

Panthea, Initiations and Festivals of the Goddess **by Olivia Robertson**

6. The Athenaea **21st - 24th March**

Oracle of the Goddess Pallas Athena

Priestess: Pallas Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, come to me now that I may be inspired by Thy Divine Spirit! Endow us with Thy Wisdom and Thy Might that Thy ancient glories may once more shine before the world!

Oracle: It has been written that the Iron Age should prevail over the earth bringing with it suffering, toil and evil, through neglect of the Deities. Its darkness is not the holy night of the Owl of Wisdom, but the limitation of ignorance. Its light is the transient glow, that comes from superficial knowledge gained from curious probing rather than the spiritual illumination that emanates from the Deities. It was not necessary for the world of men to choose the Age of Iron; but Destiny that the choice be offered. For what goodness is there in worshipping the Gods and Goddesses when They reveal Themselves easily to all? It is simple to satisfy curiosity, but the labour of years of experience to gain wisdom! Sentiment is pleasant but passing: the warmth of love is ever-renewing.

Understand the meaning of what I am, and you will gain comprehension of your own lives and destiny. I am not divided against Myself: Bright Pallas with her Spear of Light does not war with the Dark Owl of Night. Nor do the terrible flames of the Inner Sun that are Veiled upon My shield attack Athena, the Teacher of philosophy and the arts. I am Holy. Be Ye Holy. Be at peace within yourselves and cease from your philosophical warring! In verity the catastrophes of the Iron Age are due to deep division between mortals and the Deities: between mankind and nature: and between differing ideas which are but the quivering reflections of absolute truth.

The veil upon My Shield is beginning to wear thin, and the glory of the Rays of Medusa become apparent to earthly gaze! The inner power of the atom has been violently exposed, and reduces the physical body to the shadow which in verity it is. My Spear of Light brings Divine Inspiration to the mind, while My owl carries messages of warning from the dark Rulers of the universe, which will be known to be what it is: whole and perfect. On your troubled earth mortals struggle and learn through harsh experience to put on Immortality: which in truth is latent in each creature. A bird knows more of Elysium than doth mankind! Do not reject any aspect of the universe, but recognise it as part of a glorious pleroma in which even suffering and evil are transformed through wisdom into good. Listen for My Voice. I speak in the silence.

Priest: *(at the gate)* Friends, we are here assembled to celebrate the ancient Athenian Festival of the Panathenaea. The singer Orpheus instituted the Athenaea in honour of Pallas Athena, Goddess of Power, Wisdom and the Arts. At this time of the Vernal Equinox of equal days and nights, when the sun leaves the sign of the tied fishes for the ram, Athenians and foreign visitors formed a joyful procession. They climbed the hill of the Acropolis and brought to the Parthenon the peplum of Athena.

Priestess displays white sleeveless garment embroidered with gold.

Priestess: Behold the peplum of Athena! Let us follow the ancient custom and bring it to the temple of the

Goddess. May works of Art and Crafts be carried to Her altar by the celebrants.

Procession through garden and rooms of house to Temple. Music: flutes, stringed instruments, small drums.

Chant: "We sing of Pallas Athena, the glorious Goddess, bright-eyed, inventive, unbending of heart, pure virgin, Saviour of Cities, Tritogenia. She is arrayed in flashing gold. Awe seizes all the Gods who gaze upon her."

Omnes assemble before High Altar covered with green cloth. On it are 6 white candles, burning incense and Palladium – the statue of the Goddess or picture. By it on a table are olives and biscuits, wine and fruit-juice. Before the altar is tray for offerings.

Priestess: (*offers incense*) We offer incense to Thee, the Goddess Pallas Athena. Thou doth bear the Owl of Wisdom upon Thy shoulder and wieldeth the Spear of Light. From Thy Shield come the life-giving Medusa Rays, veiled from human sight. Bestow upon us power and the wisdom to use it well. Inspire our works of learning and of the arts!

Priest: (*offers incense*) I offer incense to Thee, the God Zeus. Thou art Chiefest among the Gods and greatest, all seeing, the Fulfiller Who whispers words of wisdom. Upon Thy immortal head bright Pallas descended in flashing flames. Be gracious to us, all knowing Son of Cronos, and give us the gift of enjoyment and many friends!

