

Women, Writing and the (Original) Web



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 ever put fingers to keyboard...

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 .

Her twentieth century offspring is famously male; it's Spiderman who saves the western 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.





Anansi

This character stars in novelist Neil Gaiman's hit *Anansi Boys* as the spider god reappears in modern America.

We must follow the female line 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 warns the girl against showing off; but, encouraged by friends and fans, Arachne challenges the goddess to a competition.

Her admirers gather round and gasp in delight as scenery and characters come to life. 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.



In a 1980s recounting by Anthony Horowitz it is not in sympathy but a jealous rage that the Goddess turns Arachne into a spider.

Even 'the oldest stories in the book' have alternative endings; and morality tales can give mixed messages.

For the full references
APA-style
See my essay to Clio
A click away
Pages 8 - 18



The arachnid's thread leads to another weaving woman of Greek mythology.

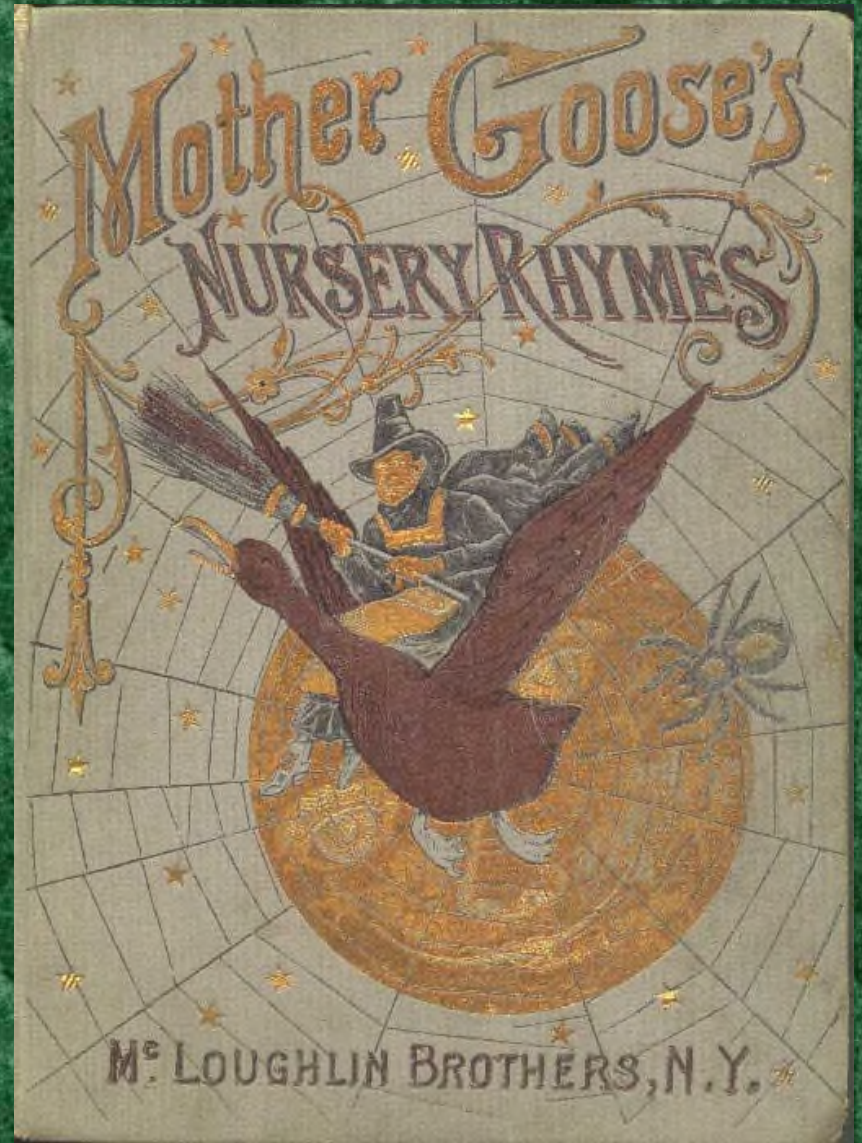


Penelope. In Homer's epic poem, the wife of Odysseus waits twenty years for him to return from the siege of Troy. Her palace is full of admirers, all trying to persuade her he's never coming back and she should choose one of them to be her husband instead.

