people at different times” (Iser 2006: 68). He locates two main strands within that theory, both of which are needed for a fully developed account of reading and interpretation. The first is represented by his own work, which is concerned with reading as a process in relation to formal features of the text, including gaps in the text that a reader has to fill (his “implied reader” is thus a transcendental or virtual construct, not to be identified with any actual reader either now or in the past). Within this mode “meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced” (Iser 1980: 10). Iser’s second strand derives from the work of his colleague Jauss, who sought a revival of literary history, and was concerned with documented historical readers and what they can tell us about the texts we read. Jauss’s “aesthetics of reception” attempts to reconcile hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation) with poetics, historical with aesthetic criticism. In the notes to his translation of the Iliad, Alexander Pope observed that the commentators were “fonder of showing their learning in all kinds than their single understanding in poetry” (Shankman 1996: 46). But if the Iliad was produced in the past, it is valued (or not) in the present; an adequate account, if it is not to be of merely antiquarian interest, needs to attend to both aspects. Past works have the power to act in the present (any present of reading) in ways that could not have been foreseen at the time. Following Gadamer’s dialectical approach, Jauss breaks down the barrier between the art object and the perceiving subject: the reader experiences “self-experience in the enjoyment of something other.” His version of reception thus “entails not only the introduction of the reader as a guide to value and interpretation, but implicitly a model for understanding encounters with the past in which we simultaneously form and are formed by artefacts” (Holub 1995: 344, 326). Hostile critics sometimes link reception with the consumerism characteristic of late capitalism. But reception does not claim that the consumer is always right, just that she is always a party to the transaction. Validity remains an issue for reception scholars, as for other interpreters (indeed since criteria of validity are historically situated and always in dispute, they can themselves be seen as a crucial part of the processes of reception).

Why should we study previous readers? Jauss’s metaphor of the “chain” reaching us from the work could suggest a way of doing reception history rather different from the norm, one that explores historical filiations without privileging original meaning. We could say that reception theory, while stressing the importance of history, also destabilizes or complicates it as a site of meaning. We usually get flat accounts in which each “age” encounters the past in isolation rather as though it were a tabula rasa (so the “Romantic” view of Vergil becomes quite other than the “Augustan” view). But much of the history of reading will be uncontrollable and subject to multiple contingencies; good accounts will acknowledge the difficulties and aortias and blind-spots of any such project, including the complex entanglements of history. It is no advance simply to substitute positivistic accounts of the text-in-itself by equally positivistic accounts of the historical-reading-of-the-text-in-itself; if the Aeneid has no single “originary” meaning, subsequent readings are equally subject to the slide in signification, in accordance inter alia with the particular needs and configurations of changing reading practices. To cope with this might try to devise accounts that are not so backward-looking. In that front, artfully disposed in varied postures, live women work at male reception to the male work, and in the work men work to the male reception to the male work (In that front, artfully disposed in varied postures, live women work at male reception to the male work, and in the work men work to the male reception to the male work).

2 Velázquez, Ovid, and the Contingencies of Reception

Most of my examples of receptions so far have been written texts (whether in the form of a piece of criticism or another work of art), but a reception could just as well be a painting, or a sculpture, or a piece of music, or a film. A reception involving two different media can help to clarify some of the theoretical issues at stake. Accordingly – and to show how I believe we might “do” reception – I have chosen as my final exhibit a painting by Velázquez, both as a final painting that is itself the object of a profound and haunting reception of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and because the way it has been interpreted itself perfectly illustrates the contingencies of reception history. It is today usually known as The Spinners (Las hilanderas); what title Velázquez gave it, if any, is unknown (Fig. 20.1; see Harris 1982: 158–62; Barkan 1986: 1–18; Brown 1986: 252–3; Alpers 2005: 135–262). Titles, often nonauthorial in origin, can help to determine how texts are read, and thus constitute a significant, if often ignored, element in their reception. In the early eighteenth century, just before Velázquez’ painting entered the Spanish royal collection, it was catalogued as “the women who were working in a tapestry workshop / on tapestries.” Furthermore the work we see today is not the same as the one Velázquez originally painted, probably around 1657/ 8. This is not merely the result of changes in color relationships and in general condition that would affect any painting over time (in that sense with older paintings we are never looking at the “original”); in addition at some unknown date the painting was substantially enlarged at the top and sides. These enlargements (which include the oculus above the tapestry) have the effect of clarifying the spatial relationships between the background and the foreground, but also of diminishing the impact of the bright interior scene, which in the smaller version starts out more dramatically against the darker front. In that front, artfully disposed in varied postures, live women work at male reception to the male work, and in the work men work to the male reception to the male work (In that front, artfully disposed in varied postures, live women work at male reception to the male work, and in the work men work to the male reception to the male work).
work by Velázquez listed as *The Fable of Arachne*, now thought to be our painting. Do we then have a genre or a mythological painting, or a combination of the two? (Such generic confusions notoriously characterize the poetry of Ovid as well.)