Priestess: (*places peplum on altar*) We present Thy peplum, noble Goddess! Let the celebrants offer their gifts.

All bestow gifts at foot of altar. Prs. and Pr. accept and bless them.

Pr: Divine Athena, accept these offerings of works to Thee Who art the Inspirer of them! At this auspicious festival of spring, it was the custom of the Athenians to present a play in honour of Thee! Let the players enact their Mystery.

Mystery of Pallas Athena and Arachne

Players: Athena with gold helmet, white robe, holds spear. Pandrosus and 2 other Priestesses and 3 Priests of Athena wear gold headbands and white robes. 1st priest holds grey cloak. Arachne and 6 Tymolean Nymphs wear silver headbands and black robes. Hermes in winged helmet, yellow robe and bears caduceus. 2 leafy wreaths and black veil lie nearby.

Hermes: I travel through the spheres, and regard the doings of Olympians and Titans, the denizens of Elysium and Hades, with an impartial eye. Many a strange story I can tell - but none more worthy of note than that of the contest between Athena and Arachne! Ovid and many another poet hath told the tale, but from a God learn what really happened!

Drum beats.

Pandrosus: Learn of Arachne from me, Pandrosus, first Priestess of Divine Pallas Athena! This maiden Arachne was renowned neither for her family nor her place of birth, but for her art alone. Her father was Idmon of Colophon who tinged the spongy wool with Phocaeen purple. Her mother was dead - but she too was amongst the vulgar. And this girl dared to boast of her superiority to our great Goddess!

Hermes: Yet Arachne, though meanly born, had by her ingenuity acquired a memorable name through all the cities of Lydia. The Naiads of Pactolus forsook their streams and the nymphs of Tymolus left their

vineyards to admire her weaving.

1st Nymph: We delight to view her work, not only for its fidelity to nature, but for her grace in the doing of it. Surely she is inspired by Pallas!

Pan: Yet Arachne will have none of this. She disdains divine inspiration from so great a Mistress!

Arachne: All the world marvels at my art! What matters lowly birth when I have such genius! All that I do has the very imprint of nature herself, nor does it owe anything to an Olympian Goddess! My mottled snakes that wind around my leafy trees, my plunging white horses with flying manes, my little lizards basking on hot rocks have the very touch of life. Why a wasp flew in at my window and settled on my pictured plums! My mind bids my nimble fingers create great works, nor are they inspired by any Divinity dwelling in far-off clouds.

Pan: Blasphemy! Wretched girl, withdraw thy rash words.

Ar: Not I! I do not fear the Gods. Let her, this Pallas Athena, if she can hear me, come to a trial of skill! Indeed, there is no penalty I will not suffer if I am overcome.

Pan: When these impious words reached the ears of the Goddess, uttered by a mortal, she descended from high Olympus to Lydia. She disguised herself as an aged Crone, added false grey hairs to her temples, and supported her tottering limbs with a staff.

Pallas conceals herself in cloak and leans on spear.

Pallas: *(to Arachne)* Young weaver, I heard your proud boast! Despise not my advice for old age is not in everything to be shunned. Experience comes from riper years. Aspire to the highest fame among mortals, but yield to the Goddess! With humble voice ask for pardon for your rash presumption. She will forgive you if you submit to her.

Ar: Old crone, you come here void of understanding and doddling under the weight of age. It is your misfortune to have lived so long! if you have any daughter or daughter-in-law, reserve for them these sage reproofs. I am sufficient for my own conduct, nor stand in need of advice! And to make you sensible how little your admonitions prevail, know that I am still of the same mind. I challenge your Goddess! Let her speak for herself. Does she fear the contest?

Quickening drumbeats. Athena throws off her cloak.

Athena: Lo she is here! Know me for Pallas Athena!

All bow save Arachne.

Arachne: Let the fates deal with me as they will. I, a mortal, will make contest with thee. Who shall judge between us?

Ath: Hermes who travelleth between darkness and light, Olympus and Hades, shall determine the outcome. Arachne, show forth thy art!