The men wait patiently till the funeral shroud she's weaving for her husband 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.



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.

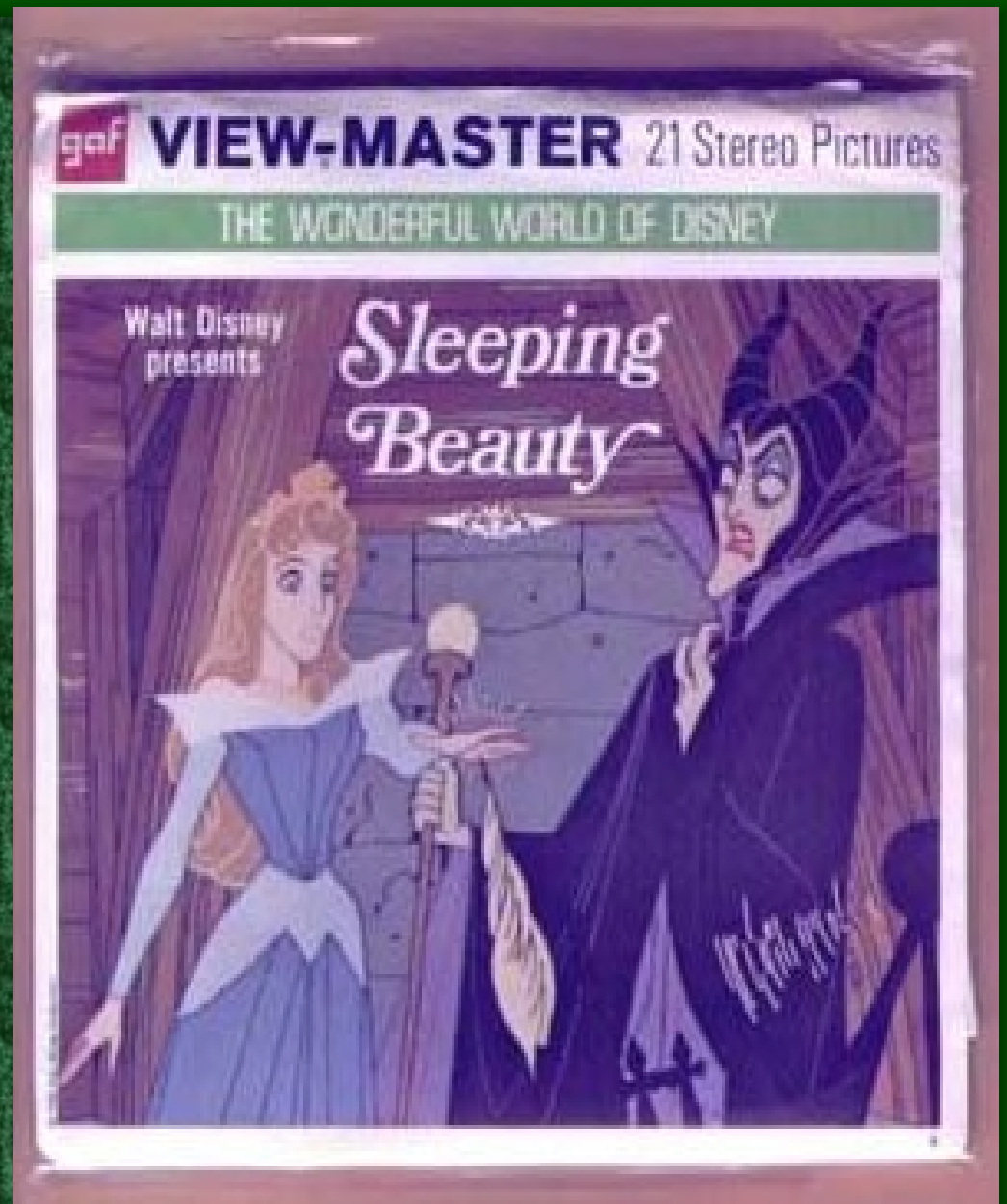




Mother Goose is the muse of Charles Perrault, the French scholar whose 1697 volume of fairy tales contain the first written versions of many classic plots (*Contes de ma Mère L'Oye*). She is pictured with the distaff, often seen as a phallic symbol, on the frontispiece of early editions of these tales .

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.

Our word 'fairy' comes from the Latin *fata*, the fates who spun the thread of time; from distaff to spindle, as from past to future...



The spindle: 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 scrolls and books, have already started to celebrate the word on the page; so must be guilty of this 'phallogocentricity', too. They stand accused by another of Grimms' spindle-wielding princesses, the heroine of Rumpelstiltskin.



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 Rumpelstiltskin.

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.

(This is an extract from my essay to Clio; one click away, will clear up any confusion.)





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.