In the later nineteenth century the European popularity of Velázquez increased fairly dramatically, partly as a result of the interest of such artists as Manet and Whistler (previously the work of Murillo had been more widely esteemed, partly because most of Velázquez’ major paintings were in Spain, but partly no doubt reflecting larger differences in taste). Yet, so far as we can tell, Velázquez’ nineteenth-century admirers knew nothing of any connection between The Spinnners and Ovid’s Arachne (indeed Velázquez was regularly seen as an artist who rejected the classical tradition in favor of realist subjects). This did not stop the influential critic R. A. M. Stevenson (cousin of Robert Louis Stevenson), in what was only the second book on Velázquez in English, declaring it one of his very greatest paintings, the equal of the celebrated Las meninas (The ladies in waiting); indeed “more supple and insinuating in its grace of pattern, more enchanting and varied in its treatment of colour and detail” (Stevenson 1899: 59). Ignorance of the “true” subject of the painting (as modern scholarship construes the matter) did not prevent intense aesthetic pleasure or a fully successful reception at this date. The point is instructive and can be generalized. There are all sorts of allusions in ancient poetry we cannot recognize (because the works alluded to have been lost) and whose presence we do not even suspect: that does not diminish one iota the pleasure we now take, say, in Vergil (if new intertexts are found, they will be incorporated into subsequent readings, but for the moment they are not missed).

The Spinnners is lucidly satisfying and self-sufficient, while at the same time deeply mysterious; that mysteriousness is more like the rapt mystery of Vermeer than the bafflement of an allegory by Bellini or Botticelli or Bronzino (where the viewer has the sense that the picture could be decoded if only she had the correct key). Putting Ovid in play creates fresh opportunities for reflection and interpretation, but it does not resolve the ambiguities (indeed the ambiguous character of the image could itself be seen as part of its “Ovidian” character). Ovid has memorable lines on the elegant way Arachne prepares her wool, in which several of the activities shown by Velázquez are included (19–23). Perhaps, then, we can interpret the foreground scene as a depiction of the conflict, with the young woman with her back to us as Arachne and the old woman as the disguised Minerva (this would explain her oddly shapely and youthful bared lower leg) rather than a scene in a contemporary tapestry workshop (but then again, the figures are not wearing historical costume). In the end we simply cannot be sure; we do not know whether we have here a history too complicated for both. And the inset scene is also not without its puzzles. If it depicts the moment when Minerva confronts Arachne after the completion of their rival masterpieces, then who are the other three figures? If they are the original audience at the contest, why are they wearing seventeenth-century dress? Or perhaps they are rather modern visitors inspecting a recently made tapestry in an artist’s atelier? And might Minerva and Arachne in that case be part of a dumb show, or theatrical performance of some kind? Once again Velázquez seems to confuse history and genre, producing an ambiguous image. As we have seen, the object carried by the woman on the left has been used by the author of La Selva (as well as the author of the speech that follows) as a kind of clue to the identity of this character.
or an implement used in the making of tapestries. Another painting by Velázquez provides an analogy: *The Drunkards* in the Prado could be read as representing either Bacchus and his crew in contemporary dress or, more simply, a group of low-life modern drunks. What we can say, in the case of *The Spinners*, is that invoking Ovid makes a new kind of sense for the whole picture, providing possible links between foreground and background (and so the women who worked on tapestries becomes the fable of Arachne).

