



"Spin Spin Spindle". Coincidence or deliberate action?

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Abstract

Spinning and weaving have commonly been associated with women's primary occupations. In the cosmology of many cultures, there were divine spinners of human destiny, responsible for life and death. In medieval reality, in which the division of roles was very defined and marked, any deviation from the generally accepted scheme could constitute an offense. It was at this time that specialized craft guilds emerged. Textiles, spinning, and weaving ceased to be the domain of women and became the domain of men. It was not an accident, but a conscious act. Linked to the human subconscious of deep-rooted symbolism. Socially and culturally, spinning has always belonged to women. It usually took place in the privacy of the home, where the energy of the work was directed inwards, towards the production of material for personal use. Weaving was associated with male power. The first reason was related to the changeability and ambiguity of the nature of spinning. The second was the constancy, dynamism, and movement that accompanied weaving. It is identified with outward-directed activity. With the changing economic situation, men took over the weaving market and brought it outside the home. They formed craft guilds and engaged in distribution. The takeover of the former domain of women by men was a deliberate action and a consequence of a series of symbolic events preceding this process.

Keywords: medieval, spinning, weaving, gender, movement

Introduction

In the general consciousness, spinning is seen as one of the main activities of the early medieval woman, along with caring for children and the home. Textile tools found in women's graves provide physical evidence of this activity at archaeological sites. Spinning has a strong place in culture, from myths such as Penelope, Kyoto, Ariadne, or Arachne, to literature (Goethe's Faust) or classical music (Stanisław Moniuszko -Prząśniczka). In a symbolic sense, spinning was the domain of women, associated with their power. The woman is responsible for the symbolic thread of human life. Divine spinners, such as Mojra or Parka, defined temporal existence. The length of life depended on their judgment (Mierzwiński, 2019, p. 96). Men, on the other hand, should not spin. This is emphasized by the medieval illuminations in the books' margins. It is a sign of his

degradation, a punishment for reprehensible behavior. A symbolic stripping of his masculinity. The most prominent example is Hercules, who was forced to spin at the feet of Omphale (Sokalska, 2010, pp. 148, 149). However, with the advances associated with the growth of cities and trade and the establishment of craft guilds, men took over the feminine domain of spinning and weaving. They transformed it into a manufactory. What was considered a disgrace not long ago became a thriving business within a few centuries in the Middle Ages, bringing prestige and recognition. What caused the change in attitude? Was it purely economic?

Spinning and weaving in the gender dimension

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, describes weaving as women's only contribution to civilization, an invention symbolically linked to their genital defect (Miller, 1986, p. 291). In his reflections, he fails to see the connection between the mythical spinners of human destiny - the Roman Parcs and the Greek Mojrás. Woman, by spinning, produces, in Freud's view, a symbolic 'leaven'. The man, in his view, should 'mold' it accordingly. This is, in his view, a typically masculine attitude in which it is not the striving itself that is important, but the result. Freud's interpretation of female weaving relates to the interpretation of the activity and passivity of spiders. The female in this case is more active and aggressive in her actions. The male is passive and quieter. Spinning itself, despite its considerable motor movements, cannot, according to Freud, be defined as an act of actual creation. It belongs to the male element, i.e. movement, and action. Women, in his view, 'invented' spinning to create a substitute for their activity because they do not have a penis (Szczuka 2001 pp. 34, 35). Perhaps, for this reason, a man who spins rather than weaves is seen pejoratively. Referring to the Freudian interpretations above, weaving is associated with movement and activity. Spinning, on the other hand, is stagnation, and passivity. Thus, the activity of spinning, although associated with the symbolic thread of life and human destiny, can be valorized pejoratively. This can be seen in such English terms as plaiting, (plaiting, weaving) gossiping. These are thus terms of verbal expression. The English word -plot, means intrigue, conspiracy, the woven plot of a novel and is associated with the activities of plaiting, weaving, and speaking (Szczuka, 2006, p. 28). Perhaps, for this reason, a man who spins rather than weaves is perceived pejoratively. Referring to the Freudian interpretations above, weaving is associated with movement and activity. Spinning, on the other hand, is stagnation, and passivity. Thus, the activity of spinning, although associated with the symbolic thread of life and human destiny, can be valorized pejoratively. This can be seen in such English terms as plaiting, (braiding, weaving) gossiping. Thus, these are expressions for the not-so-glorious activity of verbal expression that is often prevalent among women. The English word -plot, means intrigue, conspiracy, and woven novel plot and is associated with the activities of weaving, weaving, and speaking (Szczuka, 2006, p. 28).

