"Enslaved Sovereign": Aesthetics of Power in Foucault, Velázquez and Ovid

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Summary

Michel Foucault's essay on *Las Meninas* has created spaces for diverse analyses of Velázquez's painting and of Foucault's reading of its intimations. My purpose in this paper is to argue for an interpretation of both painting and essay that is shaped by an exploration of aesthetics of power rather than by perspectival considerations. To further delineate Velázquez's interest in the inherently antagonistic relation between artistic expression and institutional power, I extend my inquiry to his *Fable of Arachne*, a painting that could have served Foucault's aesthetic and epistemological purposes well, and to a text from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which this painting is firmly rooted.

Opsomming

Michel Foucault se essay oor *Las Meninas* het die moontlikheid geskep vir uiteenlopende interpretasies van Velázquez se skildery asook van Foucault se eie vertolking van die betekenis daarvan. My doel in hierdie stuk is om aan te voer dat sowel die skildery as die essay geïnterpreteer moet word deur middel van 'n verkenning van die estetika van mag, en nie aan die hand van perspektiwiese oorwegings nie. Ten einde Velázquez se belangstelling in die inherent antagonistiese verhoudig tussen artistieke uitdrukking en institusionele mag verder te karakteriseer, brei ek my ondersoek uit na sy *Fabel van Arachne*, 'n skildery wat Foucault se estetiese en epistemologiese doeleindes goed kon gedien het, asook na 'n teks uit Ovid se *Metamorphoses*, waarin hierdie skildery stewig gewortel is.

A remark in Michel Foucault's *A History of Sexuality 1* has prompted an attempt to explore intersections of reflections on art and preoccupations with aspects of power that seem pertinent to a discussion of the aesthetic in Foucault: "At bottom, despite the differences in epochs and objectives, the representation of power has remained under the spell of monarchy. In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king" (Foucault [1976]1998: 88).

The figure of the king is pivotal in Foucault's perhaps best-known discussion of a work of art, the chapter on Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*

that opens his book *The Order of Things* ([1966]1970).[1] Since Foucault did not elaborate formally a specific aesthetic of art, it is at the intersections of artistic purpose and strategies of power in particular artworks that I intend to locate my discussion.

My interest in the present essay will be to consider anew specific compositional features of Velázquez's work in the light of Foucault's analysis and within the perspective of power relations, in an effort to delineate an interpretation of Foucault's reading that provides an alternative to art criticism based on purely technical aspects. Although the primary site of my exploration is defined by Foucault's interest in *Las Meninas*, I have found it useful to include in my discussion another painting by Velázquez that reflects, and bears confirmation of, the artist's continued preoccupation with problematic relations between art and power. I shall speculate why this painting, *The Fable of Arachne* (also known as *Las Hilanderas*, "The Spinners"), was not considered by Foucault, although it might have suited and affirmed certain aspects of his analysis as well as, if not better than, *Las Meninas*. A discussion of *The Fable of Arachne*'s all-important grounding in Ovid's metamorphic tale of Arachne is intended to provide further connections with narratives that extend beyond the figurative realm.[2]

Foucault's project in *The Order of Things* is to map an archaeology of discursive regimes, as they emerge from three distinct e*pistemes*. A brief review of these may be useful to identify clearly the temporal and epistemic parameters within which his analysis of *Las Meninas* is situated. Foucault argues that the guiding principle governing knowledge, or *episteme*, in the Renaissance is resemblance, an analogical mechanism that relates part to whole or microcosm to macrocosm, allowing all forms of knowledge to mirror and illuminate each other. During the "Classical age" (roughly from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries), the principle of knowledge becomes representation, sustained by systematic ordering, inventories and taxonomies.

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1. *Les Mots et les choses* (1966) appeared in English translation under the title *The Order of Things* (1970). Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) was court painter to King Philip IV of Spain. *Las Meninas* ("The Ladies in Waiting") portrays the young princess, the Infanta Margarita, in the painter's studio, surrounded by her entourage. A clear colour reproduction of the restored painting may be found at: <http://www.mystudios.com/art/bar/velazquez/velazquez-lasmeninas.html>. Both accented and unaccented forms of Velázquez's name are used in cited publications.

2. As a classicist, I find the reception framework within which Ovid may be situated in relation to Velázquez and Foucault particularly interesting.

In its detailed inventory of objects, persons and compositional techniques, *Las Meninas* exemplifies for Foucault a problematised self-reflexive representation of the impossibility of representation, visually embodying the absence of the subject (in this particular case, the king). The implied observer of the painting is also its implied subject, who appears only as a twice-removed reflection in the mirror and whose presence is deduced, not seen, from the gaze of the personages directed at the outside of the painting:

> Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velázquez, the representation as it were of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us …. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject – which is the same – has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 16)[3]

In post-Classical orders of knowledge the limitations imposed on representation by finite categories and forms are reconsidered and questioned, the epistemic principle thus mutates into an analytic of finitude that provides the conditions for the emergence of Man as subject and object of knowledge:

> [I]n the profound upheaval of such an archaeological mutation, man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator, he appears in the place belonging to the king, which was assigned to him in advance by Las Meninas, but from which his royal presence has for so long been excluded.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 312)

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3. Shapiro provides a concise elucidation:

> On his [Foucault's] reading the place of the models … that of the actual painter … and that of the spectator all converge. Since these are all implicit functions that are not displayed in the painting, their oscillating coincidence would strengthen Foucault's idea that there is an essential gap or absence in this painting, one that can be read symptomatically or archaeologically as an indication that this work, which so carefully catalogs all of the aspects and dimensions of representation, must necessarily fail to represent the process of representation itself.
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> (Shapiro 2003: 227)

Ambiguously located between "cogito" and unthought, the transcendental and the empirical, "enslaved sovereign, observed spectator", the figure of man acquires knowledge through its own limitations. Finally, Foucault envisages the disappearance of the figure of man accompanied by the return of language and the emergence of the simulacrum: "[T]hen one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault [1966]1970: 387).