*The Spinners*, in a witty touch worthy of Ovid himself, contains another Ovidian painting hidden within it, apparently first noted in print by the artist Charles Ricketts in 1903. In Ovid the first scene Arachne depicts, with virtuoso realism, on her web is the rape of Europa (“a real bull, real waves you would think them,” 104), a story already told by Ovid himself *in propria persona*, creating a characteristic moment of self-reflexivity, a mise-en-abîme. In *The Spinners* the completed tapestry is crushed by the figures in front of it, but enough is visible (two Cupids careering through the sky on the left, a young woman with a pink drape cascading over her who rides on a white bull with clearly visible eye on the right) to identify a reproduction of Titian’s *Europa* (finished by 1562), one of a series of Ovidian mythologies the Venetian master painted for Philip II of Spain (Fig. 20.2). Barkan 1986: ch 5; Lewellen 1988: Goffen 1997: 267–73). It remained in the Spanish royal collection, and as such an object of Velázquez’ curatorial responsibilities (as well as admiration), as was a copy of it by Rubens, whom Velázquez had met and whose work he esteemed. Rubens had painted a whole series of Ovidian works for the Torre de la Parada, a royal hunting lodge near Madrid, including a *Minerva and Arachne*, now lost and known only in an oil sketch, which shows the goddess assailing her rival, with a tapestry on the left depicting Europa and the bull. Rubens also regularly produced designs for tapestries. So the tapestry in *The Spinners* could even be construed as a copy of a copy, and its presence certainly invites thoughts on copying, imitation, and creativity. Velázquez’ brilliant technique owes something to Rubens, much to Titian and the Venetian school in respect of both brushstroke and color. In a wide-ranging discussion Svetlana Alpers explores the presence in *The Spinners* of traces of a number of paintings by Titian, Rubens, and others. Velázquez may also be recreating a lost painting by an ancient artist, Antiphilos, depicting a group of spinners, which is mentioned in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* 35.138 (Bedaux 1992). Such intertextuality is regularly seen as a hallmark of Ovidian poetry, and both painting and poem are indeed often read as meditations on art – there is a general link in Ovid and the Ovidian tradition between art and illusion and metamorphosis.

Titian’s series of Ovidian mythologies ought to be as much an artistic reference point with educated persons as the plays of Shakespeare (that they are not is an index of how much Anglophone education still remains more literary than visual). They are similar in kind, though superior in execution and power, to such early modern mythological narratives after Ovid as Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, and, like these, they display a fully revived paganism, a preoccupation with sex (on the borders of pornography?) in all its polymorphic perversion, freedom from obvious allegory, art for beauty’s sake, and an emotional ambivalence. One aspect of Ovid’s seriocomic masterpiece that has regularly worried his more straight-laced interpreters is the uncertainty, or complexity, of tone. A single episode may be by turns ludicrous, pathetic, tragic, grotesque, gay, grave, and much else besides, or (disconcertingly) more than one of these at the same moment. Titian can be interpreted as providing a painterly equivalent for all this by combining, in a single image, qualities not often previously found together in painting. *Europa* is obviously erotic, as the woman’s semi-naked body, spayed over the bull’s back, is displayed to our voyeuristic gaze (her legs are parted in a way that draws that gaze towards her – concealed – genitalia). It is also witty, with the ebullient flying Cupids overhead, the swirling red drape around Europa’s head, and, above all, the bull’s knowing eye-contact with us (like the drape a feature of the iconographic tradition that goes back to antiquity) – he knows that we know he is not really a bull; he knows too that the viewer, even if he knows she affects disapproval, may well share his erotic interest in Europa. But the painting, a painting of rape (however happy the eventual outcome), has undercurrents too of menace and fear: Europa clinging for dear life to the bull’s horn (her awkward posture perhaps alluding to the figure of Dirce in the once-famous ancient sculpture-group known as the *Farnese Bull* in Naples); the dangerous romantic landscape to the left, with the tiny figures of Europa’s companions gesturing towards her; the dark clouds on the right, the darkening and tempestuous seas ahead into which the bull is heading, the
these ambivalences into an image of swirling motion constitutes the full discovery of a baroque mode, prefaced by the leap of Bacchus in Titian’s Bacchus and Ariadne in the National Gallery, London. In a paragone with poetry Titian shows the full range of his technique as a painter, the variety of brushstroke, from delicate and precise to loose and broad, the brilliantly contrasting colors (whites, blues, flesh-tints, the bold slash of deep pink), the virtuoso realism (the sunlight on the hair of the Cupid riding the dolphin, the dramatic foreshortening of the flying Cupids): “a real bull, real waves you would think them.” Titian may have more that is interesting to tell us about the Metamorphoses than many of Ovid’s academic critics (which is not to deny that some of that criticism also informs my reading of Titian).

