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Liminal Leda: A Conversation about Art, Poetry, and Vague Translations of Sex

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Liminal Leda:

A Conversation about Art, Poetry, and Vague Translations of Sex

An Honors Thesis

Presented by

Molly Alyssa Pistrang

to

The Department of Literatures in English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Honors in the Major Field

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Dedication

To Leda, whoever you are

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

My paper explores the idea that Leda has been used throughout recent history as a vehicle through which artists and poets talk non-explicitly about sex. After presenting her undetermined mythical origins in chapter one, I explore different identities assumed by Leda during the half century prior to Yeats. In chapter two, I focus on Leda as universal woman, explicit character, and one who looks. In chapter three, I move to Leda's larger roles as liminal figure and portrait, and discuss the changing role of exterior versus interior perspective. Chapter four is a detailed study on Yeats' sonnet that develops into chapter five, an account of post-Yeats works that internalize enigmatic Leda's nuanced experience and continue speaking today.

Contents

An Introduction to Leda:	1
Chapter 1. The Uncertain Love Affair: Zeus, Tyndareus, Leda, and Nemesis:	17
Chapter 2. Universal Woman, Porn Star, and One who Looks:	23
The Lead-Up to Leda	23
The Great War, Women, and Leda	26
Ambiguous Beginnings	29
Leda as Universal Woman: Mary and Eve	30
Explicit, Sexualized Leda	39
"Watches and wonders why": Eyes that Look in the Leda Story	42
Chapter 3. Liminality and Portraiture:	52
Leda and the Borders of Liminality	52
An Exterior View of Leda as Portrait	64
The Beginning of a Shift Towards Interiority (Pre-Yeats)	78
Huxley's All-Encompassing Leda	80
Chapter 4. Yeats and Leda:	87
Writing "Leda and the Swan"	87
"Leda and the Swan"	90
Narrative and Form	92
Animal, God, Leda	98
Physical Resistance and Pleasure	101
Leda as Authority: "Knowledge with his power"?	102
Violent Annunciation, Universal Body	104
Talking about "Leda"	105
Answering Yeats' Final Question	107
Chapter 5. Conclusion: "The great wings beating still":	109
Leda Speaks as Rape Victim	112
Leda as Beast, Zeus as God	120
Leda as Real (Powerful) Woman	123
Physical Betrays the Mental: Contemporary Leda Critics	125
List of Images:	134
Works Cited:	135
Bibliography:	140

An Introduction to Leda

"Wisdom speaks first in images" –W.B. Yeats

"now what about this pain/ what about this ecstasy."
-from "Leda" by John Minczeski

"A sudden blow." With these three words William Butler Yeats begins his iconic representation of the myth of Leda and the Swan. We are thrust backwards in time and experience the monumental rape that led to a developing apocalyptic history. We feel the action with her; "staggering" across the page as she staggered across the bank; "loosening" as the poem continues; inevitably "mastered" by Yeats' verse "before the indifferent beak could let [us] drop." We become Leda; we experience her fear, her doubt, her changing emotions. Indeed, "Leo Spitzer argues that the poem itself, in portraying Zeus's rape of Leda, enacts a violation on the reader- 'the reader, too, [is] helpless and numb like the girl: we feel the helplessness, the terror, the horror of closeness imposed'" (Sword 307). Leda's fear resonates with us; we omnisciently experience Leda from within her experience. As we read, the form of Yeats' poem reflects the action of the story. The text carries us and manipulates us in the same fashion that Leda was manipulated by the swan.

Yeats' textual manipulation becomes the primary way we know and experience the myth. It shapes our interpretation of the myth and also of Leda. Yet there are many depictions of Leda

in literature and art- so why do we consider Yeats' sonnet an authoritative source? The innumerable versions of the story speak the same narrative, but they talk in different languages, mediums, and ideologies. Leda is an elusive figure that artists have attempted to capture, but cannot. Using Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" as a framework for study, we question: is his translation the closest we get to Leda "herself"? And if so, are we so intrigued by his story, by *her* story, that we continue to tell the tale until we truly make sense of her? Is this even a question we are able to ask?

Because Leda, by nature, is indefinable. The story of Leda and the swan emerged from ancient Greek mythology. There is debate about who first recorded the story; debate about who wrote the authoritative text; debate about Leda's actual involvement in the births. Thomas Bullfinch records that after being visited by Zeus as swan, Leda gave birth to Helen, Castor, and Polydeuces (Bullfinch 188). Zeus and Leda consummate a divine desire, and she bears physical proof in the form of children. Classical scholar Edith Hamilton also refers to "the usual story," yet in this case "[Leda] bore two mortal children to [Tyndareus], Castor and Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife; and to Zeus, who visited her in the form of a swan, two others who were immortal, Pollux and Helen" (Hamilton 46). The addition of Clytemnestra, along with the words "the usual story," concedes alternative adaptations. We are prompted to persist with this incomplete study.

We continue our investigation because Leda continues. Her myth is a story often repeated and well-known. The bizarre quality of a sexual encounter between beast and human strikes people as intriguing; the fact that the beast is Zeus-as-swan, and the woman is beautiful queen also helps.

This avian tradition was not uncommon in Irish literature. One such example occurs at the conclusion of the eighth century myth, "The Dream of Oenghus," when Oenghus and his lover are transformed into swans. The last we hear of them is how "they went away in the form of two white birds" (Greene 43). Here, and often in literature and art, swans are romantic symbols of noble love, seemingly the opposite of Leda's swan. Zeus as swan is violent, and although we are made to believe that Leda and the swan experience a divine sexual encounter of extreme pleasure, their copulation inevitably leads to destruction (Yeats' "broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ and Agamemnon dead"). In the case of "Oenghus," the woman began as swan and only afterward was the man transformed; this story does not show a male beast accost a human woman, but a human male who approaches a female animal and subsequently is transformed.

The symbolism of "Oenghus" is thus contrary to the Leda myth but common within most cultural narratives. Primarily, swans are perceived as regal creatures, graceful in their simple plumage, innocent in their hue. They take on the feminine, representing a delicate, pure beauty. The swan can also be seen as a "multivalent literary symbol: swans are graceful, like the rhythms of poetry; white like an unwritten page; romantic" (Sword 310). So not only are swans symbolic of love, they are also symbolic of the poems that record that love. Their grace and order connote authorial innocence and beauty. Also, swans supposedly sing "only at the moment of death" (310), which may illustrate the eventual outcome of Leda's story. We do not see her death but are made aware of the destruction of Troy. Zeus can only sing his love song for Leda with the thought of an apocalyptic fate in the present future.

**

Such violence relates to Leda's status as object to be seen and consumed. Many earlier versions of the myth are constructed from the exterior; we are presented with portraits, outside views of the authors' and artists' representations of the mythical woman. The external perspective removes us from her experience. She becomes an object that is viewed and manipulated by a greater, outside force. Through this outward gaze, she is dehumanized and violated, reduced to a theme, an image, and barely a woman. Although some poems and paintings show a magnificent Leda, no matter how we describe the encounter ("came down to," "visited," "encounter with," etc...), what is being described is rape- linguistic, artistic, and bodily. Why are we so fascinated by this?

Our fascination may make sense if we (readers, authors, and artists) ourselves were Leda, if we had been raped and needed to work through the trauma. Although seemingly counterintuitive, sometimes a victim needs to retell her story as a means of recovery; having the courage and ability to put trauma into words signifies a renewed acceptance of self. Indeed, as philosopher Susan J. Brison postulates, "perhaps there is a psychological imperative, analogous to the legal imperative, to keep telling one's story until it is heard. After the story has been heard and acknowledged, one can let it go, or unfreeze it. One can unclench" (Brison 110). Brison comes from the view of victim-survivor and here acknowledges the therapeutic value of retelling a traumatic event. Repetition and reclamation are vital for healing.