Spinning and weaving in the early Middle Ages and the category of gender

In the Middle Ages, spinning and weaving, alongside caring for the home and children, was the predominant activity of women. The only exception was in monasteries, where weaving was done by monks. This was linked to a specific monastic rule. The taboo on weaving, therefore, did not apply to this group of men. However, in many of the medieval illuminations found on the pages of book margins, a recurring pattern is visible. The man is often beaten by a woman with a spindle or spinning machine, often a nun. In medieval France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland, there was a specific rite of charivari. In England, it was called Skimminton. It was intended to ridicule those who violated moral norms, such as bigamy, infidelity, and excessive sexual

freedom in marriage. It also applied to a husband who beat his wife or was himself beaten by her. Charivari also mocked those who struggled with impotence (Negrel, 2019, p. 4). By the form in which the charivari rite occurred, it was forbidden by the Church (Ibid., p. 3). It was a mixture of swagger, cruelty, and a tool of social control. It had a specific scenario, beginning with laughter, derision, and noise. It was followed by the cruelest element: a parade through the city with the victim of derision. The mocking of battered husbands and despotic wives involved swapping roles and playing off the couple. In the Swiss village of (according to recorded information) Chene, a young villager sat with his back to his horse and held its tail instead of the reins. Behind him walked another young man in female guise, holding a spindle with thread wound through it - a potential instrument of assault used by a wife against an effeminate husband. At the end of the procession walked a priest carrying a large cross (Davis, 2009, pp. 85, 86). (Ibid., p. 87). This was often a public punishment inflicted for violation of rights (Wadsworth, 2009, pp. 101,110, 115)

Also in the early medieval Slavic written sources, there are references that spinning was an occupation that was derogatory to a man's dignity. The Polish chronicle by Marcin Bielski states that Boleslaw the Wrymouth (Bolesław Krzywousty) sent spun hemp and flax to the voivode of Krakow, who had fled from the battlefield because his behavior made him unworthy of being called a man and he should spin with women since he had proved that he was mentally a woman. Spinning and weaving in the popular mind were the domains of women. If men engaged in it, they did so sporadically. There are known cases of men who engaged in these activities from ancient Egypt according to Toussaint-Samat or Renaissance Swabia. A lithograph from 1544 shows a man at a loom, and the caption underneath reads- The customary occupation of a Swabian (Mierzwinski, 2019, p. 83 after Munster 1544; Toussaint-Samat, pp. 203-207). In European culture we find three instances referring to male spinning. Both are valorized pejoratively: iconoclastic and mocking the men who engaged in it. They clearly show that spinning was seen as incompatible with male nature. The first is Achilles, who had to wear women's clothes and spin to avoid being recognized and sent to the front during the war with the Trojans. The second is Heracles, who was sent into the service of Queen Omphalia for killing a friend. The queen humiliated him. She was beaten with a slipper and told to use a spindle rather than a mace. The third was Dejanira's husband, who, as punishment for betraying his wife, had to lie at her feet and spin threads (Malec, 2003, pp. 60, 61). George Dumézil, in his fundamental work *The Gods of the Germans*, presents the figure of Odin, a transcendent person, associated with seidr magic, reserved for women. He unequivocally links Odin to this type of magic, making it clear that this god had a blurred boundary of sexuality. According to Dumézil, a man practicing this type of magic was valorized as homosexual and unmanly. Magic itself was very clearly linked to spinning and weaving, through its function of foretelling fate (Dumézil, 2006, p. 76).

Spinning and weaving are also a way of encoding, of conveying messages. As mentioned earlier, verbal expression is associated with women. Text is like lace, thread is the voice message (Szczuka, 2006, pp. 39, 40). Justyna Żychlińska, an archaeologist specializing in prehistoric spinning and weaving, speaks in a similar vein. She draws attention to the symbolic dimension of fabric as an element of communication (Żychlińska, 2017, p. 47). In the early medieval period, weaving was a way for women to express their emotions, a verbal means to tell a story, comparable to the Scandinavian sagas. One element played a crucial role. It was the weaver who decided when the story should begin and when it should end (Gardęła L. 2019, pp. 40,41).