Foucault analyses the paradoxes inherent in Velázquez's masterpiece in the context of the elucidation of the principles of knowledge that define the intellectual temperament of the *age classique*. As an artistic achievement in its own right, the essay has left its mark both on subsequent interpretations of the painting and on explorations of Foucauldian aesthetics and philosophy. Critical responses to Foucault's analysis have focused primarily on the technical aspect of his assessment of the perspectival structuring of the painting and the conclusions he draws from it. From Brown's brief corrective statement to Snyder's extended critiques, Foucault's interpretation has been subjected to a thorough re-evaluation and was generally found unsatisfactory on strictly geometrical grounds.[4]

His reading, nevertheless, reveals an acute sensitivity to the complexities of the painting. I would attribute its fascination (even when unacknowledged) not only to the fact that principles of geometrical perspective may be

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4. Brown (1978) and Snyder (1980: 1985). That Foucault was "wrong" in his appraisal of the painting's geometrical perspectives is established; this does not mean that his reading of the underlying issues in the painting is not valid. Bongiorni (2003: 88-91) provides an excellent concise overview of the continuing scholarly debate around perspectival aspects. See also de Diego (2003: 150-169) for a perceptive discussion of art-historical responses to what she terms Foucault's "flagrant change of paradigm". De Diego bases her reading of Foucault's analysis on the "fracture" between Said and Seen, on the impossibility, as discerned by Foucault, of describing a painting in words:

> Through the careful selection of his words to approach a visual reality which might have seemed obvious at first glance – a painter in the act of painting – Foucault is naming uncertainties, or to use his own words, discontinuities. In that way, Las Meninas becomes a strategy for revisiting Western culture itself, a device used to locate the split between two systems, two orders, two fractures – the visual and the linguistic.
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> (de Diego 2003: 153).

Shapiro (2003) discusses at length aspects of the fracture between Seeing and Saying as related to issues brought out in Foucault's essay. For an acute discussion of the implications of the incompatibility of language and painting for Foucault's own analysis, see also Carroll (in Brown 1978: 705ff.)

seen, in both painting and analysis, to be stronger in the breach than in the observance, but especially to the perception that more is at stake in this reading than the stated definition of representation through absence.[5] Foucault's epistemic orders are traversed, beneath taxonomical or other categories, by demarcations of power. I would suggest that a shift in critical focus, from geometrical calculations to compositional strategies, may permit an individuation of the reading of *Las Meninas* that Foucault's analysis gestures towards but does not formally explicate.

The aspect that I should like to explore here, therefore, is the possibility of detecting those implicit levels in Velázquez's painting that Foucault discerned, and responded to in *The Order of Things*, both to directly sustain the argument of absence and to obliquely introduce the problematics of power. My strategy will be to draw away, for a time, from both the epistemic drive of the essay and the perspectival geometries of the painting, in an effort to recuperate the underlying tensions of the intricate (artistic) interaction between philosophical aesthetics and figurative work.

Critical scholarship has found it particularly useful to consider the intention of *Las Meninas* in the light of the thinking that informed Velázquez's time and location. In Golden Age Spain, the art of painting, still relegated to the rank of craft, had not yet been accorded equal status with the higher arts, such as music or poetry, a situation that provoked much debate in contemporary intellectual circles. Jonathan Brown, for instance, argues that *Las Meninas* was intended to function as a strong statement by the artist precisely on this issue.[6] The painting's brilliant handling of techniques, composition and concept was designed to convey incontrovertible proof of the nobility of this art. In a series of observations aimed at offering an alternative reading to what he regards as Foucault's ill-judged interpretation, Brown remarks that, in the context of Velázquez's epoch and

5. Shapiro remarks: "In his ekphrasis of Velazquez, Foucault responds in effect by defamiliarizing a painting that we thought we knew; however puzzling we might have found its play of positions and looks, we did not previously see it as quite so uncanny" (2003: 234).

6. *Las Meninas* is not only an abstract claim for the nobility of painting, it is also a personal claim for the nobility of Velázquez himself … he meant to demonstrate once and for all that painting was a liberal and noble art that did not merely copy, but could re-create and even surpass nature. Painting was a legitimate form of knowledge, forever beyond the realm of craft, and therefore was a liberal art. Its lofty status was proved conclusively by the monarch who visited the atelier to watch the painter work his special magic, and who remained there as perpetual guarantor of his claims.

(Brown 1986: 109)

personal situation as court painter, it is unthinkable that he might have considered placing a hypothetical spectator in the space designated for the king.

Thus Brown alludes to the presence of possibly problematic power relations in the painting but does not pursue its potential implications. I suggest that an exploration of this theme could provide important insights into Velázquez's choice of compositional structure and rhythm, and particularly into his consciousness of the authority implicit in the acknowledged value of his artistry. And, further, I would argue that Foucault attempted to address, both in the prefatory essay and in the body of *The Order of Things*, the problematics of power articulated by Velázquez in the painting.

Art-historical interpretations that view *Las Meninas* as a concrete demonstration of the nobility of the art of painting, provided by Velázquez to strengthen his claim to the Order of Santiago, are not unjustified or unfounded. But they are reductive, in that they tend to de-emphasise the role of the artist, both within and without the painting itself. What causes some confusion or imprecision here, is the synonymous function attached to "art" and "artist", whereby the abstract notion of the profession is merged with the physical reality of its practitioner. For the painter is unequivocally a key figure in the painting, whereas the status issues relating to his art are a matter of deduction on the part of interpreters. Even a reading as perceptive and sophisticated as Amy Schmitter's is reticent about the importance of the painter's presence.

Schmitter's response to previous criticism on *Las Meninas* and her own interpretation are most illuminating. Beyond Foucault's (apparent) failure to apprehend the impact of displaced geometries of perspective, she explores and interrogates both Velázquez's reasons for disrupting linear alignments and Foucault's motives for basing his analysis on a geometrical misapprehension that he leaves undeclared. In this painting, she concludes, lines communicating power are of greater significance than those calculated to shape regular perspectives. The underlying intention is to portray the absent subject as performing a "representation-act" in the sphere of power:

> *Las Meninas* reveals a notion of representation whereby representation serves to analyze and enforce absolute royal power … the King's representation is a *force* or *power*, a manifestation of royal power that embodies, displays, and extends it …. It thereby constitutes its subject, the royal power and the royal office, by representing it. In short, it is a representation-*act*, for it does not so much describe a state of affairs in the world as it helps to bring it about.
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> (Schmitter 1996: 266)

These remarks foreground issues related to what I consider to be the primary intention of the painting, the figurative elucidation of forces of power. But, in my view, by following Foucault's lead in placing explicit emphasis exclusively on the representation of the king, Schmitter elides the presence of the other essential actor – the royal counterpart, the painter – who provides the necessary exemplar of an alternative power. Without the figure of the painter gazing out from the canvas at the king, the latter's meaningful absent presence and embodiment of power would be reduced to banal symbolism. In the labyrinthine web of visual correspondences woven by the characters' gazes and by their reified equivalent, the mirror, it would seem unwise to neglect the image of the web's creator himself.[7]

In a natural reading of the painting, from left to right, the dominant figure in the composition appears to be the painter, who forms a unit with the imposing canvas on the left. All the other figures are dwarfed in relation to this unit and stand in descending order from it, to reach a humorous bathos in the relaxed shape of the dog, stretched out on the floor in the bottom right corner. The extended verticality of the large, dull-coloured canvas demarcates with unambiguous precision the left-hand boundary of the painted surface, allowing the Infanta grouping to unfold on its right, in an aptly logical creative sequence: canvas, painter, painted scene. The sequence, though, contains pauses, both spatial and chromatic, that in turn mark out meaningful distances between its elements. Canvas and painter are enclosed in a space of consonant purpose that shapes them into an iconic unit, recalling such familiar, and noble, pairings as knight and horse or warrior and shield.