Her argument again prompts my question, what produces our interest in Leda? Are we trying to take her place as narrator and viewer, to stand where she stood and recreate her story? Yes and no. We tell and re-tell Leda's story, and although we hear the story each time through diverse mediums of literature or art, we still cannot make sense of it. Hers is a timeless mystery.

**

We ask: what about a woman being raped by an unearthly swan maintains our interest? Why are we interested by Leda? Why does she remain culturally relevant? Are we simply fascinated by our disbelief and skepticism surrounding the visit of an avian deity to a mortal woman?

We try to answer these questions by looking at varied artistic and literary representations of the myth. Although we hear most frequently about Yeats' "Leda and the Swan," there are numerous poems written on the subject, and a similar variety is found within the visual arts. Huxley, Rilke, H.D., and Frank O'Hara are merely a few of the poets who wrote about Leda, while Leonardo da Vinci, Constantin Brancusi, Paul Gauguin, among countless others, are credited with artistic works. Even contemporary performance artists like Ana Mendieta use Leda as inspiration. No matter the approach, medium, or time period, all these works are created around the same ineffable story because liminal Leda occupies the space of all mediums and interpretations. She becomes every woman and no woman; her lack of definition is what defines her.

**

Although all of the aforementioned works represent analogous stories, Mendieta's piece sharply illustrates what was a transition from exterior to interior Leda. The publication of Yeats' sonnet marked a transition to this alternative approach: an interior, active Leda who replaced the idyllic portraits seen from outside of her experience. Now instead of the story being about her, it is often *by* her (or at least by another trying to emulate Leda). Brison is not far off. More recent pieces make us experience the interiority of the assault. In the piece, "Blood and Feathers," Mendieta speaks explicitly of (bestial) rape. Zeus as god has been animalized in both the physical and figurative sense. He is beast in form and beast in idea. This beast then rapes Leda.

No longer do we see her holding the swan fondly as her children play at her feet. In the language of violence, Leda has been re-told. And this is just one artist's representation of the theme. We are exposed to countless versions of Leda, and the disparities among these depictions force us to continue looking. At the moment we begin to make sense of the story, another translation directs our gaze with new eyes. These are omniscient eyes; the eyes of Zeus; the eyes of Leda; our own eyes. We see violence easily substituted with compassion and acquiescence; we sense our own shifting perception. When bombarded with so many views of the same woman, how can we know what to think?

One reason for this confused focus stems from the perceived straightforwardness in a story stemming from ambiguity. We label rape stories as bad. Yet any myth has undefined origins and translations. Myths were oral, so each story-teller passed on his or her particular version. Eventually the myths were written down, but the tales that construct such classical histories began by word-of-mouth. The only veritable truth is that the stories are told. What they tell is another story.

And each depiction varies. Michelangelo's subdued Leda painting is almost the inverse of Cy Twombly's abstraction, but both address the same topic. Yeats differs from H.D., who differs from Huxley. One explanation for these variations is that the myth is used as lesson and should not be taken literally. Although then, what is the lesson? Stay away from riverbanks? Beware strange beasts who promise greater glories, because all they are looking for is quick sex? And do we even acknowledge this negative side, or do we just gloss over the fact that Tyndareus' wife was victim of sexual assault?

**

Yeats' poem begins by representing the story as a struggle; she is "staggering," she is "helpless." But as the poem continues, the interaction of blame and desire becomes indistinguishable. The "loosening" and the "shudder" imply orgasm and pleasure, concepts reflected in many other works of art about Leda. As Helen Sword writes, "most modern narrators of the myth, in fact, have skirted the rape issue entirely by suppressing or denying the essential violence of the situation" (Sword 306). Instead, they look to "the legions of painters and sculptors, from Greek antiquity onward, who have represented Leda's encounter with the swan in terms of romantic playfulness or sexual acquiescence... not as a violent drama of pursuit and violation but rather as a peaceful idyll" (306). To these artists and many poets, Leda is not suffering; she is enjoying herself. More often she is depicted as pleased temptress than as victim.

Leda's supposed pleasure may stem from outmoded beliefs about woman's involvement in sex. Her rape and subsequent pregnancy confused many artists, because until the 1820's it was commonly believed that "without an excitation of lust, or enjoyment in the venereal act, no conception can probably take place" (Laqueur 161). Pregnancy implied pleasure, which negated any claim of rape. It did not matter what a woman said had happened; "whatever a woman might claim to have felt or whatever resistance she might have put up, conception in itself betrayed desire or at least a sufficient measure of acquiescence for her to enjoy the venereal act" (161), a belief that dates as far back as Soranus in second century Rome (162). Because she gave birth to the Dioscouri and Helen, Leda (from this viewpoint) wanted to have sex with Zeus. This outlook assumes that women desire such violent, rape-like sex not only for pleasure, but for procreation. Rape cases were not taken seriously if the victim had given birth as a result of the assault, for, as "another writer argued... pregnancy ought to be taken as proof of acquiescence since the fear,

terror, and aversion that accompany a true rape would prevent an orgasm from occurring and thus make conception unlikely" (162). According to this author, a woman's body betrays her desires because conception implies physical satisfaction and consent despite purported violence.

In the Leda story, such violence cannot be escaped. Yeats commonly equates this violence, especially sexual violence, with beautiful women. According to Yeats, the "passivity [of beautiful women] generates violence" (Toomey 229). Leda's attractiveness led to the original violent encounter that caused beautiful Helen's birth, which led to the destruction of Troy. Beauty both glorifies the woman, but is also "the uncomprehending cause of violence" (229) that "destroys itself as well as others" (228). When viewed this way, beauty is a risk and imposition; women are victims of their beauty. Beauty is both a blessing (we desire to be attractive) and a curse (beautiful women are objectified). Women are subject to the desire of others, both constrained and freed by their beauty. Leda is regarded as one of the most beautiful women in the world, and so is raped. The senseless violence of "women carried off by robbers and ravished by clowns" (229) thus echoes her illogical fate; a beautiful queen violated by a swan.

So how can women come to terms with such a conflicting notion of physical perfection? How can women desire to be beautiful when they know that their beauty so strongly affects other's perception? Some women loathe their attractiveness. Yeats argues that "because 'Beauty is from the antithetical self, a woman can scarce but hate it, for not only does it demand a painful daily service, but it calls for the denial or the dissolution of the self' (Au 365). It calls, to be more exact, for the dissolution of many selves" (230). A woman is unable to exist as herself. She is herself, but only as others view her; as Yeats writes in the poem "Adam's Curse," "[t]o be born woman is to know-.../ That we must labour to be beautiful." And "to be beautiful" is to be seen as beautiful. Woman is not one individual, but many individuals who see her and think about

her- her identity is fragmented by the gaze of others. A woman can exist only through that look. She is herself, but is unable to exist on her own terms, and thus becomes a disembodied version of herself. She is seen by others, and seen by herself as she perceives others to see her, because, as John Berger claims in his book *Ways of Seeing*, "a woman's self [has been] split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost always accompanied by her own image of herself... And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman" (Berger 46). Women are divided into different selves; they experience Yeats' "dissolution of many selves" by watching themselves, and watching how others watch them.

As Berger further says, "the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47). Leda- theme, woman, character- becomes an object to look at and thing to study, as told from the male perspective. This "sight" is both visual and verbal. Paintings and sculptures visually enthrall us, and the poems engender verbal images. And while we are bombarded by the "sight" of Leda, we do not see her through our eyes. Just as Leda, a woman, has no real authority to control our gaze, we are directed by artists and poets to perceive her in a particular way. They choose to show her as victim, or temptress, or helpless, or empowered. We are forced to see her however the creator chooses to portray her; we are controlled along with her. As the artists control our gaze, they create her identity.