Incantations may have been used for this purpose. Swords and textile tools recorded in the graves of Viking period women may have been associated with magical curses or incantations, uttered during spinning and weaving. The woolen thread/material was then passed to transfer the curse or incantation to the recipient (Taylor, 2014, p. 148). When weaving or embroidering, the thread carried all the negative energy available to the person doing the activity. Sometimes these were protective spells, as the woman was responsible for the home's mirrors. The Orkneyinga saga mentions an embroidered shirt with golden thread and an evil spell. The one for whom it was intended died in agony (quoted in *Women and Magic in the Sagas: Seiðr and Spá*, <http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/seidhr.shtml>). Magical shirts not only harmed but often even helped. There were special 'witches' shirts'. These are mentioned in the two sagas *Eyrbyggja* and *Vatnsdolea*. Another way of protection was the 'raven banner' woven by the warrior's mother or sister. A magical spell was woven into it. It possessed the power to terrify opponents. It was white when stationary, turning black during combat (Korneluk-Markiewicz, 2021, p. 97). Spinning has no effect, it is in itself passive. Weaving is movement and mobility. Miller places Ariadne on one side, as the one who left nothing behind, and on the other side Arachne, an outstanding weaver who has been turned forever into a spider out of revenge (Szczuka, 2006, p. 41). Arachne thus takes on 'masculine' characteristics in this case. She is active and creative. Spinning does not result in visible material. It is only a prelude to later activities. Weaving involves the creation of a tangible textile object. It brings tangible proof of the work done.

Weaving, according to Carolyn Heilbrun, was from the very beginning a dualistic form in contrast to spinning. Women weavers, like Penelope through their work, were able to manifest their emotions. Through weaving, they were revealing male power while documenting violence against them. Analyzing Penelope's attitude, Heliburn believes that by weaving and spinning fabric at the same time, she likened it to the act of writing. She was creating her plot. She was not a passive participant, but an active one (Szczuka, 2001, pp. 31, 32). Her role was not limited to preparing the product. She was creating it. She had control over her work, her time, and, consequently, over herself. which, in a patriarchy-dominated world, was an important value. She could manipulate the warp thread at will. Decide on its beginning and end.

Weaving is akin to manipulation. The woman manipulated the warp accordingly to achieve decisiveness. Weaving involves concrete movement and mobility. The axis of weaving has a dualistic dimension. It is the rhythm and balance of the world, feminine and masculine. This can be seen in the cosmologies of the world. In one passage from the *Rigveda*, the Creator God Varuna wove the world from primordial matter (Toussaint-Samat, 1998, p. 289). We find similar themes in Slavic cosmology. In the Eastern Slavs, there was the Archetype of the Demiruga-Weaver. The binary divine entity was created from two equal forces that cooperated in the act of creating the Cosmos. Perun, supreme in the Slavic pantheon, possessed certain attributes that assisted in the process of fabric creation. This was the arrow, which was identified in folk messages as a form of greeting. It was meant to symbolically help the weaver/woman (female) to put the fabric in order and ensure order on the loom similar to the order prevailing in the Cosmos.

In the early medieval Slavs, religious dualism played an important role, combining pagan and Christian practices. The clash of the two eschatologies resulted in a specific form. It consisted of enriching biblical stories with interpretations drawn from pre-Christian beliefs. Characters from the Slavic pantheon were identified with certain saints. Vlas was identified with Saint Nicholas, Florek, Vlas, or Blaise. They preserved most of the traces associated with spinning and weaving. On the eve of Saint Vlas, the yarns were subjected to cooling to make them whiter. On St. Paraskev, the first

samples of worked flax were brought to the church for consecration (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 26, 28, 48, 81, 82, 86, 88). In the Eastern Slavs, it was always women who were associated with textile work. During the expulsion of humans from paradise, the Creator, or Demiróg the Weaver, forbade men to work with thread. They could only sow flax, harvest it and process it. In folk messages, the man has a practical, dynamic function, e.g. sowing, harvesting, and processing flax. The woman, on the other hand, has to create the structure. Flax processing is defined by verbs such as beat, destroy, throw, and valorized pejoratively. They are associated with aggression and fighting. They belong to the world of men. Activities are divided between males and females (A. Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 42, 47, 49, 51).

