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Lavinia: The Weaver and the Mother Wolf

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Lavinia: The Weaver and the Mother Wolf

Over the course of Ursula Le Guin's Lavinia, the titular character transitions from a maiden bound to the pages of another's story, to a strong heroine who writes her own. Le Guin shows this by having Lavinia move from identifying as a spinner to identifying as a weaver. While spinning is a repetitive, mindless task, weaving requires active concentration and results in a unique creative output. Lavinia's social role also changes, from an obedient princess to a queen who defies control to pursue her own agenda. The metaphor of spinning, weaving, and fabric is multilayered, quite literally woven throughout the text to display Lavinia's ascending self-growth.

The ancients, with perhaps the exception of the Egyptians, recognized weaving as the domain of women. A woman could even start a business and gain independence through her weaving, although doing so usually required slave labor. Yet, weaving during the time of Augustus when Virgil wrote was considered the proper domain of high class Roman ladies. The story of Lucretia characterizes the chaste *exempla* of a woman by having her stay home and weave for her household instead of banqueting. Augustus additionally required his wife Livia to weave his clothes, according to Judith Sebesta. Le Guin does note that their clothing was simple. We don't see any gorgeous tapestries, but the clothing Lavinia produces would be useful and highly valued by members of her community. Most Romans likely had only a few garments apiece, given the time and labor a piece of cloth took to produce. Of course, what looks to us like a simple piece of cloth would still have required hours of labor with eight women spinning the wool required by one weaver.

Le Guin does appear to make one noticeable error in the text, when she talks about carding wool. "Pulling wool drawing apart the blobs and hunks of a washed fleece to separate the fibers so they can be carded, was always my favorite housework;" (p.17) Carding was actually not a common process in the ancient world, as the tools required were not invented until the Middle Ages. Instead, Lavinia and the women of her time would have combed their wool. "Combing the unspun fibers to lie parallel results in a strong, hard thread. Carding, on the other hand, makes the fiber lie all which way —just like teasing one's hair —and gives a soft, fluffy thread like our knitting yarn. Most wool yarn now available is of this latter sort, but the process wasn't invented until the Middle Ages." (Wayland Barber) Regardless, Le Guin emphasizes to her readers that Lavinia's work as essential not just to the development of her character, but to the economic foundation of her household.

Lavinia's personal growth is charted through the motif of weaving. Anyone could spin wool, as Lavinia herself says, it was mindless. Before her marriage, Lavinia noted "I was a good spinning-woman, I made as strong and even a thread as any, but I was slow and clumsy at the loom (pp.82)." Le Guin's ancient Rome exists in three temporal spaces, the ancient coasts of Lavinium, the bustling Rome of Virgil's time, and the modern western society we shared with Le Guin before her untimely passing. All three of these time periods imported themselves into Le Guin's work.

Spinning is a natural part of Lavinia's girlhood. "I sat and spun and thought and gazed out over the hills and woods of Latium, all green with May." (Le Guin, 60) Likewise, "They probably had no cotton or linen yet; the women carded, spun, and wove wool into the togas and pallas they wore." (Le Guin, 278) The wool Lavinia spins is white, and in her girlhood color symbolism is noteworthy, while interestingly it is not that prominent in the later half of *Lavinia*. Lavinia herself, at least at the start of the text, is associated with the color white, as in the white sacred robes she wears that have a red border. Purity plus blood, perhaps? While Le Guin does take some historical liberties (see the afterword) it is quite likely women in pre-Republic Rome did not have access to vibrant dyes. Her mother Amata is associated with the color red, the color of passion, of blood. Amata's life is characterized by violence perpetuated by and against her, and throughout the course of the novel she descends into a Bacchic-like madness. Can we apply a specific metaphorical meaning to each of the tasks involved in cloth production? Perhaps not, but weaving has such a rich history of symbolism, that to put spinning in contrast to it necessitates a careful analysis. None of the other drudgery of cloth production is given quite so much attention. Le Guin is unique among authors of classical reception in her focus on spinning.

Her encounter with Virgil is the transition point in which her fate changes "I was a spinner, not a weaver, but I have learned to weave." (pp.141) Clothes define a person's identity. Lavinia dreams of being a wolf or a sacred goose, the prophetic female animals that save Rome. She gains power in her role as mother, even though she is not openly transgressive. Her writing her own story would appear subtle to the people who know her. It is in large part internal development. "I learned at last to weave well, that winter, for if I had no work to keep my hands and mind occupied I could do nothing but hide in my room and weep." (Le Guin, 228) With few other options available to her as she begins to chafe under her mother's strictures, weaving offers her an escape, and a recognition of her destiny.

Weaving is also a key part of Lavinia's role as a wife and mother. Now that Lavinia has escaped her mother's house, she can self actualize and take on a role of caring for an entire household. "Those warriors, those kings are my descendants," he said to his friends. As he spoke, I passed by carrying little Silvius on my shoulder, as Aeneas had carried the shield." (p. 195) Lavinia weaves her own tale. Aeneas in contrast, has his shield to display his stories. A woman must make something out of nothing, but also Le Guin suggests she has greater creative power, despite the obstacles. Le Guin notes the women are changing things, while men largely stay the same throughout their lives. It is important to note Lavinia is probably thinking of cisgender individuals here, with a stereotypical binary between what men and women are physically capable of doing. She refers to puberty, with the onset of menstruation serving as a major event in many girls lives, but also to social roles. According to her, a woman plays many roles, while a man is just a man. In Ancient Rome and in our time, women are defined by their sexuality and marital status in ways men aren't. Cisgender women are also capable of having their bodies physically change in ways to carry a fetus. In Lavinia's world a woman also had to leave her father's house as she took on the new identity of wife.

Yet, women are dangerous. Women's creation is uncontrolled. They can make something beautiful or, as the tale of Arachne's shows, something offensive. They can resist violent patriarchal power through weaving, as Procne did, or using their art to distract and deceive those who would harm them, in the case of Penelope.

Lavinia is often mentioned as a spinner or weaver, the similar role that the Fates take on as they dictate human lives. "So my mind ran from possibility to possibility like a hare dodging hounds, while the three old women, the Fates, spun out the measured thread of what was to be. (238)" By comparing her to the Fates, Le Guin suggests that Lavinia is a figure in control, even if it is just her own life and story. In Roman and Greek poetry, weaving is often associated with writing, as both the warp and weft and the words pull together to create a thing of beauty. With the poet's guidance, she spun her own fate, but now the situation has become more complicated. She cannot follow a straight thread anymore-- instead, she must fill in the pattern of her own life while striving to make the correct final result.

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