**

Leda: manipulated vulnerability, active woman, artistic theme. What about her fragility and malleability piques and retains our interest?

* *

One basic explanation is that Leda is a beautiful, albeit nuanced, nude. Most commonly she is presented to us without clothes; rarely do we see her nakedness concealed, her sexuality constrained. Even the works of art that negatively portray the story as rape do not shield her naked form, and her uncovered body ambiguously reflects her vulnerability, lack of control, or strong sexual desire. She is an unsolved symbol through this nakedness. Indeed, in his essay "The Nude as Symbol," Jean Lefebve writes that the nude is "not solely a mode of thought, it requires itself to be thought... While the sign puts us at once in possession of its meaning, the meaning of the symbol is always in question" (Lefebve 102), and to us, Leda is "the symbol... that which, in us, poses the question" (102). She is the embodiment of intellectual questioning and we are never sure what to think of her. For one, her vulnerability is undercut by perceived promiscuity; in many of these visual or verbal images she contradicts her innocence by seductively presenting her body to the serpentine swan. More importantly, artists and authors use her as the symbol through which one "indicates without truly revealing" (102). They cloak sex with aesthetic mythology because the female nude and male god evade restrictions of societal taboos. Exterior views of Leda and Zeus as swan become the shield which blocks censors from prohibiting the display or publication of such works, regardless of observed violence or sensuality.

**

Leda entices. She is dangerous and sweet; a champion, yet violated; a layered idea of victim that attracts some people. To such readers and viewers, her struggle provides entertainment. This sexualization of the victim is illustrated in John Finch's short essay that commemorates fellow Wesleyan professor Charles Olson. In it he describes a burlesque show from the 1930s based on the story of Leda and the swan. He explains that he saw "Leda and the

Swan. Yes, the immortal bird and the mortal Leda, in the flesh, not a movin' pitcher. For burlesque, in the thirties, was highbrow, not lowbrow" (Finch 36). And while burlesque was highbrow, the version and manner in which the story is presented still resonates crudely and negatively. According to Finch, the announcer said:

Ladeez an' Gennelmen, no doubt you all know the tale of Leda an' the Swan. No doubt you all seen those bee-utiful pitchers by Veronese, an' Corregio, an' the great Michelangelo of Leda an' the Swan. An' doubtless you recall the bee-utiful poems by Algernon Charles Swinburne an' William Butler Yeats recountin' the story of Leda an' the Swan. Well, today, on this stage, before yer very eyes, the management of this thee-ater is proud to bring you, not a pitcher nor a pome, but Leda herself, nude an' defenseless, bein' violated by the Swan! (36)

Afterward, Finch writes that they "witnessed the fateful rape" (36). They are placed in the moment; they are within it. Yet they do nothing, and are made to not want to do anything. Even though the spectators hear that Leda is "'nude an' defenseless, bein' violated by the Swan!'" (36), they still consider it a source of entertainment. They passively view the assault, and think of it as sophisticated (it is based on classical mythology) entertainment. Like spectators in a gladiator arena, they watch a contrivance of violence and beauty that indulges their unconscious desires. This was a popular myth being represented in an accessible and sexy way.

The accessibility of the burlesque performance was created by its tangibility, and also by the popularity of the myth at that point in history. By hearing "no doubt," and "doubtless," we are made to think that Leda's story is without question recognizable. Of course we know her story. But then the introduction continues, because it was not enough that the audience members had all heard the story, seen paintings and statues, or read poems on the subject. They needed to see it

for themselves. At this point in history visual performance was preferred; the fairly recent birth of cinema by the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès created an atmosphere that demanded the moving visual. And so the Leda and the Swan burlesque show was witnessed live by Finch and Olson.

The entertainment of that burlesque show can also be analyzed psychologically. The woman playing Leda is directed by an outside force. She is acted upon. Yet she is not physically acted upon by Zeus or the director, but is manipulated and controlled to act upon herself. For not only is the "stripper" "'nude an' defenseless,'" she also is "clad only in a gee-string and a swan, a rather tacky construction of feathers strapped to her right elbow, her forearm the neck, her gloved hand the head and amorous beak" (36). She is required to play both Leda and swan, and therefore violates herself- physically reenacting the roles of both victim and abuser. She must maneuver her body to become both characters in the story; physically carrying the swan on her arm, she metaphorically carries the rape on her conscience. As occurs often in depictions of the encounter, Leda and swan meld into one character, and we find it difficult to differentiate the two figures. As the physical forms become blurred, so do the motives, identities, and consciences of the character. Guilt becomes arbitrary when two individuals are represented as one.

**

The question remains. How can we define this queen of multiple identities and diverse fates? We are drawn to her story and become caught up in our attempt to understand. Maybe this urge stems from our fascination with human suffering, or our desire to view the human body. Or are we simply trying to make sense of a story we hear? Something entices us. Yeats himself became caught up in the story while writing his sonnet, writing that, "my fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took

such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it" (Jeffares 296). Even Yeats, the creator of the iconic sonnet, was unable to distance himself from the commanding enchantment of the story. So how are we, as readers and viewers, supposed to stay detached? The answer is: we cannot.

And we do not. Leda has persevered as a figure throughout history. Corregio painted his version in 1532, and artist Wim Botha created an installation titled *Leda* in 2005. Boucher painted an explicit version in 1741, and Diana Michener made multiple, violent, photographic prints in 1989. In 1999, a porn company, Blue Visions, produced a thirty minute movie titled "Leda and the Swan: Nailed" that highlights the sex, as opposed to the surrounding story. The rape is both represented as "highbrow" entertainment, as well as pay-by-the-minute pornography. Leda covers a wide spectrum of society; she is a universal character.

She is at once beautiful, tragic, violent, seductive, helpless, damaged, empowered. These traits attract us, and we search to understand more. How is her complexity possible? Why is her identity so fragmented? Who is this Spartan queen, this mortal woman, this eternal history?

**

Using Yeats' sonnet as a framework for study, I will attempt to answer some of these elusive questions. Yet I plan to take a similar approach as literary scholar Helen Vendler, who writes in *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*, that she will not "argue with the poems; poems are hypothetical sites of speculation, not position papers. They do not exist on the same plane as actual life; they are not votes, they are not uttered from a podium or pulpit, they are not essays" (Vendler xiv). Like Vendler, I will remain in dialogue with the works of art, but never will I claim to fully answer these queries. Instead, I acknowledge their status as "products of

reverie" (xiv) and hope to explain, even if just to myself, how we are active members of this visual and textual conversation.

I start by looking at different ancient versions of the myth to begin to understand from where the variability of account emerges. I then trace the development of the theme during the fifty years prior to Yeats' 1924 publication of his sonnet in order to frame the atmosphere of Leda scholarship that enveloped Yeats while he wrote. I focus on a variety of lenses through which Leda was seen. These include: Leda as universal woman (Eve, Mary, Venus), as pornographic object, as one who looks (or is made to not look), as liminal figure, and as woman viewed by an exterior source.

Prior to Yeats, verbal and visual works were typically traditional portraits and landscapes that for the most part sweetly and gently illustrated Leda as an object. She was a thing to be seen from the outside. The primarily male authors and artists creating works around the fin-de-siècle relied on this exteriority. The obscenity and threat of female sexuality was distanced from them; they did not have to worry about her.

And then came Yeats; iconic, notable Yeats, whose sonnet is the vehicle through which most contemporaries are familiar with the Leda story. Aside from its undeniable influence, where and how does his sonnet fit in the conversation? What role did it, and does it continue, to play? I then track some recent pieces that illustrate contemporary visions of Leda, and comment on the trajectory of these later works.