Weaving in the hands of medieval men

Analyzing the above examples, the question arises as to why the feminine aspect of weaving was absorbed into male structures. Socio-cultural changes took time. The binarity of spinning and weaving on a symbolic level led to a blurring of the balance and consequently to a role reversal. The feminine was replaced by the masculine. The resulting dysfunctions were covered up by established social norms. The categories of femininity and masculinity can be defined differently, as they happen to be merely an anthropological approach. The basis of the division, according to Ortner and Whitehead, is an opposition that has always been fixed on the line of domestic/public/natural/cultural. That which was associated with nature, i.e. women, stood lower in the hierarchy of importance than that which was associated with culture, i.e. men (Levi-Strauss, 2009, p. 278). The home-interior opposition is a functional-structural view in which women matter and men function. Women's lives in the Middle Ages were mostly centered around the domestic. Men, on the other hand, were allowed to function in the public sphere (Yanagisko, Collier, 2007, pp. 23,24,25). This is related to the inside/outside opposition, where the woman is identified with the home, i.e. the inner sphere, and the man as more dominant is associated with the outside. These categories are characterized by a large number of variables and each carries a different message. Ingvild Øye believes that the takeover of spinning and weaving by men was linked to the invention of the horizontal loom. For most historians of Western Europe, the question of gender in the textile industry and the emerging craft guilds should not be an issue. This is because, from the very beginning, craft guilds were exclusively male. With increasing tensions between individual medieval states, numerous wars, and the consequent deaths of men, it was often women - widows and daughters - who took over or were able to take over the business. Already at this time, there was a reversal of social roles. Weaving requires more control over the operation, and control over the running of affairs remained in the hands of men. The phenomenon of control over production was an activity directed 'outwards', in the public sphere. The woman in the Middle Ages directed her actions 'inwards'. The male-female opposition in the context of weaving and spinning may have originated in the spinning, whirling motion with which the spinner moves the spindle. The movement of spinning involves the simultaneous opening and closing of space. It is transcendent. It is performed 'against the sun', in opposition to it. Any movement in opposition is interpreted as negative, bringing evil. As with the sides of the world - right masculine, good, left feminine, evil. Rotary movement reverses space, which can cause dangerous situations. An example is the return of the dead. In the folk mentality, the woman was an 'impure force', oriented toward the past. Because of her transcendent role, she was alien, different from her biological nature (Wasilewski, 1976, p. 92). She was alien, different from her biological nature. On the one hand, she is life-giving, but she could just as easily take life. She was an ambiguous, non-obvious figure. She was associated with the symbolism of the moon (Walenciuk-Dejneka, 2014, pp. 59, 76). In the popular consciousness of Eastern Slavs, the

preparation of yarn was done by women. Men harvested the flax and processed it. The preparation of the raw material took place in the 'dark period'- autumn and winter. The yarn was prepared in darkened rooms, sometimes in baths, places considered unclean (as was the woman). The weaving itself took place in spring during the 'light' period. (Gołębiowska-Suchorska, 2011, pp. 35-38). The same was true of the cycle of the emergence of new life in the womb. This has numerous connotations in folk beliefs. The Mojras, daughters of the Night, had associations with the magic of the moon. The word 'Mojra' means - part, phase, which can easily be linked to the phases of the moon. A woman's body is a kind of loom on which to 'weave' a child. The processing of raw fibers into yarn, in the folk consciousness, was associated with power over life and death (Gładziuk, 1997, p. 66).

Conclusions

The expanded symbolism of spinning and weaving gave rise to the cultural changes that took place in the Middle Ages. Unconscious actions, hidden in the human subconscious, led to a change in perspective. As I have tried to point out, the transfer of the textile monopoly from women's to men's labor in the Middle Ages was not necessarily dictated solely by economic or practical considerations. Spinning has and had connotations strongly associated with the feminine element. The feminine is associated with nature, as is the spinning wheel, the yarn. The masculine is a dynamic, action-oriented element (Rudnicka 2014, p. 184). Yarn is associated with a revolving, ambiguous, transcendent movement. It is a cycle, a long process of creation. Spinning and weaving are very strongly associated with protective magic, the magic of Alkomen. It accompanies the various cycles of human life. Apotropaic actions are all aimed at saving the person towards whom they are directed. If we assume that the yarn is a structure-child and relate this to the family model, the following conclusions emerge. In the early stages of life, it is the woman who takes care of the newborn. As the child grows, the man takes over responsibility. The child, in this case, the structure/weaving, is the coherent part between spinning (the female element) and weaving (the male element). Weaving, understood in terms of gender, can, in my opinion, be a way of expressing emotion by creating a corresponding thread line. The masculine nature of weaving is not only about movement and dynamics. It is the possibility of changing the weft, which is impossible with spinning. Moving the warp, or the individual constructions on the loom gives a different effect. It allowed for choice. In the case of spinning, this was very difficult. Weaving, through its active role, made change possible.

This deeply ingrained and subconscious aspect, completely unconsciously, could trigger socio-cultural changes. What was once feminine and inappropriate, unmanly, was given a new light through appropriate rhetoric and framing.

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