasts 5,000 years. Once the sand is swept away from his/her mysterious sides, though, it only takes thirty years for the desert to bury the Sphinx again (p.29). This message is easily repressed, but persistently returns.

At first 'people thought the Sphinx contained hidden secrets. They suspected there were chambers built inside, with ancient books of wisdom and magic. But we now know that the sphinx is mostly solid rock' (Chisholm, 1999, p.5). So we are left, as we were at this point in Calliope's chapter, with the shifting sands; on which a female figure of inspiration may write with a finger, pen or needle. The argument began with a spindle; and continues in the virtual enmeshing of the world wide web. In my first chapter, the timeline of Divine Inspiration, male poets made the muse mortal; then jilted her for nature, each other and themselves. They made poetry human, wrote it in sweat and semen. They stopped suggesting the ideas were whispered by goddesses.

In Clio, though, female storytellers resist the word; the word on paper, printed, penned. They unpick the lies; they embroider the truth. The rebel Pamela is accused of minding her pen

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[10] Scholars and story-lovers have ever since wondered why the Sphinx's riddle was so easy; suspecting it of secret codes or double-meanings. I think Oedipus passed because he implicitly acknowledged that man is an animal!

more than her needle, but in many cases the pen is spurned like the penis by women who have another story to tell.

Ultimately we invoke Spider Woman/Mother Goose. If Muse Clio has another guise, it must be this. Older, now, than the beautiful virgin portrayed in the classics; tale spinner, plot weaver, she ties the thread of the essay together. Maternal and melancholy, drunk and drugged; she is Sphinx-like, too, as Emerson, the American Tennyson, says in his 1841 poem:

> ‘Out spoke the great mother,
> Beholding his fear;--
> At the sound of her accents
> Cold shuddered the sphere:--
> 'Who, has drugged my boy's cup?
> Who, has mixed my boy's bread?
> Who, with sadness and madness,
> Has turned my child's head?’’
>
> ‘I heard a poet answer
> Aloud and cheerfully
> ‘Say on, sweet Sphinx! thy dirges
> Are pleasant songs to me.’’

So, the accents are mournful, but the eye is twinkling. In this poem we hear the heroics of Oedipus and Odysseus; but we see the gleam of self-conscious creativity that changes the face of inspiration for Calliope:

> ‘The old Sphinx bit her thick lip,--
> Said, ‘Who taught thee me to name?
> I am the spirit, yoke-fellow;
> Of thine eye I am eyebeam.’’ (Sauer, 2009)

This may be the same expression of a visionary trope we’ve traced in Homer and Milton, Emily Dickinson and Jean-Luc Nancy; a common reflection on the still uncanny experience of inspiration. Ralph Waldo Emerson enacts both Oedipus and Sphinx in his epigrammatic response:

> ‘Thorough a thousand voices
> Spoke the universal dame;
> ‘Who telleth one of my meanings
> Is master of all I am.’’
> (Sauer, 2009)

I would never dare to be master of a muse; that is Arachne's boast. No writer will ever beat the creator(s) at their own game. Nor should I claim that the thousand voices are all the same. There's a huge gap between genius and ingenuity. H. W. Parke cites this key 'distinction between a clairvoyant and a medium and the corresponding difference between the Sibyl and Pythia' (1998, pp. 9-10).

Pythia was a priestess of Apollo, who sat to prophesy on a tripod seat over a crack in the rocks; where the body of a monster, Python, slain by Apollo, had been thrown. The fumes it gave off as the beast decomposed were intoxicating and the priestess spoke in a trance. Literally, the ancient Greeks believed, she channelled the voice of Apollo; and when she spoke it was with his 'I', the first-person perspective was his.

In contrast, the sibyl was divinely inspired; her voice remained her own, though the ideas may have come from God; when she said I, it never meant Him. And most importantly, having spoken, the sibyl remembered what she'd said. As a modern creative writer, I can claim to have sipped some pretty strong spring water and inhaled some ugly fumes; I've aimed to prick with words, to untangle offensive old webs and spin new ones. I've been boastful about my writing and humbled by it, like lots of the characters in this chapter; but I hardly ever look at a page the next morning and not remember writing it the night before.

The end of my musing on Clio is marked, then, by a giant needle, covered in hieroglyphics. Made by Thotmuse, blessed by Thoth, guarded by Sphinxes, threaded by Spiderwoman; it has cross-stitched this essay. Spun by midwives, sung by mermaids, scratched on sibyls' leaves, the story of 'where writers get their ideas from' goes on. Another instalment, to Polyhymnia, starts with words carved on a great stone monument too; and continues the project to identify an immortal author.

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