Within this study I explore the themes of violence and rape; pleasure and desire; knowledge and power; history, time, and the telling of trauma. I explore the answer to Yeats' final question in the poem: "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" I also look at the physicality of desire and pleasure, as well as Leda as

a representation of the eternal female. Through these internal themes, I attempt to make sense of why Leda remains a prominent figure in scholarship and art. What do these different accounts say about her story, but more so, what do they say about us as readers for telling the myth the way we do?

**

My foray into the intricate world of Leda is not an attempt to resolve the complexities of a myth of unknown origins. Instead, I commence my imprecise task by acknowledging the lack of consensus surrounding her fickle liminality, because underneath the various frames through which we see Leda, she is always, resolutely, liminal. I also continue to explore how Leda is presented to us by noticing the drastic shift from exteriority to interiority that emerges with Yeats-era Leda.

These two concepts- her liminality and the shift from exterior to interior Leda- are what shape our understanding of the beautiful queen. Firstly, her status as a liminal figure is twofold. On one hand, she emerges from myth, itself always of indeterminate origin. Myth, by nature, is an oral art captured in writing that transmits assorted versions of classical stories. Second, any comprehension of her story is directed through multiple mediums and lenses. Regarding Leda as solely a poetic figure denies the notable influence she has on visual art, just as an analysis of her character based completely on art excludes verbal works fundamentally important for an understanding of her story. As a liminal figure, she is not easily characterized, but perpetually remains in the space between. She is a nuanced, malleable being who thrives in these undetermined spaces.

Leda always remains just outside our grasp. Only by studying her from various angles, and I argue, mediums of artistic language, are we able to come closer to a sense of her identity.

Following Yeats' sonnet, authors and artists attempted to produce depictions of the story that materialized out of her experience. Now no longer are pieces simply about her. They are for her, by her, within her. As she experiences, so do we. We move closer to some form of comprehension, but are divided by the obvious flaw- no matter how vividly an author describes the rape in the first person, they are not Leda and therefore do not know her personal experience. Because of this, her image can only exist within our hazy understanding. She occupies the liminal space of both our intellect and our imagination; she forces us to explore; she compels us to concede that we can only ever partially know Leda and her swan.

1. The Uncertain Love Affair: Zeus, Tyndareus, Leda, and Nemesis

"and by that trick got what he wanted from her-
which may or may not be true."
-from "Helen" by Euripides

Leda the queen is enshrined through the mediums of art and poetry. Yet she is also commonly presented through the filter of her children, specifically the notorious Helen. In Ovid's "Heroides," Helen speaks of her divine birth. While rebuffing Paris' attempts at seduction, she claims that her mother's "lover was disguised by plumage" (Ovid *Her.* XVII. 45) and that "this house of mine is glorious enough with its own nobility... Leda makes Jove my father, deceived by the swan, false bird she cherished in her trusting bosom" (51-6). Here Helen compares Zeus' swan disguise to the latent deception in Paris' words while simultaneously asserting the divinity in her lineage.

Helen again claims divine birth in Euripides' play, "Helen." She recalls that although her father was Tyndareus, the king of Sparta, "there's an old story that Zeus changed himself / into a swan once and, being chased by an eagle,/ flew to my mother's lap for refuge/ and by that trick got what he wanted from her" (Euripides *Hel.* I. 1. 18-21). This description by Euripides is one of the earliest recorded versions of Leda and Zeus' interaction, but even this cannot be considered "truthful." Helen acknowledges that she is merely relating "an old story," and continues to admit

that this "may or may not be true" (22). Immediately, we are made aware of the ambiguity of this history. No version is authoritative.

Hyginus also vacillates in his account. Under the "Leda" entry in his "Fabulae," Hyginus writes that "Jupiter, changed into a swan, had intercourse with Leda near the river Eurotas, and from that embrace she bore Pollux (Polydeuces) and Helen; to Tyndareus she bore Castor and Clytemnestra" (Hyginus *Fab.* LXXVII.). Hyginus here clearly delineates mortal from immortal. Pollux and Helen are Zeus' divine offspring, while Castor and Clytemnestra are the mortal kin of Tyndareus. Yet in his entry for Tyndareus, which directly follows Leda's, Hyginus writes that "Tyndareus, son of Oebalus, by Leda, daughter of Thestius, became father of Clytemnestra and Helen" (LXXVIII). In one entry Zeus is the father of Helen, in the next, Tyndareus is assigned the paternal role. The translator and editor of this book, Mary Grant, acknowledges that "since grammarians do not agree about the paternity of Leda's children, as may be seen in *Fab.* LXXVIII, Rose thinks Hyginus merely set down varying accounts without trying to reconcile them" (74). He knows that there are discrepancies in his version of the story, but does not care. The paternity of Leda's children is always undecided, so why would Hyginus make a judgment here? Instead, he provides us with both versions and allows the readers to make their own informed decisions "without trying to reconcile them."

And in his text, "Poetica Astronomica," Hyginus offers yet another story of the birth of Helen. In this version, Zeus, enamored with Nemesis (the goddess of retribution) is continually rebuked. In order to trick Nemesis into having sex with him,

He bade Venus, in the form of an eagle, pursue him; he, changed to a swan, as if in flight from the eagle took refuge with Nemesis and lighted in her lap. Nemesis did not thrust him away, but holding him in her arms, fell into a deep sleep. While

she slept, Jupiter embraced her, and then flew away... But Nemesis, as if wedded to the tribe of birds, when her months were ended, she bore an egg. Mercury took it away and carried it to Sparta and threw it in Leda's lap. From it sprang Helen, who excelled all other girls in beauty. Leda called her her own daughter. (*Poe. As.* II. 8)

In the former interpretation, Leda is merely a caregiver for another woman's child. She is not the unattainable beauty sprawled on the river bank, desired by the king of the gods, but a mortal queen chosen by Mercury to take care of an unwanted, albeit beautiful, bastard child. We also are made clearly aware of Hyginus' lack of certainty. Hyginus recounts the pursuit of Nemesis, but at the end concedes that "Others say that Jove, in the form of a swan, lay with Leda" (8). Hyginus grants authority to the "others [that] say;" he does not pretend to be the only accurate source of information. Instead of declaring which version should be regarded as authoritative, he states that "we shall leave the matter undecided" (8). Deciding upon the particularities of a myth is not a worthwhile endeavor.

Homer also displays doubts and exhibits inconsistencies concerning the triangle between Leda, Tyndareus, and Zeus. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Tyndareus is explicitly described as the father of Clytemnestra ("Tyndareus' daughter.../ Klytaimnestra, the adultress" (Homer *Od.* XXIV. 199)) and of the Dioscuri ("Leda, wife of Tyndareus,/ upon whom Tyndareus had sired twins/ indomitable: Kastor, tamer of horses,/ and Polydeukes, best in the boxing ring" (XI. 298-300)), but in the *Iliad*, Homer uses the epithet "Helen, daughter of Zeus" multiple times (*Il.* III. 418 and *Il.* III. 426). Maybe this shows that, out of Leda's four famous children, Helen is the only offspring of Zeus. Yet this distinction is never clearly made, although Homer seemingly indicates that Helen was a daughter of Zeus and therefore part divinity.

On the other hand, Ovid's *Fasti* describes how "a temple was dedicated to Leda's divine sons: brothers of the race of the gods founded that temple for the brother gods" (Ovid *Fasti* I. VI. 705-8). Now Castor and Polydeuces are also equated with the semi-divine Helen. Instead of regarding Helen as the sole offspring, both the twins and Helen are attributed with a divine father and a mortal mother.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* also presents Leda as the mortal Spartan queen visited by the swan. Book VI of the *Metamorphoses* "shew'd how Leda lay supinely press'd,/ Whilst the soft snowy swan sate hov'ring o'er her breast" (*Meta.* VI. 109). Here we clearly see verbal descriptions from which visual artists drew inspiration. Leda is on her back with the divine bird perched above her chest. She is "press'd," or to borrow from Yeats, "mastered."