Monochromatic colouring (the red cross of the Order of Santiago was added after Velázquez's death) further outlines the proud self-containment of the pair in severe tones of brown and black, sharply contrasted with the richly luminous lines of the Infanta's dress and the bright attire of her entourage. The painter's emphatically defined location causes an important

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7. Snyder indirectly concedes the importance of the painter in his interpretation of the painting as a "mirror of the prince":

> The portrait addresses the Infanta and the conditions of her education. In a sense, *Las Meninas* is the painted equivalent of a manual for the education of the princess – a mirror of the princess. And as all such works do self-consciously, it runs the risk of overstepping the bounds of decorum by presuming to instruct the sovereigns, by elevating the author to the level of the sovereign or, perhaps, to a level higher than the sovereign.
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> (Snyder 1985: 564, n. 29)

Snyder's analysis, however, concentrates primarily on what one may call the "didactic" role of the painting.

displacement, since the dominant space in the painting, formally occupied by the Infanta, shifts in effect to the artist. An implied autonomy thus emerges in the nucleus formed by painter and canvas, and in its containment of their shared secret – what is represented on the face of the canvas being visible only to the represented painter in the moment depicted:

> [B]ut when, in a moment, he makes a step to the right, removing himself from our gaze, he will be standing exactly in front of the canvas he is painting; he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will, for him, become visible once more, free of shadow and free of reticence. As though the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 3-4)

This seclusion is contrasted with the grouping around the Infanta. Here, the demands of the royal child are met with undivided attention by the kneeling Menina, her docile tenderness in counterpoint to the obsequiousness emanating from the postures of the other attendants: the tableau deliberately creates an impression not only of devotion but also of subjugation. The group, held together by the centripetal force of its smallest but most authoritative member, around whom all the energies of the attendants converge, provides an alternative weight to the power unit formed by painter and canvas.[8]

It is important to note here other correspondences, which further define the significance of the painter's presence, namely those between painter and princess. Both maintain a similarly dignified bearing in relation to the outside observers, the royal couple, and no gesture of deference is proffered by the artist, in sharp contrast to the obsequiousness openly displayed by the Infanta's entourage. From the erect posture and steadfast, outwards-fixed gaze of both painter and princess emanate a commanding air of authority that forcefully arrest the viewer's attention, but remain quite incongruent with the conventionally limiting connotations of their immediate

8. Note how effectively the groupings on the extreme left and right of the painting are contrasted: size and chromatic range clearly mark differences in rank and importance between the painter and the dwarves. However, the pugnacious stance and unflinching gaze of the female dwarf ironically blur neat demarcations of hierarchical boundaries. The dwarf's defiant posture projects an exaggerated echo of the painter's dignified self-confidence and brings to an abrupt halt the sequence of obsequious gestures framing the Infanta. Artistic genius and physical deformity set painter and dwarf apart, their anomaly informing the two figures that flank the central scene of subservience with a vaguely seditious sense of authority.

circumstances as (mere) court painter and (mere) five-year-old child. Once noticed, the unexpectedness of their demeanour and of its implications compels closer scrutiny.[9]

Even though the real studio was situated within royal territory, namely the Alcázar of King Philip IV, the circumscribed space depicted in the scene effectively belongs to the artist. It is from this space, wholly dedicated to art, that the painter gazes out at the royal couple, his proud bearing framed on one side by the ascetic vertical lines of the soaring canvas, on the other by the shimmering horizontal ones of the Infanta's dress. Equally weighted forces – artistic and courtly power – are at play here, with the artist as their fulcrum and converging point of diverse tensions. Artist and child are linked as elements of power distinct from the royal couple, and yet subject to the latter's patronage and parental authority; the two figures are projected, at once, as self-contained authorities in their own right and as controlled extensions of kingly power.[10]

Further, because of her placing, the Infanta paradoxically embodies both the royalty of her lineage and, as his magnificent pictorial creation, the nobility of the artist, thus providing evidence and justification for the munificence of her royal father. Finally, the deliberate contrast between the demeanour of the artist and of the royal retinue underlines the dichotomy between courtly ambitions and artistic independence, conflicting needs that Velázquez attempted to accommodate.[11]

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9. It is interesting to note Palomino's understanding of the relationship between artist and princess in the painting: "So too that [the name] of Velázquez will live from century to century, as long as that of the most excellent and beautiful Margarita, *in whose shadow his image, under the benign influence of such a sovereign mistress, is immortalized*" (Palomino [1724]1982: 196; my italics). The painter Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco, often called "the Spanish Vasari", included a "Life of Velázquez" in the third volume of his biographies of Spanish painters and sculptors.

10. Alpers considers the Infanta, as centrepiece of the painting, the "representative figure" of "two contradictory (and to Velázquez's sense of things, inseparable) modes of picturing the relationship of viewer, and picture, to world" (1983: 39). She continues: "Even as he once again confirms woman as a central motif and possession of the European painter's art, Velázquez questions her role: she is a princess, but at the same time a little girl; she is most marvellously self-possessed in bearing, but is herself possessed by the court and by the royal lineage marked by her placement just below her parents' mirrored image." Although Alpers aims to "suggest ways in which pictorial representation, an aesthetic order, engages also a social one" (1983: 40), she does not discuss interactions of power in *Las Meninas*.