Titian, we are told, read Ovid in the translation of his contemporary Lodovico Dolce, but he undoubtedly received advice as well from others more classically trained in conventional terms than himself. The art historian Rona戈ffen argues that in depicting Europa, Titian was tacitly putting himself into the subject position of Ovid’s Arachne (if, perhaps, without the presumption, at least in the full knowledge of the envy, invedias, so often aroused by great art). What he offers us is “a tapestry woven in pigment applied with unprecedented freedom that recalls the artistic act of creation” (Goffen 1997: 272). Ovid’s description of the skill of Minerva and Arachne as colorists would serve just as well for Titian, famous for colere.

While they cheer the eye
With glowing purple of the Tyrian dye,
Or, justly intermingling shades with light,
Their colourings insensibly unite.
As when a shower transpired with sunny rays
Its mighty arch along the heaven displays,
From whence a thousand different colours rise,
Whose fine transition cheats the clearest eyes,
So like the intermingled shading seems,
And only differs in the last extremes.
Then threads of gold both artfully dispose,
And, as each part in just proportion rose,
Some antique fable in their work disclose.

(61–9, trans. Samuel Croxall, from Samuel Garth’s composite version of 1717)

Classical scholars likewise argue that Ovid links himself as an artist with Arachne. Not only does he use words throughout the episode that could be applied to poetry in general and to his own poetry in particular (the link is made easier because poetry was regularly associated with spinning and weaving), but also he explicitly makes Arachne into an Ovidian metamorphic artist, whose work, lacking the classical formality of Minerva’s, depicts the transformations of gods to seduce mortal women in riotous abundance, starting with Ovid’s own Europa:

There might you see the gods in sundry shapes
Committing heady riots, incest, rapes.

3 Conclusions

Reflecting on The Spinners, prompting as it does questions about the nature of perception and reality and about art and narrative, provides an excellent point of entry into Ovid’s metamorphic world. Velázquez had more than one translation of Ovid in his personal library, but we do not know whether The Spinners involved a direct response to Ovid’s text, or one largely or wholly mediated by the Ovidian tradition in the visual arts. Arachne after all was a well-known figure, and Velázquez could have found all he needed in works of art available in the royal collection. Claiming that the painting is an important reception of Ovid does not require us to resolve that issue. My point is rather that putting The Spinners and the Metamorphoses into conjunction with each other can produce, in the resulting pleasurable free-play of our mental faculties, what Kant, the philosopher of the aesthetic, calls “aesthetic ideas,” ideas, that is, which do not involve immediate closure or strict determination. Poem and painting can then mutually illuminate each other, suggesting interpretive possibilities without closing discussion down. This process may suggest to us something about Ovid, or Velázquez, or Titian in Velázquez’ reception of him, that we had not considered before. Titian’s Europa, like most other paintings after Ovid, shows us how one Ovidian story could be interesting. The Spinners, with its lack of clear linear logic, gestures towards how Ovid’s poem might be found exciting as a whole. It does this by finding an equivalent for Ovid’s subordination of story to story by means of its unusual spatial representation, with the curious Chinese-box effect of receding images (on four planes) that are hard to make sense of. The painting also encourages us to explore the links between art, and the reception of art, and metamorphosis. One great change that The Spinners depicts (one that recalls Pythagoras’ list of changes in the natural world in Metamorphoses 15) is the transformation of wool into a complete work of art; we see the beginning and end of that process (which requires a humble craft base as well as supreme artistry in execution), but there is no sign of loom or of anyone weaving the tapestry. The change is at once natural and miraculous, as extraordinary in its way as the change of caterpillar into butterfly, or ugly cynet into swan. If we insist that the relationship of past and present can only be unidirectional, we shall miss much of the benefit that such “correspondences” (to use a word of the poet Charles Baudelaire) can bestow. But within a Javanian framework of interpretation, The Spinners becomes not only the fable of Arachne, but also a fable about reception.

Reception theory provides a methodology for dealing with any body of material, from the past or present. But does reception have a special role to play within classics? I would argue that it does, for at least two reasons, the first pragmatic, the second a point of principle. The pragmatic consideration is that reception provides a way of compensating for the loss of so much of the archive. If we take the case of Sappho, only the tiniest fraction of her work survives, and that in fragmentary form. Yet the quality of some of those fragments is such that some have thought her one of the greatest poets of all time, including the poet Algonian Charles Swinburne (no less).