This more commonly accepted depiction of Leda as Helen's mother and woman pursued is popularized in literature and art, but entries in classical dictionaries and encyclopedias vary. Entries under "Leda" could often be interchanged with that of Nemesis, the goddess of retribution and revenge. They can begin by saying "in one version of the legend, Nemesis was courted by Zeus" and then conclude by stating, "however, in the more common version, Zeus repeated his trick of seduction by swan with Leda, and thus conceived Helen" (Matyszak 113). (Again it is almost universally agreed that Helen is the daughter of Zeus, despite doubts of her mother's identity). In Pierre Grimal's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, Zeus is the sometimes-father; "some [children] were begotten by Zeus, who changed himself into a swan in order to unite with [Leda]" (Grimal 254). Yet Grimal concedes that "it was also said that Helen was really the daughter of Zeus and Nemesis... [but that] more often, and particularly from Euripides onwards, it was accepted that Leda, because of her love for Zeus, laid an egg, or occasionally two eggs, from which emerged two pairs of children: Pollux and Clytemnestra, Helen and

Castor" (255). These fluctuating ideas illustrate that even a dictionary can admit uncertainty; the phrases "it was also said," "more often... it was accepted," and "occasionally" directly identify a lack of authorial assurance when writers or historians recount the myth.

The story in *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* also oscillates. Zeus is both the father of Helen and Polydeuces (through Leda), and also the father of Nemesis' egg. In the former translation, Zeus as swan causes Leda to give birth to an "egg containing Helen and Polydeuces, an egg displayed in Sparta. Castor, thus the mortal twin, was born to Tyndareus on the same night" (Price 315). Of the Dioscuri, Polydeuces is the son of Zeus. But then the latter version, which appears on the same page, explains that "Nemesis transforms herself to escape Zeus and finally in the form of a goose is fertilized by Zeus in the form of a swan; Leda only finds the egg, or has it brought to her" (315). In this interpretation, Leda is not the pursued beauty, but an adopted parent who cares after the consequences of Zeus' lust. She passively receives the glory of raising a divine child without incurring the violent inauguration. Yet a few lines earlier, we read of Leda's involvement with the birth. Once more multiple renditions of the same story shape our understanding. Either the mother is Leda, or the mother is Nemesis. Either Nemesis' abandoned egg is brought to or found by Leda. There is never a definite; it is always "or." The only definite is that Helen is the daughter of Zeus; her exquisite beauty is, in fact, divine.

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Along with developing authorial doubts, these different descriptions of the encounter begin to question the culpability of the two (or three) participants. In Ovid's *Heroides*, Jove "deceived" Leda and is a "false bird," which implies a wicked trickery. Yet Leda "cherished [Jove] in her trusting bosom." (Ovid *Her.* XVII. 51-6) She cares for him, lovingly and trustingly.

According to Ovid's *Heroides*, Euripides's play "Helen," Hyginus' *Fabulae*, Pierre Grimal's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, and others, this was not an assault. The mating was a sympathetic deceit, not a violent attack. In Euripides' "Helen," the unsuspecting queen offers Zeus "refuge/ and by that trick [he] got what he wanted from her" (Euripides *Hel.* I. 1. 20-21); this is a trusting and caring woman who is taken advantage of. However, some of these accounts seem to indicate desire. For example, Pierre Grimal's *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* cites Leda's "love for Zeus" (Grimal 255). "Love" indicates mutual desire, or at least implies a more even relationship than the modern conception of Leda as rape story. Hyginus' *Fabulae* also calls the encounter an "embrace" (Hyginus *Fab.* LXXVII), another word that connotes love and reciprocal affection.

Although these classic origins seem to produce a one-sided account of Zeus as trickster who takes advantage of a fairly unresponsive Leda, there are many dissimilar versions and interpretations that make it difficult to determine any one source. So does any story show the "real" Leda? Furthermore, who is she?

2. Universal Woman, Porn Star, and One who Looks

"L'histoire de Lédá avait fait tant de bruit..."
–André Gide

"Leda, Lada, aflutter-afraida, so does your girdle grow! Willed without witting,
whorled without aimed"
-from *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce (272. 2-4)

"It was woman in the guise of Leda which fascinated the turn-of-the-century male viewer most. Not only did the painters have a long tradition of depictions of Leda- stretching from Leonardo to Delacroix- to fall back upon for thematic and iconographic justification, but, in addition, the long neck and snowy whiteness of the swan provided endless possibilities for elegant, suggestive, and serpentine juxtapositions of woman and her bestial lover"
-from *Idols of Perversity* by Bram Dijkstra

The Lead-up to Leda

I therefore suggest that we look at Leda not as a singular entity but as a community of breathing stories that engage each other in active dialogue. This lack of definition is both what perplexes us and entices us. Her allure does not solely affect Zeus the swan, but also captures our literary and artistic attention. For not only is she a monumental woman of antiquity, she is a resplendent echo that continues to resonate within our society because of the liminal aspect of her mystery that tempts us: we do not understand her, and never will.

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Her undecipherable story emerged from antiquity and continues to resonate within our modern culture. Although Yeats' sonnet sets what we consider the "standard" for the Leda narrative, it is necessary to study other interpretations, sources, and influences that surrounded the sonnet prior to its 1924 publication in *The Dial*. Painting in particular couples the interpretative act of reading with our immediate visceral reaction to the visual. Through painting, we are given direct access to the story. While complex verbal entanglements illuminate visual images, artistic works allow anyone to read the story. In this way, paintings are to Leda as stained glass windows are to the Bible. Her accessibility and popularity in part rely on the visual—although many do not read poetry, everyone is exposed to images. The sense of sight is in fact what grants access to lived experience; before we write, we must see. Also, the perceived reality of painting creates a sense of replicated life that captures experience with vivid immediacy, and we react personally and deeply in our effort to decipher linguistic, mythic, and visual Leda.

In order to attempt a clearer understanding of her story, I will investigate some of these illimitable factors and influences and will identify different frames of understanding from which Yeats' "Leda" may have emerged. As Hans-G. Ruprecht writes, "si l'on commence à lire l'histoire de Léda non plus comme 'mythos' au sens aristotélicien du terme mais du préférence comme le schème explicatif d'une 'pensée mythique' qui ne s'exprime que subjectivement en fonction du processus mental de l'actualité d'un mythe collectif" (Ruprecht 793), we are able to make sense of the myth as a story, and not an event itself. We read the narrative as a subjective "pensée mythique;" one that has evolved through history to inform future representations of the myth, including Yeats' poem of undeniable beauty and strength.

Therefore, we must not ignore Leda's popularity in works exterior to Yeats. Not only is the narrative intriguing, but authors and artists commonly recycle her story because she provides a vehicle through which one can talk explicitly about sex without being deemed obscene. Here is a female figure (commonly depicted as a nude) shown with a god in animal form. Because Zeus is divine, we are able to primarily ignore the sexual implications of the scene, and substitute sentiments of glory for the shame and dishonor associated with explicit representations of sex.

In addition, Leda's locus in a liminal space allows us to speculate on her connotations and denotations as a flexible being, which dissuades a firm reading of "good" or "bad," or "right" or "wrong" that we so readily revert to with contentious stories. Upon whom is the blame placed? Do we even need to make this distinction? Such ambiguous horizons of myth and sex are in part what frighten us the most because we are uncomfortable with anything other than the "either-or." In a situation of understanding (or lack thereof), it is best to comprehend, acceptable to be entirely ignorant, but inexcusable to flounder somewhere in the middle. Leda's domain, this middle area, is our biggest threat.