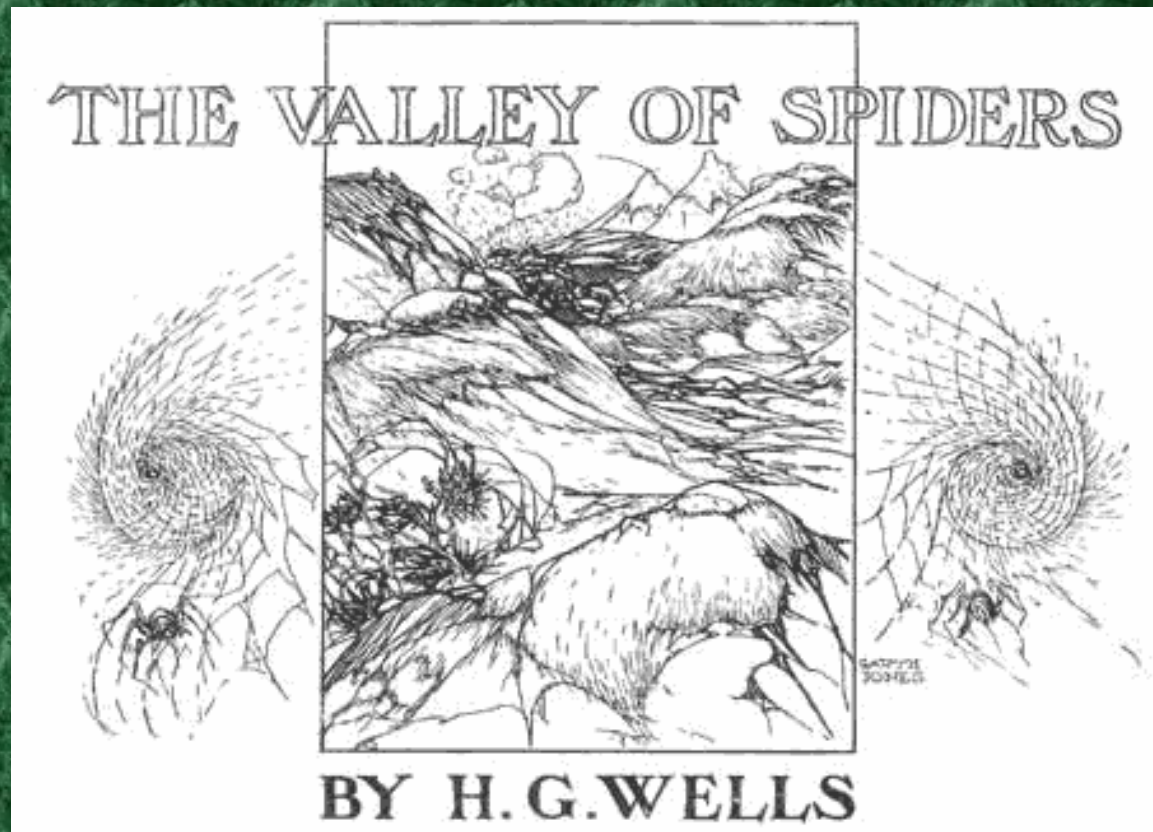


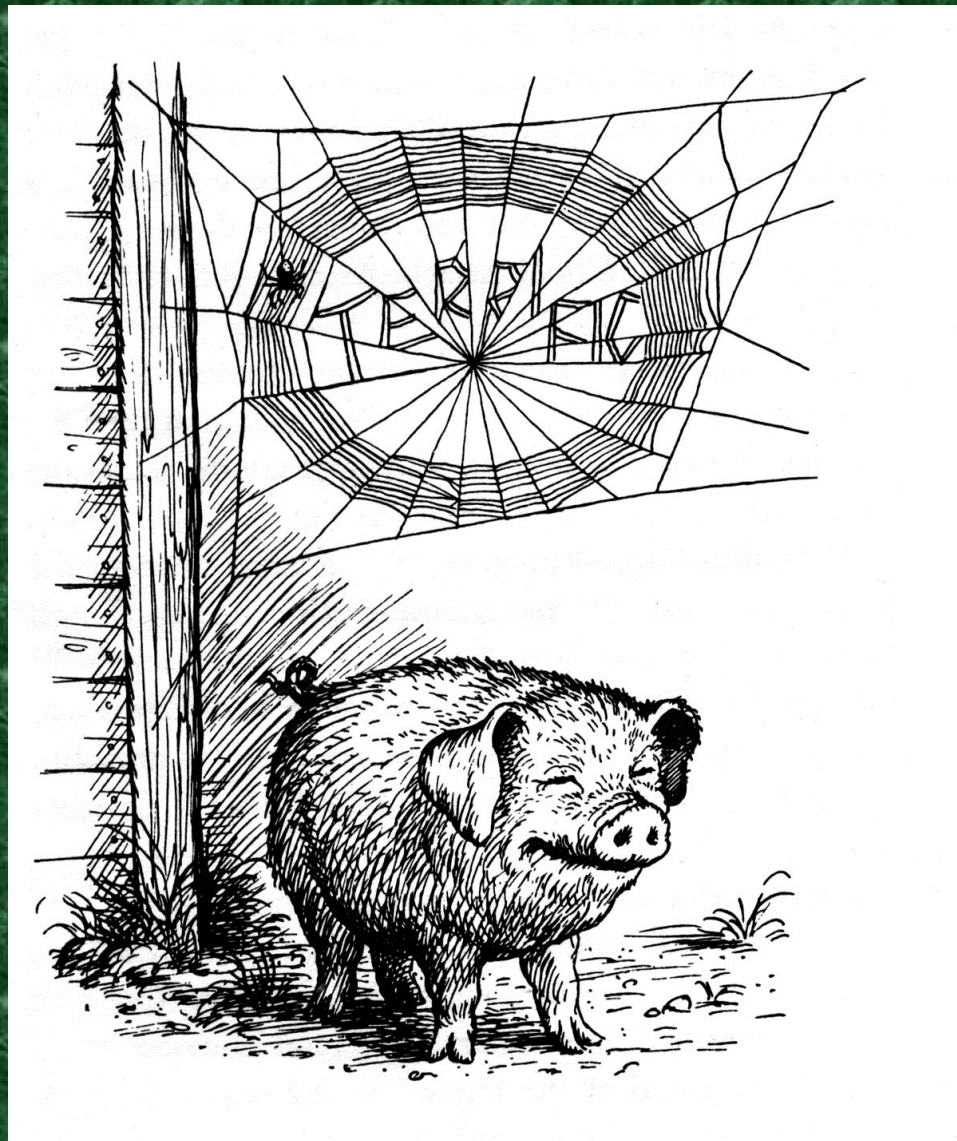
It's Sleeping Beauty syndrome, as she waits to be woken from the dream with a kiss. Then one day in her mirror the Lady of Shalott sees Sir Lancelot, a knight in shining armour, riding past on his white horse. She turns from the looking-glass to see him for real, to look through the window to see him 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.