The dignity and self-possession of the painter's stance both reflect and resist the noble countenance of the king standing opposite, and outside of the represented scene. This imaginary juxtaposition – for the onlooker can see only a dim reflection of the royals in the mirror hung on the back wall – is clearly solicited by the compositional rhythm of the painting. But what is its function? I suggest that by displacing the king outside the obvious field of vision and projecting the royal image into the far background, the artist appropriates a location of power, alongside the Infanta, casting himself not as revering subject or attendant, but as an equal. A liminal equal, poised at the threshold between artistic sphere and royal territory, and thus, in both, an absent presence, mirroring the king's:

> At once object – since it is what the artist is copying onto his canvas – and subject – since what the painter had in front of his eyes, as he represented himself in the course of the work, was himself, since the gazes portrayed in the picture are all directed toward the fictitious position occupied by the royal personage, which is also the painter's real place, since the occupier of that ambiguous place, in which the painter and the sovereign alternate, in a never-ending flicker, as it were, is the spectator, whose gaze transforms the painting into an object, the pure representation of that essential absence.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 308)

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11. Brown argues that *Las Meninas* presents a summation of Velázquez's aspirations as courtier and artist:

> He [Velázquez] seems to have harboured two enormous, but mutually exclusive ambitions. One was to be regarded as a great painter; the other was to be regarded as a great gentleman. In the rigid, hierarchical court of Philip IV, where painters were assigned a low rank, the realization of these ambitions came into deadly conflict. In the end, Velázquez found the only way out of this quandary: he devoted himself to the service of the king, the one person who had the power both to advance and to reconcile his artistic and social aspirations …. Naturally a compromise was involved, but is this not the essence of royal service – the deference to authority, the exercise of restraint, and the faithful execution of duty as the means to obtain honours, privileges, and wealth? All these rewards eventually came to Velázquez, and it must be accepted that he considered the price of fame and fortune to be worth the sacrifice of time for painting. But time was all he sacrificed to his ambitions. Required by the consequences of his choice to paint but few pictures in the last decades of his life, he made every picture count in his quest to redefine the medium of which he was the unsurpassed master.
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> (Brown 1986: 262)

I take the last observation further, and suggest that, in redefining the medium, Velázquez also sought, in his last years, to redefine the relationship between all-powerful patron and court painter.

Confronted by the artist's assertion of his own position of authority, the king thus generates both lesser and greater forces than Schmitter envisages: lesser, in the sense that the absolute level of power invoked by Schmitter as the constituting force of the monarch is partially dissipated by the presence of the artist. Greater, because the king clearly retains his influential position as the artist's patron: he is the essential conduit for the display of creative potency, for the necessary exposure to the gaze of the other, without which no work of art can be considered complete. I suggest that this binary relationship of power controls and defines the painting's composition, chromatic structures, and intention. Foucault implies as much, I believe, in his account:

> Of all the figures represented before us, they [the royals] are also the most ignored, since no one is paying the slightest attention to that reflection [in the mirror] which has slipped into the room behind them all, silently occupying its unsuspected space; in so far as they are visible, they are the frailest and the most distant form of all reality. Inversely, in so far as they stand outside the picture and are therefore withdrawn from it in an essential invisibility, they provide the centre around which the entire representation is ordered: it is they who are being faced, it is towards them that everyone is turned … from the canvas with its back to us to the Infanta, and from the Infanta to the dwarf playing on the extreme right, there runs a curve … that orders the whole arrangement of the picture to their gaze and thus makes apparent the true centre of the composition, to which the Infanta's gaze and the image in the mirror are both finally subject.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 14)

In a series of well-calculated placements and alignments that defy established coordinates, of perspective as well as of social hierarchy, the artist not only asserts the nobility of his art, in contrast to craft, but much more importantly, reclaims a position of power in relation to his patron, the king. In fact, I would argue that the unexpected perspectival displacement deliberately reflects the unorthodox displacement of power positions alluded to in the painting. By disrupting punctilinear perspective and altering its planes, Velázquez compels the onlooker's visual concentration to divide between mirrored image (the king) and "real" presence (the painter); in an unconscious move to recreate coherence, the viewer then makes an intellectual attempt to reconstitute what her/his vision presents as dissolved. And, in so doing, she/he must focus on the figure of the painter, who stands surrounded and defined by elements of recognisable artistic and official

authority: on his right a mighty canvas, on his left a princess, behind and opposite him, mirrored and intuited, a king:[12]

> In appearance this locus is a simple one; a matter of pure reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is looking out at us. A mere confrontation, eyes catching one another's glance, direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross. And yet this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints …. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also diminished by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. But, inversely, the painter's gaze, addressed to the void confronting him outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators: in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange … the painter's sovereign gaze commands a virtual triangle whose outline defines this picture of a picture.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 4-5)

The king's reflected image thus functions as synecdoche for the greater reciprocal reflection of "sovereign" painter and monarch: as it projects the reflection of an unseen presence, so they mirror each other's authoritative presence and absence. A twofold space contains this artistic reconstruction of power: within the boundaries of the canvas, the king's effigy takes shape in the mirror, and at the same time, projected from the gaze of various personages, the invisible presence of the monarch is reconstructed outside the boundaries of the painting. Enacting a strategy predicated on perspectival and deductive displacements, the painting engages both eye and intellect on conflicting positions and definitions of power, articulated within a tight correspondence of visibility and invisibility: "The observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity" (Foucault [1966]1970: 4-5).

The artist cannot win visibility and thus renown without the patron's protection and fostering, the patron cannot obtain visibility and thus

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12. In commenting on a pentimento, revealed by restoration, that would have affected the painting's perspectival structure, Brown remarks:

> By creating numerous focal points within the composition, Velázquez sought to imitate the restless movement of the eye as it scans a large space inhabited by several people and illuminated by light of variable intensity. There is also reason to think that the perspective was deliberately left ambiguous in order to accommodate more than one reading of the composition.
>
> (Brown 1986: 259)

immortality without the artist's re-creative intervention.[13] Aided not by an army but by his skills, the artist carves a kingdom within the king's own, and can claim recognition of what he has conquered. The figures of the royals appear "the frailest and the most distant form of all reality" because the mirror reveals and doubles, well beyond the play of perspectives, their inherent need for a concretisation, a bringing forth into reality that only the painter can perform, by placing their effigies onto the invisible canvas. The painter acts as demiurge in the creation of an artistic reality that supersedes the ontological one. Thus the absence of the king is both the issue of an epistemic principle and an index of an imperilled equilibrium of powers:

> Around the scene are arranged all the signs and successive forms of representation; but the double relation of the representation to its model and to its sovereign, to its author as well as to the person to whom it is being offered, this relation is necessarily interrupted. It can never be present without some residuum, even in a representation that offers itself as a spectacle. In the depth that traverses the picture, hollowing it into a fictitious recess and projecting forward in front of itself, it is not possible for the felicity of the image ever to present in a full light both the master who is representing and the sovereign who is being represented.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 15-16)

This close interdependence, and potential mutual nullification, which subverts univocal interpretations of patronage, is particularly important for an understanding of *Las Meninas* and its museum companion piece, *The Fable of Arachne*. Both paintings were produced shortly before Velázquez's death, at the acme of his fame and while he enjoyed excellent standing at court. Both display a profound, proud awareness of the artist's achievement and of the significance of his powers: powers that equalled, in the artistic sphere, those of a sovereign. Recognition of this equal standing is, I suggest, what the artist strongly advocates here, a recognition that goes well beyond the mundane (if famously coveted) Order of Santiago's sanction of his noble lineage.