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My study begins at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, a period of artistic and technological growth that saw the end of Romanticism and the ensuing development of Realism, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Impressionism then Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Expressionism, and Metaphysical Painting, artistic movements competing and interacting with each other. Yeats occasionally associated himself with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), a group of artists and writers with "a desire to see things with fresh eyes and an intensity of expression" (Treueherz 555), a group that "talked of the poetic content of painting" (Hilton 33). Among other qualities, the Pre-Raphaelites were known for their interaction between the realms of art and writing, a creative construct into which Yeats

nicely fit. As the ancient Greek philosopher Simonides of Ceos said, “painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks” (“Long Conversation”); Yeats’ poem “Leda and the Swan” was poetry of paint. Like other artists of the PRB, he “used symbolism and myth” and cultivated “poetic suggestiveness and mysterious otherworldly beauty” (Treuhertz 556), while at the same time insinuated some sort of judgment about a story. The influence of the PRB, coupled with these other artistic movements, eventually set the stage for Yeats’ sonnet, a climate of creation that produced a body of sources with which to exchange in dialogue.

The Great War, Women, and Leda

Overall, this was a period of rapid growth and change, of human conflict and great creation. The Second Industrial Revolution produced a more efficient world that made survival easier, yet from 1914 to 1918, the largest war in the history of mankind up to then, World War One, devastated the land and peoples of Europe. The Great War was a war of inconceivable destruction and loss, and created an atmosphere of confusion and political and cultural turmoil that produced an atmosphere eager for a retelling of the Leda narrative. Helen, Clytemnestra, and the Dioscuri (Castor and Polydeuces) were born of Leda; also from those “two eggs hatched the Heraclitian opposites of Love and War” (Whitaker 81). Leda indeed transplanted both Love and War into the world of ancient Greece and also into that of fin-de-siècle Europe. Paris was given Helen by Aphrodite, the goddess of love and passion. Helen is then credited with the fall of Troy (another female leading to a “fall” of man), Clytemnestra killed her husband Agamemnon, and the Dioscuri were known as great warriors. Many versions of the story were produced because Leda’s offspring embodied the opposing forces characteristic of post World War One Europe. The world as it previously existed had been uprooted, and a new version of history needed to be produced.

Yeats' consciousness of the global situation circa 1920 was revealed through his personal ideology and also his poetry. As seen in many of Yeats' poems, post-World War One Europe was a perfect atmosphere for creation, because to Yeats, "destruction and creation go on at once" (Ellmann 47). The conception of one thing leads to the destruction of another, which then leads to the next creation, a cyclical pattern that generates history and art. As the soldiers and weapons in the Great War devastated European nations, Yeats acknowledges that "the mind has another glory besides its power to create: it can also destroy... every imaginative construct could only momentarily satisfy his creative need and must then be demolished" (42). From destruction emerges creative growth. A war was fought and millions died. The world lacked voices, and artists such as Yeats were motivated to produce.

Another important cultural was the women's suffrage movement. The fact that women were still fighting for voting rights combated, yet simultaneously perpetuated, the belief in male dominance and the subjugation of the weak, undeserving female. Stories of empowered women supported the movement, but a myth that glorifies a male deity who rapes women as he pleases (in animal form, thus further dehumanizing his victims) seems to counteract any positive female push for equality. We then ask, was there a connection between the prevalence of references to Leda and the suffrage movement at this time, or was it a coincidence that at the same time women fought for voting rights, a story of a male god and his female victim was being venerated as an important cultural narrative? This may have been a male attempt to counter the increasing power of women by subjugating the female figure. Men were threatened by the idea of powerful women and counteracted the suffrage movement by representing women in weak, demeaned positions. Another reason why this story was able to maintain popularity could have been that

women may have viewed the story as a negative example of male authority suitable for harsh analysis and criticism. This was a story to be criticized; instructions for "what-not-to-do."

An editorial article published in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 8, 1909 titled "The Original Don Juan" focuses on another capricious form of female empowerment. The article humorously introduces Zeus as the ultimate seducer, but then makes the claim that while Europa, Danae, and Leda (European women) were all willing to accept Zeus as a lover, American women are strong, dominant female characters who would have denied his proposition. Here Leda is used as the antithesis of American women; a prop to demonstrate what one should not be. She is portrayed as the weak, compliant female who is easily mastered by the dominant male figure, an idea that women were trying to malign during the early twentieth century.

Yet the feminist/ suffragist movement was not strictly a female agenda. Artist Charles Dana Gibson fashioned images of women that combated weak femininity. Known as "Gibson Girls," these women were considered "the ideal American girl or woman" in the early 1900s ("The Gibson Girl"). Despite the fact that these women were "*Gibson* Girls" and that the women he depicted in his drawings were perfectly, if not impossibly, proportioned, they also embodied the new, independent woman who was "strong," "intellectual," "stern," and often described as "manly" (Patterson 29). In fact, Gibson presented "women dominating the mating game and less frequently smoking, drinking, swimming, golfing, or posing as college girls and jurors" (31). These were tall, severely dressed, "mannish" (32) women who "seem[ed] little concerned with having entered a male domain" (31), and were characterized as both "towering, potentially castrating figure[s] and... weightless but alluring siren[s]" (41). This portrayal as liminal figure-both sexualized female and dominating sexual partner (42)- challenged, expanded, and threatened conceptions of woman as passive object; a Gibson Girl, with her extreme beauty and

finesse, dominated relationships with men. Despite the attention on her physical perfection, the Gibson Girl had authority on her own terms.

Ambiguous Beginnings

Although this was a period of advancement for women, the Leda story, a tale of rape, was undeniably popular. In 1907, a short article was published in the Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin that briefly discusses the theme and myth of Leda and the swan. The article states that there were many works created about Leda, spends the majority of its duration explaining the complicated mythological origins, and then briefly analyzes the ancient sculpture owned by the museum. In this article, the uncertainty surrounding the myth is emphasized. According to this article, the account of Nemesis as mother, with Leda serving as proxy caregiver, was soon replaced by Euripides' variation of the myth. The author writes that, "in a later version, Leda was fabled to be the mother of Helen, and the myth of Nemesis and the Swan became the story of Leda" (S.N.D. 15). According to this article, Euripides' account became the accepted telling of the myth, because Euripides was "the most popular of tragic poets, [and] may have given it the currency which made it a part of the generally accepted mythology of later Greek and Roman times" (15). Indeed, the work described in this article "belongs to a time when the influence of Euripides was dominant" (15). But is Euripides' dominant authorship the only reason why we hear this version?

Such a reading falsely abolishes uncertainty. Contrary to our predisposition to accept a given fact, we are likely to denounce this claim as unproven hypothesis and continue our search for comprehension because the author and origins of the myth remain unclear. According to Hans-G. Ruprecht, "d'après M. Lévi-Strauss il semble même certain, que 'les mythes n'ont pas d'auteur: dès l'instant qu'ils sont perçus comme mythes, et quelle qu'ait été leur origine réelle, ils n'existent qu'incarnés dans une tradition'" (Ruprecht 794). Myths exist as stories and lessons but

are not grounded in facts, and thus the telling of any particular myth is apt to fluctuate. Leda's story is not perpetuated by Euripides or Homer, but by the culture that surrounds her.

Indeed, one online database lists almost thirty articles from 1900 to 1924 in *American Art News* where Leda is alluded to or directly discussed. That same database shows multiple references in *The Art News*, *Archaeological News*, and *Archaeological Discussions*. These include mentions of works being auctioned or purchased. Catalogues from museums, newspaper articles, and journals report the movement and acquisition of classical and decorative works on the subject. Images of Leda were circulating through the art world. Hers was a recognizable and potent story that people would not forget.

Yet this famous woman is characterized by a lack of definition. She is not a woman easily classified, but a queen who wears many- sometimes contradictory- masks that display her flexible liminality. We are confused and intrigued by the diverse ways in which we see her and attempt to label her. By placing her into precise categories, we begin to make more sense of this enigmatic lady. At the same time however, we remain cognizant of the fact that we are looking at Leda- we see her from the outside, and peer into her indefinable character. A frame is assigned from the exterior, and we try to make her fit.