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?

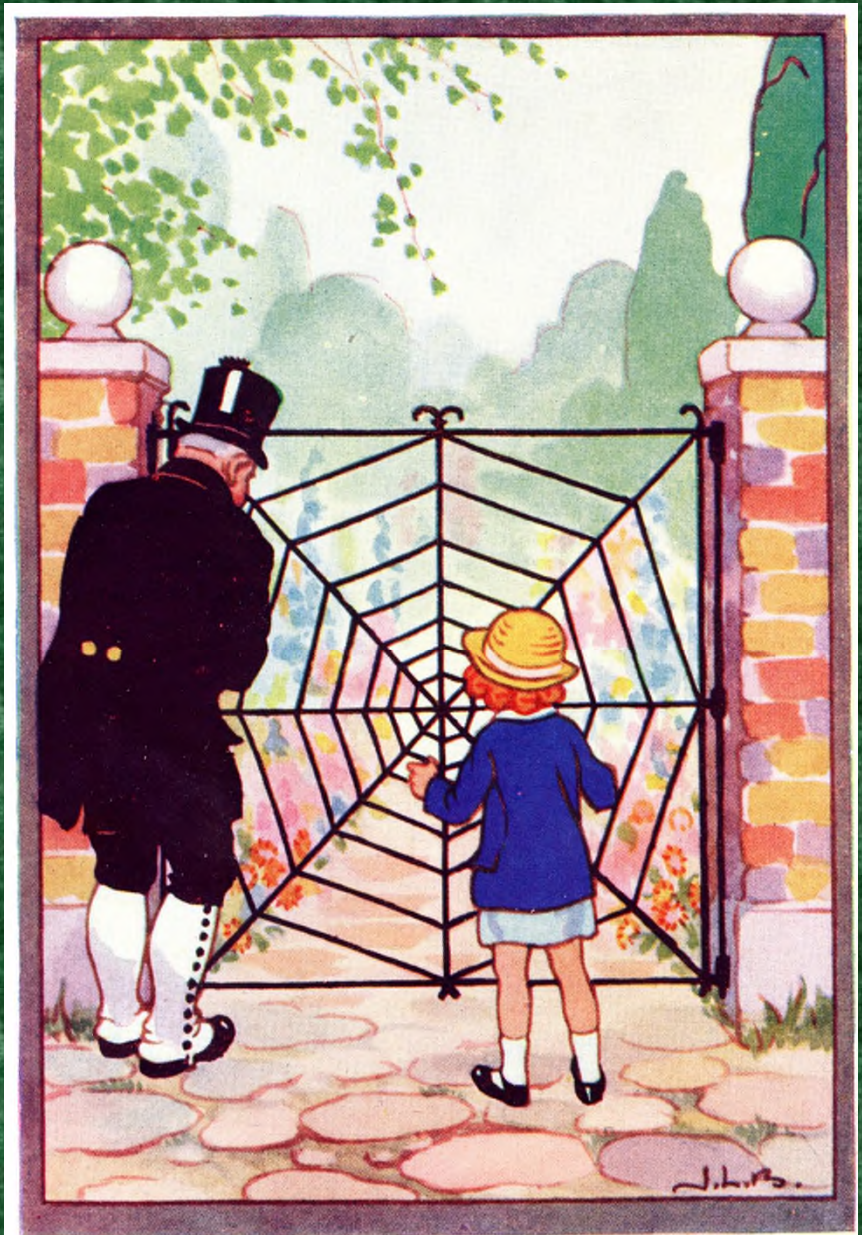
Perhaps the worst thing about the web is the spider; but the act of spinning evokes some deeper fear than arachnophobia in men. In H.G. Wells *The Valley of the Spiders*, giant malignant arachnids attack his hero. Overwhelmed by the gossamer threads, it might be a threat of emasculation, of being trapped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