On the back wall of the depicted studio, well above the mirror, hang two paintings, rather indistinct, even after restoration; they have been identified

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13. See Schmitter:

> It is true that the king's power is constituted and displayed by his representations. Velázquez's construction, however, makes the circle of representation complete only when the king stands in the viewing position. So, through the shifting readings it generates, *Las Meninas* displays the king's need for representation, and analyses that interdependence of King and representation.
>
> (Schmitter 1996: 264)

as copies by Mazo of Rubens's work, the one on the left being an illustration of the punishment of Arachne by the goddess Pallas. The myth of Arachne holds particular significance since it recurs in, or rather, forms the subject of *The Fable of Arachne*, the magnificent companion piece to *Las Meninas*.[14] I should like to discuss how aspects of representation and power are addressed in this painting in ways closely connected with their treatment in *Las Meninas*, in order to inquire whether Foucault might not have fruitfully employed this painting, either alone or in conjunction with *Las Meninas*, in his elucidation of the representation of the classical *episteme*. It will be necessary, though, to examine first a text that is fundamental to the construction of meaning in Velázquez's painting, namely Ovid's tale of Arachne from his poem *The Metamorphoses*, Book 6.[15]

Ovid shares with Velázquez a strong reliance on illusionist representation; the whole of the *Metamorphoses*, in fact, is played out on the twin lines of illusion and spectacle, closely interconnected with strategies of absent presences, problems of identity and declinations of power.[16] The

14. This fascinating episode of pride and prejudice [the Council's initial refusal to bestow the Order of Santiago] provides a bittersweet conclusion to Velázquez's career as a courtier. And it also furnishes the background for understanding certain aspects of the two masterpieces of his later years, which are arguably his two greatest paintings – the *Fable of Arachne* ("*The Spinners*") and *Las Meninas*. Although of different subjects, these pictures have certain things in common. First is their position within the trajectory of Velázquez's career: they are the largest, most complicated compositions executed between 1640 and 1660, a period during which Velázquez painted mostly portraits of single figures. Also, they are works of Velázquez's later years: *Las Meninas* could not have been done much before 1656, while the *Fable of Arachne* is generally, and rightly, dated to the same time. These circumstances, not to mention the incomparable artistry, suggest that Velázquez created the two pictures with a special purpose in mind (Brown 1986: 252).

    A clear colour reproduction of the restored painting *The Fable of Arachne*, or *Las Hilanderas*, housed in the Prado Museum, may be found at: <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/V/velazquez/hilanderas.jpg.html>.

15. Tarrant (2004) provides the most recent Latin edition of the *Metamorphoses*; I have used Melville (1986) for the English translation.

16. Hardie: "Ovid's own poetics of illusion may owe something to a mystificatory nostalgia for an imagined primitive past plenitude of poetic and artistic presence. Whatever its sources, however, a key aspect of Renaissance Ovidianism is its responsiveness to Ovidian evocations of presence" (2002: 27).

formulation of power in this particular episode is neither univocal nor immediately obvious, but is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the explicit topos of hubris, or overweening pride, and implicit patterns of mutual obligation. The weaving contest between Pallas and Arachne originates in the mortal woman's repeated challenge to the goddess, her teacher and patron of weavers, to engage in a competition that will prove her own superior skill. As described by Ovid, the tapestry masterfully woven by Pallas illustrates in a large central panel the power and dignity of the divine rulers. Smaller ones, set around it in orderly sequence, depict the harsh punishments meted out by the gods to those mortals who, in various ways, had challenged divine authority.[17]

Arachne's tapestry ironically reverses the motif of divine gravity and authority by representing the gods, Jupiter in particular, engaged in an extended series of abductions and rapes of human females, under the expedient guise of multiple animal shapes. In Pallas's orderly panels the gods appear as just protectors and benevolent patrons; this portrayal is replaced and subverted in Arachne's tapestry by fragmented illustrations of riotous misrule and utter disregard for human concerns. Depicted in splendid colours and patterns, sexual prevarication effected under animal disguise sustains an undignified game of godly hide-and-seek, fuelled by lust and by the consciousness of wielding overwhelming power.[18]

Arachne is publicly declared the winner in the contest, her skill acknowledged to equal, even surpass, the goddess's. The *écarte* between human and divine is fixed in the act of a competition, unequal by definition, which surprises by the overturning of the normally hierarchical result: the expected defeat of the mortal is replaced by triumph, and public recognition of artistic supremacy soars in the face of authoritarian threat. Yet, victory is ephemeral. In a fury of indignation, Pallas tears up Arachne's tapestry and hits the young woman repeatedly on the forehead with her shuttle. In the raised fist of the goddess we are meant to read not the decrying of inferior

17. Pallas depicts the gods sitting *augusta gravitate* ("with noble dignity", *Met.* 6.73): the static, ponderous quality of the divine gathering depicted in her tapestry contrasts sharply with the unruly movement that animates the gods' actions in Arachne's cloth. Pallas's *augusta gravitas* is reproduced in the noble bearing she assumes in Velázquez's *Fable of Arachne*.

18. The rape of Europa by Jupiter in the guise of a bull is the first story woven by Arachne: *Maeonis elusam designat imagine tauri /Europen; uerum taurum, freta uera putares*. (*Met*. 6.103-104; "Arachne shows Europa cheated by /The bull's disguise, a real bull you would think, /And real sea." Melville 1986: 124). In Velázquez's *Fable*, Arachne proudly points at her completed tapestry, which depicts this abduction.

artistic quality (as Ovid says, "not even Envy could fault Arachne's work"), but a condemnation of arrogance and ingratitude, provoked by the weaver's persistent refusal to acknowledge a clear obligation towards her patron and teacher.[19]

Arachne's attempt to redefine the boundaries of power on the strength of artistic prowess fails: the physical punishment and the humiliation dealt by the goddess's blows manifestly equate her with a disrespectful slave and forcefully recast her into the position of inferiority she thought she had evaded. Pallas saves Arachne from a self-inflicted death, but transforms her into the spider, forever doomed to spin colourless webs. Arachne's metamorphosis, which confines her to an endless existence of alien form and repetitive weaving, is designed to provide enduring and incontrovertible evidence of the superior power wielded by authority over artistic creativity.[20] A process of status reversal is operative here: at the beginning of the episode, Ovid had insistently described the weaver as being of