Leda as Universal Woman: Mary and Eve

The first frame I explore is Leda as Eve or Mary, two characters that appear diametrically opposed. I follow this religious frame chronologically through the fifty or so years prior to Yeats, and study how she fits into both (seemingly contradictory) roles. As Mary, she is glorified and praised, and as Eve she is blamed and reprimanded. Yet Leda can play both of these parts; she is a universal woman. Religiously, then, she assumes great power and influence while she is

simultaneously characterized (and objectified) by her body. She is just a tool, and not a full woman.

We see religious overtones in an 1865-1875 painting by Gustave Moreau titled *Leda* (Fig. 1). Moreau's painting reflects a strong sense of divinity; many dim forms fill the muted oil with non-definable shapes, but Leda and the swan gleam from the right-center of the piece. Their heads are surrounded by three angels who appear superimposed over the background. One angel has his back to us as he flies away, but the two others raise their arms above their heads and hold up a glowing crown. These cherubs could be the three children most commonly attributed to Zeus: Polydeuces and Helen (divine offspring) and Castor, the mortal twin who flies away to his life on earth. We assume that the crown will be put on Leda's head because the swan



Figure 1. Gustave Moreau, *Leda* (1865-75)

already has gold beams emerging from behind his neck and head. His divinity is physically represented by the glowing light in the exact manner that Jesus is so often illustrated in works of art; the similar shape and color as other Messianic crowns designate the swan as divinity.

But the title of the painting specifies that this is not entirely about the swan. *Leda* has the position of authority; she sits on a chair, her veritable throne, and is in front of the swan. His head rests on her head, but she covers him. She blocks much of our view of his body, but we are able to see the entirety of hers.

Her body position also indicates a more egalitarian rapport. Her left arm curves up from her body and rests on the throne, a shape that reflects the curve of the swan's neck. This body positioning equates her with her pursuer. By taking on the same form as the swan, she decreases some of our negative assumptions; they are connected; thus they belong together. She reclines in a languid position on her throne; she is not curled up in defense, but stretches herself out. She does not protect herself, but extends herself, making her body even more desirable (yet vulnerable) than before. Her eyes are directed at the ground away from the swan. Does she avoid him, or does she contemplate the imminent bestowal of divinity? The direction of her gaze leads us down her (almost completely) naked body, and when we find nothing of real interest at her feet, our eyes move back up the length of her body toward her eyes and toward the swan.

As we look at her body, we see her right hand lightly holding a transparent cloth. She is covering herself up, but the cloth itself is transparent. She pretends to be modest, to not desire the swan, but in fact she feebly resists. If we do take these garments as actual clothing, however, she is mostly covered, except for her left breast- that which is over her heart. Her most intimate sexual parts are covered, but she has left her heart bare. Her emotions are exposed and visible; Zeus is able to fly down from Olympus and win the heart of this Spartan queen.

Indeed, analysis of this piece exposes weak female acquiescence. In one case, Leda barely resists her avian tormenter, but on the other hand, and this must be the focus of this work, Zeus is seen as another divine impregnator, and Leda the passively accepting reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. When viewed this way, the story is rewritten as an honor bestowed, and is no longer unwanted and violent. A languid Leda-Mary slouches in her throne as she feigns disinterest, yet just as the Virgin Mary received divine annunciation from God, so too does Leda's celestial visit produce children integral to the development of society. Although these women do not choose this fate, they are divinely implicated within our human history. As illustrated in Yeats' poem, "The Mother of God," these events are very much connected; both "events concern the union of godhead and woman. Both produce momentous births" (Jeffares, *A Commentary* 297). Both women are "indispensable instruments of historical change: though they gestate what they cannot control" (Whitaker 308). Although they are not in control of their physical bodies, they take on the historical importance of creator by "transforming godly annunciation into human enunciation by rendering a divine will intelligible and incarnate" (308). The question of "whether or not they 'put on' the god's knowledge, then," becomes almost irrelevant, because "these women surely participate in- or perhaps even supersede- his power" (308). Although manipulated, they are still the physical vessels required for these monumental births; through bodily penetration, they give birth to invaluable players in history.

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The figure of religious Leda was not just centered on depictions of Leda as Mary. She is also vilified as Eve, a woman unable to resist the serpentine temptation of the swan.

Paul Gauguin experimented with the Eve-Leda dynamic, producing a design for a plate which he titled *Leda, Honi Soit qui Mal y Pense* (shame on those who think evil). This simple lithograph from 1889 (Fig. 2) illustrates Leda as a young girl with her eyes lowered in shame. A back view shows her shoulders drooped downward in a posture of defeat. Although she is naked, the swan covers her nakedness from behind. The whiteness of the swan also covers what appear to be traces of writing. We cannot decipher what they say, and wonder what narration is being hidden.

We cannot make out these words, and instead look to the quality and content of the image. This picture is very flat. There is no shading or attempt to create a three-dimensional space. Two rudimentary cygnets move on the right side of the drawing. Their legs are in a forward position, and one of them has his/ her wings raised. A piece of fruit that looks like an apple partially covers one of these cygnets. The red apple is what connects Leda to Eve, another fallen woman manipulated by serpentine persuasion and trickery. On the left side of the drawing there is a snake wrapped around a small branch, which further establishes the link between Leda and Eve. The two red flowers to Leda's left reflect the shape of the apple, and may represent Leda's other children or her awakening sexuality.

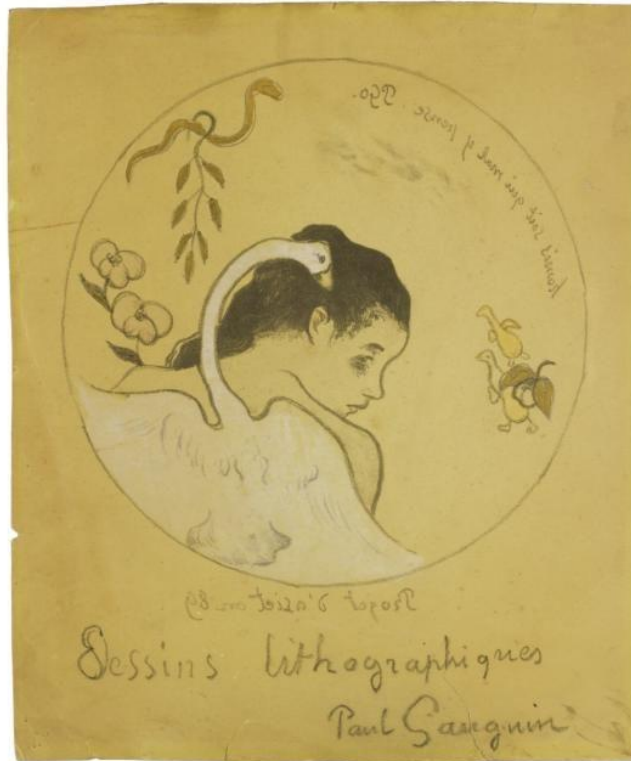


Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, *Honi Soit qui Mal y Pense* (1889)

Such notions of emerging sexuality directly unite Leda and Eve. After eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, Eve and Adam were made aware of their nakedness; after Leda was visited by Zeus as the swan, she was made aware of her desirability as a woman. This is further demonstrated by Gauguin's placement of the title directly in his work. While looking at the picture, we read, "Honi soit qui mal y pense," so we have no choice but to think about the connection between text and the image he presents: *shame on those who think evil*. Are we to be ashamed because we think poorly of Leda? When we see a snake and apple we are conditioned to think of an evil, shameful act. But are we at fault for this? Or is the swan being criticized? Or, finally, are we to feel guilty because we find pleasure in this depiction?