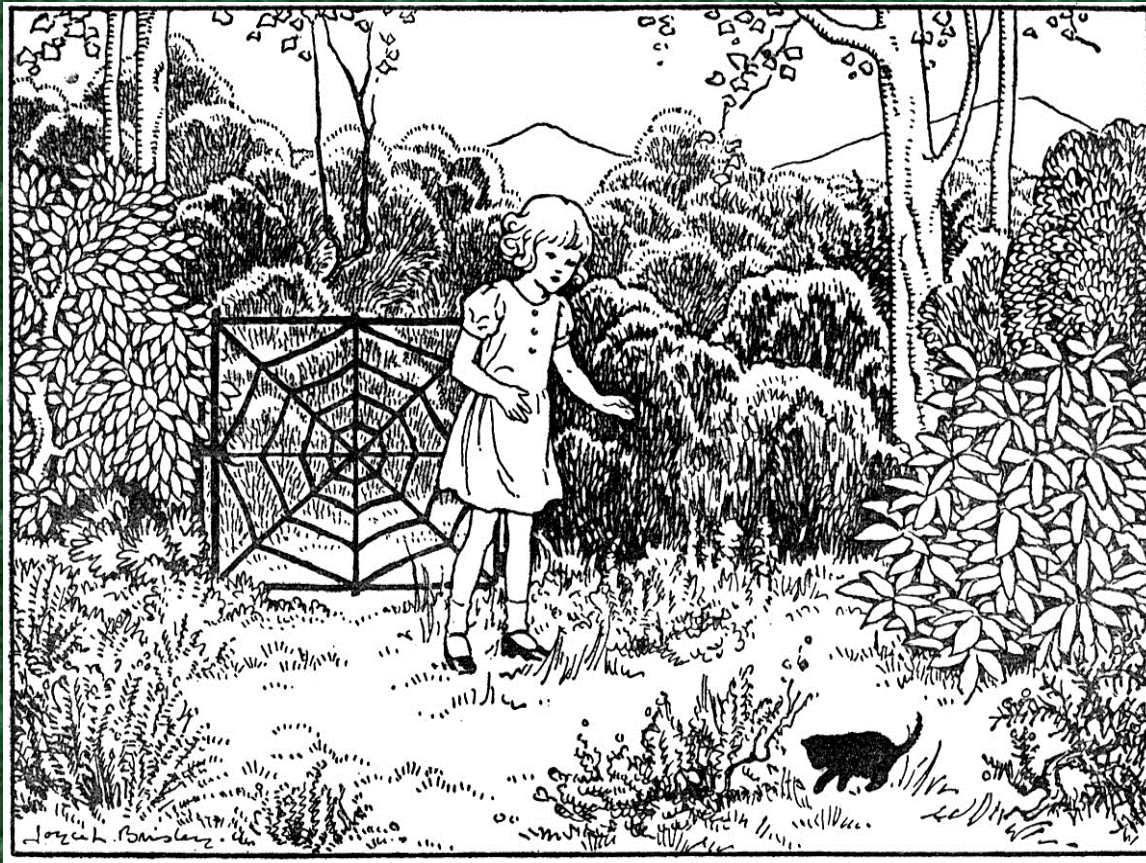


Spiderwoman threatens men, much as the Sirens did and the sibyls. There are positive 'spinster' role models in children's stories, though. The 1950's classic *Charlotte's Web* shows a spider saving the life of a piglet by writing messages in her web.

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:



SHE HAD ARRIVED !



She is a postmodern sister of the Lady of Shalot as the boundaries of her 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.

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.



The thread used here is most like Ariadne's in the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, though: having tied it securely to the opening image it will lead us safely back out of a maze.

(Though in some versions of Ariadne's tale she ends up hanging herself by her own thread... when jilted by her lover, Bacchus.)