19. Arachne's ambition is clearly to evade her lowly status through winning widespread recognition for her weaving skill and part, at least, of her denial of Pallas's role in developing her ability is due to her reluctance to acknowledge her humble origins: "*seu pingebat acu, scires a Pallade doctam. /Quod tamen ipsa negat tantaque offensa magistra /'certet' ait 'mecum; nihil est quod uicta recusem*." (*Met*. 6. 23-25; "… or embroidering the pattern with her needle – you would know /Pallas had trained her. Yet the girl denied it /(A teacher so distinguished hurt her pride) /And said, 'Let her contend with me. Should I /Lose, there's no forfeit that I would not pay.'" (Melville 1986: 120)). As she tears up the cloth that physically depicted "heavenly crimes" (*et rupit pictas, caelestia crimina, uestes*; *Met*. 6.131), Pallas also deletes the artistic interpretation of misuse of power presented by a mortal to a wide audience. Arachne's punishment issues not only from her lack of deference and sense of obligation, but especially from her presumption to appraise, through the medium of her art, the actions of a class far superior to her own.

20. Whereas the tragic outcome of the contest was prefigured in the "warning" panels of the goddess's tapestry and in the narrator's allusions to Arachne's arrogance, the awarding of victory to the mortal woman unexpectedly forms a central aspect of Ovid's structuring of the episode. It is public recognition of her superior skill that at once dooms Arachne and validates the truth of her artistic imagination:

> Arachne's vision is bound to an uncertain and unpredictable world of appearances and her limitation is at once the source of her artistic strength and her fatal weakness. Yet only such an artist as she, doggedly asserting her autonomy and the truth of her vision, can reveal the ironic injustice of divine order.
>
> (Leach 1974: 118)

humble origins, as was her family.[21] Arachne's ambition to overcome her social inferiority through her art is undermined by a higher power, which reduces her to an even more inferior status than she owned originally. Indeed, her *art*, weaving, is effectively diminished to *craft*, spinning.[22]

In spite of successfully evoking compassion for the cruel fate of Arachne, the narrator's presentation does not, ultimately, sway the reader entirely in her favour, neither does it uncompromisingly cast Pallas in the guise of the villain. I consider this refusal to guide the reader to "take sides" as a deliberate strategy. Throughout the story there is a continuous, subtle oscillation between assent to orderliness and authority, and criticism of it. Ovid's presentation is purposefully ambivalent in its projection of both negative and positive aspects of power and authority. On the one hand, there is a clearly voiced reaction against officialdom's interference in artistic matters, the sense that uncontrolled artistic freedom – in both content and style, in its unconventional and variegated forms – is paramount. On the other hand, we find a peculiarly Roman, deeply rooted need (one might be tempted to call it "fascination") for the orderliness, stability and reliability of official authority and power.[23]

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21. Melville (1986: 121): *non illa loco nec origine gentis /clara, sed arte fuit. Pater huic Colophonius Idmon /Phocaico bibulas tingebat murices lanas; /occiderat mater, sed et haec de plebe suoque /aequa uiro fuerat*. (*Met*. 6. 7-11; "The girl /had no distinction in her place of birth /or pedigree, only that special skill. /Her father was Idmon of Colophon, /Whose trade it was to dye the thirsty wool /With purple of Phocaea. She had lost /her mother, but she too had been low-born /And matched her husband."(Melville 1986: 121)).

22. The narrator carefully balances Pallas's compassionate act (*miserata*, "pitying her") with Arachne's unbeaten spirit (*animosa*, "spirited"); neither artist relinquishes entirely the features that have characterised their behaviour in the story (Pallas had earlier disguised herself as an old woman, in an attempt to persuade Arachne to desist from her foolhardiness): *Non tulit infelix laqueoque animosa ligauit /guttura; pendentem Pallas miserata leuauit /atque ita 'uiue quidem, pende tamen, improba' dixit, /'lexque eadem poenae, ne sis secura futuri, /dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto*.' (*Met*. 6. 134-138; "The poor wretch, /Unable to endure it, bravely placed /A noose around her neck; but, as she hung, /Pallas in pity raised her. 'Live!' she said, /'Yes, live but hang, you wicked girl, and know /You'll rue the future too: that penalty /Your kin shall pay to all posterity!'" (Melville 1986: 125)).

23. Awareness of Ovid's condemnation to exile by Augustus in 8 CE lies, of course, never too far beneath critical interpretations of this particular episode. See, for instance, Leach:

I would suggest that Ovid attempts to advocate a balance of power between artist and patron, and mutual respect, even cooperation, between the world of art and the world of ruling authority. An acknowledgment of different kinds of obligation is proposed: the one which authority owes and expresses in extending protection and patronage to those subject to it; the other, owed by those thus protected, that is manifested in the form of an allegiance loyal at its core but capable of voicing criticism and formulating independent thought.[24]

Velázquez's *Fable of Arachne* constitutes not only a highly original reiteration of Ovidian motifs of power and subjugation and of important aspects of the relationship between artist and patron, but also a well-constructed response to the problems of absent presence raised in *Las Meninas*.[25] The *Fable of Arachne* is articulated on three physical levels. The

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> The destruction of the piece [Arachne's tapestry] invites the reader to look questioningly backwards upon the poem. Should it now be seen through Minerva's eyes as an impious spectacle of *caelestia crimina*? Has Ovid deliberately spun an image that implies the vulnerability of his own work? One can easily be tempted to carry the moral of the story beyond the immediate confines of the situation and to read into this incident a reflection of the rebelliousness and concomitant apprehensiveness of the poet whose own forthright portrayal of human nature constantly pushed at the boundaries of social propriety and dared the tolerance of official moral sanction.
>
> (Leach 1974: 117)

24. The effective silencing of the artist through metamorphosis into a lower form of life holds important implications for the reception of the Ovidian myth in subsequent epochs. In her excellent overview of the influence of Ovid's poetry on early modern English writing, James sums up sixteenth-century English writers' view of Arachne's fate as a profound reflection on the imbalances of political power:

> As a spider, Arachne becomes an emblem of her own ambition and of the tyrant's envy of popular liberties, especially that of bold speech. Hanging between endlessly insignificant labor and death, she monumentalizes the fate of Athenian women and more generally all subjects denied civic benefits and public voice …. Arachne, then, represents far more than arrogance duly punished: she also commemorates a history of civil deprivation, whose injustice stirred the minds of commentators writing over fifteen hundred years after Ovid's death.
>
> (James 2003: 363)