Ar: I portray the sublimest work of nature, the spider's web. In perfect spiral curve, adorned with crystal dewdrops, it entices many an unwary fly into its suffocating embrace! Observe their useless struggles, caught in sticky strands! Ruling as Queen within the web so skillfully woven from her own body, the spider sits and waits. She devours her lawful prey one by one at leisure. Do not all natural creatures feed

upon each other? Thy owl Athena, is wise indeed – in its skill at catching mice! And I depict love also. Behold, the spider's marriage! What a wonder is her nuptial dance with her mate, as she glides with silken feet over her web unharmed. Nor does she, secure with future eggs, intend to kill her spouse. Only if he lacks speed at the end of love's engagement, is he by chance devoured by his wife!

Semitonal music. Dance of the Spider and her mate by Arachne and Nymphs.

Hermes: Marvellous and horrible! Who may excel this work of nature which hath in it the terrible humour and tragedy of humble insect existence? It would seem that young Arachne hath won the contest.

1st Nymph: Our artist of reality has prevailed. Hail the victory of a mortal!

Athena: Think you so? What may a mortal with no true knowledge portray, save pictures of meaningless cruelty and direful death? Only the artist inspired by the Immortals may portray Truth. Behold, I draw a picture of the divine sphere of which this earth is only a shadow. With my far-seeing art I show the progress of the soul through the ages. After death all receive their due reward, and the spirits of the just are purified, until they are free from all taint of evil. No fly dies in vain, for its tiny soul attains a greater life! Wonder at the beauty of Elysium, beloved of the Muses and the Graces! For the souls of the just, Helios shines in strength while on earth 'tis night. They dwell amidst meadows red with roses and their beautiful city is shaded by the incense-tree, laden with golden fruits. Some disport themselves with sports and lyres, while beside them bloometh the fair flower of perfect bliss. And o'er that lovely land the smoke of fragrant incense rises from the far-shining fires on the Altars of the Deities. While the bodies of all creatures are subject to over-mastering death, their spirits remain alive, for they come from the immortal Deities. As the spirit sleepeth, the limbs are active on earth. Yet to them that sleep, I give fair dreams that presage the glories of Elysium, home of poets and of philosophers.

Classical music. Athena and Priesthood give stately dance of Elysium.

Hermes: Athena hath won the contest! Her divine art giveth hope and bliss and the assurance of immortality.

Pan: A wise judgment! For who would choose the cruelty of nature rather than the felicity of Elysium? Light hath conquered darkness. Pallas hath won the olive crown of victory! Arachne, veil your face for shame.

Hermes presents wreath to Athena.

Arachne: Not so fast! (*She throws black veil over head and body. Quickening drumbeats.*) Know that I am Lachesis, Weaver of the Web of Fate! (*all bow save Athena*) I am the Matrix. From my dark body I spin the universal web. Within its spiral glittering like dewdrops shine the constellations. There is no light that is not born from My primordial darkness: no noble deed that has not been strengthened through fear of Me. I test the soul. I draw every trembling creature through the meshes of cause and effect. None can escape My binding Destiny. Even the Immortal Gods obey the Fates. What artist has not suffered for his work nor maiden who has not struggled to keep her integrity? Out of evil cometh good, for what worth is the virtue that hath not endured ordeal? Whether good or evil is chosen, reward or punishment bestowed, all obey the law of Nemesis!

Hermes: To the awakened soul there is no contest here! The bright Athena bears the night owl and Arachne hath a light upon her brow. These twain are Sisters. Dawn and twilight bring night and day into colourful harmony, and winter and summer blend in this lovely spring! Harken to my judgment. Pallas Athena and Arachne both win the prize.

Hermes presents both with wreaths. Music. Dance of the Arachnids and Elysians. Those in black on left, in white on right. Then both mingle and hold hands.

Chant: "Darkness and light are one. Day and night are one. Winter and summer are one. Nature and art are one. Arachne and Athena are sisters."

The Goddesses embrace. Drumroll indicates end of play.

Priestess: Fellow celebrants, let us contemplate the mystery of Pallas Athena and Arachne.

Contemplation: Rays of harmony are sent forth. Reports.

Holy meal is shared.

Thanksgiving to Pallas Athena and Zeus.

End of Rite.

SOURCES: "Metamorphoses," Ovid, trans. Davidson, J. Robinson, 1759. "The Odes of Pindar," trans. Sandys. "The Homeric Hymns," trans. Evelyn-White. "Fasti," Ovid, trans. Frazer. All pub. Heinemann, Harvard. "Juno Covella," Durdin-Robertson, Cesara.

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