25. Ovid's masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*, was so popular in the Renaissance and later periods that it had earned the nickname of "bible of the artists". Its discourse of wonders had won renown in the West from the Middle Ages,

background section shows the goddess Pallas raising her fist at Arachne, who proudly gestures towards a splendid tapestry behind her, a rendition of Titian's famous "Rape of Europa", then part of the Alcázar's art collection. The middle section is occupied by a group of three elegant ladies; in the foreground, a weavers' workshop is laid out, with a group of women labourers intent on their various tasks of carding, spinning and winding yarn. Perhaps the first illusionist twist to attract attention is the apparent displacement of the figures of Pallas and Arachne *outside* the tapestry, standing, in fact, between it and the ladies. Placing a helmeted goddess and her victim in the midst of contemporary court ladies creates an unsettling incongruity: the fleeting impression of spatial and temporal displacement powerfully charges the dramatic interrelation between human and mythical figures, and between events enacted in the background and foreground.[26]

The disjunction between the two greater fields of representation – foreground and background – is reiterated within the smaller compass of the background, by juxtaposing the dramatic clash of divine power and human resistance depicted in the tapestry onto the benign indifference of the ladies, whose relaxed postures betray an ataraxic detachment from the violence *implicit* in the mythological scenes.[27] The ladies, I suggest, are the elegantly

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first in Latin versions, often simplified, and subsequently through translations into the vulgar languages, mainly Italian and French. The transposition of verbal narratives into images meant that the artist had to be familiar with some form of the text, although not necessarily the exact Latin original, that was then adapted to the representational demands of the painting or sculpture he planned to execute. The viewer, in turn, would have to recognise the story adapted in the artwork, and then apply his own knowledge of the text/s to apprehend the intention of the artist's refashioning. This sequence of interactive passages between written work, artist and viewer would often naturally result in strongly individualistic readings – of both artist and viewer – that might alter, at times quite radically, the intended meaning of the original written text. Italian and Spanish versions of the *Metamorphoses* were listed in the catalogue of Velázquez's library; besides *The Fable of Arachne*, other mythological works – such as *The Forge of Vulcan* – were clearly inspired by Ovidian myths.

26. Brown: "In creating this effect Velazquez also encourages us to draw a parallel between his own art and the mythical weaver's: we cannot tell where his painting ends and her tapestry begins" (2005: 110).

27. Neither *Europa* nor *Arachne* displays explicit violence. A comparison with Rubens's rendition of Arachne's myth is revealing. The painting, commissioned for the Torre de la Parada as one of a mythological series

attired personification of courtly and, therefore, kingly power, and provide a "formal", contemporary correspondent to the divine power explicated in the tapestry. Situated as they are in the middle level of the painting, they act as intermediaries not only between the figures dispossessed of power/authority (the abducted Europa and the workshop labourers) and the Arachne episode that articulates the – at least attempted – subversion and displacement of these powers, but also between the artefact itself and the acknowledgment of it as a work of art.

Mediating the subjection of the artwork to the knowing and acknowledging gaze, engages another form of power, since without being subjected to and, at the same time, mastering the seeing eye of a public (no matter how restricted), the work of art cannot reach the fulfilment of its being and intention. The ladies embody the gaze that will behold and judge the artwork and thus, importantly, *authorise* its existence as recipient of the public gaze. One might be inclined to think that, as viewers placed inside the canvas, the ladies function as an extension of the onlooker situated outside it. On the contrary, there occurs here an unexpected, and deliberate, inversion: because the ladies focus upon the brilliantly lit alcove and turn their backs to the workshop, from *their* perspective the latter becomes the background and the former the foreground. The outside viewer is thus relegated to the "background" and is drawn into the closed, darkened space of the workshop, fixed there by the unwavering gaze of the lady on the far right.

This socio-hierarchically disadvantaged vantage point, however, offers the opportunity to acquire a more distinct perception of the levels behind the creation of the valuable artefact than the ladies ever could obtain from their position of power and unknowingness. The viewer thus becomes complicit participant in this portrayal of socio-hierarchical discrepancy, pictorially effected through the sharp separation of the painting's levels and the consistent averting of their gaze on the part of the members of the two groups: they remain mutually unaware of each other's presence.

The spatial/social divide is refracted onto the temporal/ontological disjunction caused by the incongruous fading of the figures of Pallas and Arachne from the tapestry, where they logically belong, into the company of

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based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, was probably destroyed in a fire, but the surviving preparatory cartoon shows an irate Pallas crouching over a vanquished and terrified Arachne and hitting the girl relentlessly, her posture and features distorted with anger strongly reminiscent of a predator attacking its prey. The almost hieratic gesture of Velázquez's Pallas, in contrast, preserves and emphasises the divine majesty and unquestionable authority of the goddess and renders the impending punishment more frightening because it remains implied, suspended within her gesture.

the ladies on the lit "stage" of the alcove. This anachronistic irruption of ancient myth into the contemporaneous deliberately fractures the illusory seclusion of aesthetic pleasure temporarily appropriated by the ladies' group. Conflicting relations of power refuse to be contained by mythical unreality and explode into the space and time projected by the painting. I would, therefore, suggest that the most telling aspect of this gathering of women is not primarily the possibility of collapsing the contemporaneous into myth, but, rather, the translation of a different kind of power from myth into the contemporaneous.

The Fable of Arachne clearly deploys strategies of power through a pictorial re-enactment of Arachne's web: all the personages in the painting are caught and enmeshed by the woven threads of hierarchical categories that bind them to each other in corresponding patterns of subjugation and authority. The spiralling, labyrinthine nature of the painting – both its significance and its composition – may easily be configured as an infinite Arachnean web of internal and external correspondences of power.

Could Foucault have employed *The Fable of Arachne* as a parallel to or in conjunction with *Las Meninas* in the context of elucidating a particular *episteme*? I propose that, indeed, the former painting might have served his purpose well. For the artist, and the inescapable presence of his absence, remains the intellectual, and therefore powerful, centre of this painting, as he is in *Las Meninas*. Here, in fact, we note a further refinement on the Foucauldian topos of the artist looking at himself as if through the lens of the viewer, of the artist being his own onlooker. No actual mirror is employed to destabilise a conventional viewing, though the mirroring effect sought in *Las Meninas* is retained and emphasised by less explicit tokens.[28]

Locating the depicted artist at the most perspicuous site in the painting, under a double aspect – in the figures, that is, of Pallas *and* Arachne –, and, ironically, also encapsulating his presence within that of the workers, produces a figural echo that reverberates through the painting's levels, to be finally subsumed in the gaze of the viewer. The game of illusion performed in the act of seeing, and challenging the act of seeing, repeats tensions of elusiveness, achieved in *Las Meninas* by turning the great canvas away from the outside viewer, in the displacement of mythical creative agents, Pallas and Arachne, into the midst of contemporary courtly judges, or in the elision of the act of weaving, showing only its preparation and its result. In the

28. Pym, though arguing from the viewpoint of a "discourse on the status of painting", corroborates my view: "Far from rendering him invisible, this posture [ironical self-effacement] has precisely the opposite effect, tending subtly to draw attention to the ubiquitous presence of the painter not merely as craftsman, but as the creative intellect behind the work" (1999: 194).

foreground, this act is prefigured in each worker's task, in the background it has been performed already. In a process of mutation alluded to and invisibly enacted, inchoate matter, the disordered wool, has metamorphosed into art's measured order of warp and woof.

It seems clear that *The Fable of Arachne* was composed as ideally complementary to *Las Meninas*. The painstaking reiteration of details in the former adds to the doubling allusions to the latter painting: the (incongruously luxurious) folded red curtain that delimits the left side of the (humble) workshop echoes the one framing the royals reflected in the mirror; the dozing cat recalls the sleepy dog lying at the feet of the Infanta; the upright ladder on the left repeats the rigid flight of the imposing canvas in *Las Meninas* (in the original unenlarged painting, the top of the ladder would have seemed to soar and disappear into the height of the room, just as the depicted canvas does in *Las Meninas*); starkly strong lighting at the back is employed in both paintings. The accumulation of echoes of the depicted concrete objects from one painting to the other reflects the complementarity of other issues between the two works.

Further replicating the pattern of *Las Meninas*, the viewer is situated outside the canvas but is also a presence inside the workshop (as in the studio), held there by the fixing gaze of the lady on the right and embraced into a compositional U-shape reminiscent of the former painting's. The complex structure of ironies embedded in *The Fable of Arachne* is sustained by the play on distancing the viewing subject from its place in the painting, as each grouping of personages is distanced from the other. No explicit relation is formed between any of the groups of figures to each other. The same distancing device is implied in *Las Meninas*: the groups are held in isolation from each other, yet they maintain an implicit interrelation, by a concerted gazing at the outsider and displayed awareness of the outsider's presence.

In *The Fable of Arachne*, the positioning is reversed: all but a couple of the figures are turned away from the viewer in a most obvious manner; the effect is, then, of drawing in and absorbing the viewer into the illusion of the painting, with a different procedure, but as effectively as in *Las Meninas*.[29] But who is the viewer? It is the figure, unseen, that is held in the

29. My argument for a strong presence of the viewer in *The Fable* clearly diverges from Alpers's:

> *Las Meninas* is a viewer's picture …. But the direct address to the viewer implicit in the stance of the figures and the depiction of the space is exceptional for Velázquez …. In contrast to *Las Meninas*, *The Spinners* is a painter's painting …. The purpose of *Las Meninas* is still being discussed, but the genre and purpose of *The Spinners* is even more

gaze of the lady, as it was in that of the Infanta, and that must respond to the challenge issued by the confrontation between patron and artist depicted in the focal site of the painting. The viewer, and absent subject, is then again the king, or kingly power, who will judge the painting as the ladies are assessing the tapestry. Eliding the group of labourers, his gaze meets not only the masterpiece painted by Velázquez, but also the one by Titian, which forms the apex of the whole composition. In these works he sees reflected, not his physical features, but the effigy of his own power as absolute monarch and as munificent patron. He is also confronted by a power, creative artistry, which equals, and challenges, his own.

Why did Foucault not consider *The Fable of Arachne*? Did the social architecture of the royal family in *Las Meninas* offer a more abstract setting, remote from the socio-political frameworks of the 1960's? Would the labourers' explicit presence have altered precariously the reciprocities between visibility and invisibility, upon which the new *episteme* was being brought forth? *The Fable of Arachne* is as illusionist as *Las Meninas*, even more so, and certainly more "outspoken" about locations of power. Would a too-glaring light thrown upon relationships of power have obscured other aspects of his inquiry that Foucault did not wish to be sidelined? *The Fable of Arachne* has been *Las Meninas*'s companion piece since they began to be exhibited in museum space. Should one analyse so closely the one and completely ignore the other? By fixing his attention exclusively on the painting containing a more explicit presence of the artist, a presence that subjugates the onlooker, as much as a kingly presence would, Foucault holds the viewer's attention upon features – such as absent presence – that obfuscate tensions of power.

This sleight-of-hand – hiding what is foregrounded and releasing into the surface what is latent – could not have been performed with *The Fable of Arachne*, without the risk of destabilising Velázquez's own innovative placements. In his essay on *Las Meninas*, Foucault, in other words, consciously or not, plays in reverse Velázquez's game in *The Fable of Arachne*. Foucault wrote an essay that, well beyond the stated clarification of the classical *episteme*, rhetorically "repainted" in words Velazquez's canvas. He situated himself, the critic, in strategic positions inside and outside the painting, as "king", "painter", and "viewer", ironically undercutting the driving principle of the book and of its introductory chapter: the absence of the subject, and, ultimately, the disappearance of man. Let us not forget that *The Order of Things* is prefaced by a tale of laughter caused by Borges's "encyclopedia". That sense of destabilising

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obscure. Its effect is stranger, more unsettled and unsettling (Alpers 2005: 188-189).

humour, I think, lies never too far beneath Foucauldian "pessimism". The ending of the book should be read, I suggest, in close conjunction not only with the introductory chapter on *Las Meninas*, of which it is a deliberate artistic prolongation and complement, but also with the preface:

> In the profound upheaval of such an archaeological mutation, man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator, he appears in the place belonging to the king, which was assigned to him in advance by Las Meninas, but from which his real presence has for so long been excluded. As if, in that vacant space toward which Velazquez's whole painting was directed, but which it was, nevertheless, reflecting only in the chance presence of a mirror, and as though by stealth, all the figures whose alternation, reciprocal exclusion, interweaving, and fluttering one imagined (the model, the painter, the king, the spectator) suddenly stopped their imperceptible dance, immobilized into one substantial figure, and demanded that the entire space of the representation should at last be related to one corporeal gaze.
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> (Foucault [1966]1970: 312)

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