Through the ambiguity of this piece, Gauguin uncomfortably raises the question of blame within the realm of sex. Many blame Eve for the fall of man, so are we to view Leda as at fault?

Initially we regard the female as perpetrator, but soon are reminded of the serpentine tempters-both snake and swan. Although the women involved are often considered culpable, the phallic animals in each story may also share the blame.

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Another mythic-religious work that casts Leda as universal woman is Paul Beckert's 1912 oil painting, *Leda mit dem Schwan*, a very soft Leda painting with barely any darkness (Fig. 3). Even the black bill of the swan is muted down to gray. Leda is in the water by a bank of what appears to be an ocean or large lake. This does not look like the Eurotas River, but seems to be a body of water of much greater magnitude, suitable for the king of the gods. Water splashes around her. The swan lifts his wings as if preparing to fly, and his feet and the bottom of his torso splash through the water. This splashing may simply be a result of his movement, or may be a symbol for his ejaculation. This is a turbulent, energetic scene that reflects the enormous historical and mythological implications of this event, as well as the chaos and violent activity of the rape.

The most interesting aspect of this painting, however, is that Leda becomes a type of Venus. The composition of Beckert's work strongly echoes Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, painted in 1486 (Fig. 4). In both works, the women rest on scallop shells, although Botticelli's Venus stands fully on a shell that sits in placid water, while Beckert's Leda is partially in tumultuous water. Two cherubim hover near Leda as she reaches out her right hand to pluck at a harp, and Botticelli's Venus is approached by two flying figures with wings (a man and woman). However, the man and woman actively approach Venus, inclining their bodies toward her and blowing air at her, while the cherubim in Beckert's piece seem to be more focused on the harp and less on Leda.



Figure 3. Paul Beckert, *Leda mit dem Schwan* (1912)

The paintings are further connected by compositional details. Botticelli's man and woman are surrounded by flowers that they blow in the air toward Venus. These flowers parallel the small flock of birds that flies through the sky of Beckert's painting. Venus is surrounded by flowers, symbols of beauty and sexuality proper for the goddess of Love and Beauty, and Leda faces an imminent approach of birds. They advance upon her; she has created new generations of flight.

Another connection between the two pieces is that Beckert's Leda and the Venus of Botticelli have the same flowing red-gold hair that is uncovered and unrestrained as it blows in the air. Feminine sexuality exudes from these pale representations of beauty.

When linked with Venus, Leda gains a distinctly feminine power. Venus eventually caused Helen, Leda's divine daughter, to be pursued by Paris, thus causing the Trojan War. All three women are notorious for their exquisite beauty. Furthermore, Venus and Leda are both powerfully associated with the original epitome of desired woman, Eve. In Botticelli's piece, Venus evokes the image of Eve, connoting the fall of man through desire (fitting that we are

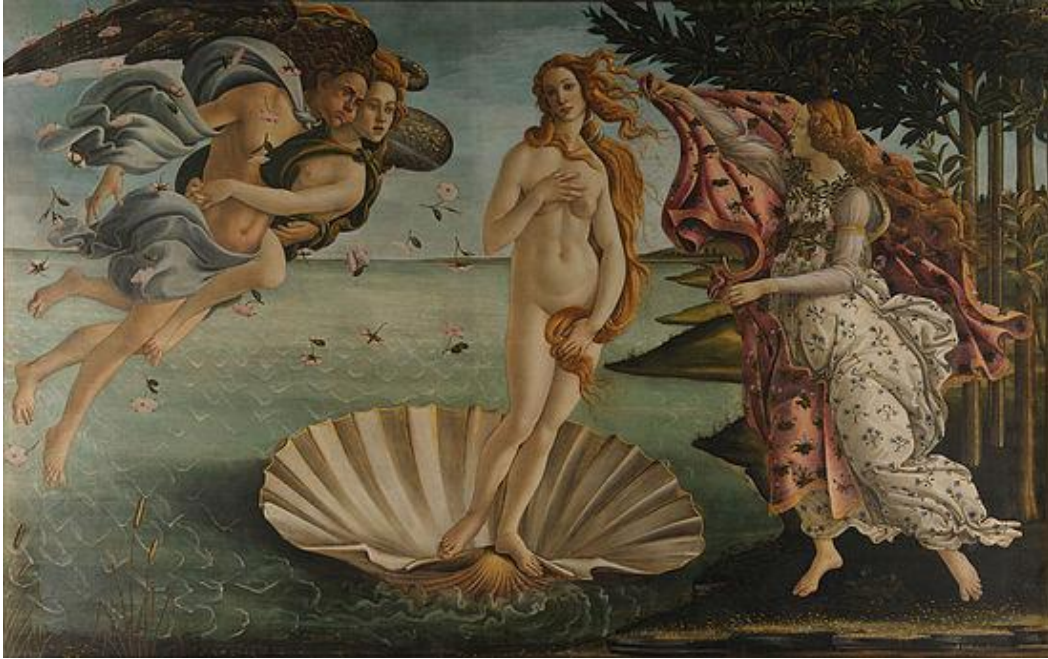


Figure 4. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (1486)

presented this idea through the goddess of love and beauty), but in Beckert's painting, Leda is the woman desired. She throws her left hand up hastily, exposing her breast to the on-looking swan. The fingers of her right hand unconsciously pluck the harp strings while her left hand rests on her head as if thrown there in swift reaction. She is unable to control her body, similar to how Eve was unable to control her desire in the Garden of Eden. The two are implicated. Just as Eve caused the fall of man by tasting the fruit, so too did Leda's sexual interaction with Zeus lead to the eventual fall of Troy.

Yet despite such definite compositional similarities, there are some differences between the two works that require analysis. Beckert's Leda is mostly clothed, while Venus is barely able to cover her nakedness with her hands and hair. Botticelli's Venus is naked, and a woman (maybe a maid) arrives from her left side to clothe her with an opulent garment. Those around Venus attempt to cover her, versus a swan who tries to disrobe Leda. Venus is pure beauty, while Leda is a symbol of beauty that is to come; beauty that will be consumed.

In more general terms, this can be seen as the birth of Venus versus the birth of Leda. Venus is born pure, while Leda's mythical birth only occurs after her sexual encounter, as it was for Eve. So while Venus is the pure embodiment of female beauty and sexuality, Leda is a tainted mortal rife with human and divine struggles. In comparison to the naked, innocent Venus, Leda is clothed and covered. She has been made aware of her nakedness.

Explicit, Sexualized Leda

Whereas Moreau's, Gauguin's, and Beckert's encounters between Leda and the swan are religious representations of the story, Heinrich Lossow's undated painting from the latter half of the nineteenth century focuses mainly on the pleasure obtained in the sexual act (Fig. 5). The religious frame is now subverted by the sexual; the framework of religious modesty is replaced by that of carnal desire. Lossow, known for his pornographic works, especially his painting called *The Sin*, was comfortable explicitly depicting sex through images. In his painting, the two figures embrace; we see them copulating amidst a moment of (what appears to be) utmost pleasure. Leda throws her arm around the swan's neck and clasps him to her throat. We can barely see his head; her pleasure overtakes the scene. Her back is tensed and arched; the muscles of her back and behind are contracted in pleasure. It looks as if Leda is bracing herself for an oncoming orgasm. Her mouth is also partially open, which highlights the physical act of sex- she is breathing heavily- and her open lips may reflect her physical willingness to be penetrated by the swan. She is wearing some type of shoes or boots, or has garments around her ankles. These clothes either connect her to the mortal, human world characterized by clothing and conventions, or imply that this was a hasty interaction full of passion and urgency. She did not have time to disrobe completely before having sex with the swan.

Another sexualized aspect of the painting is that Leda is surrounded by flowers that are

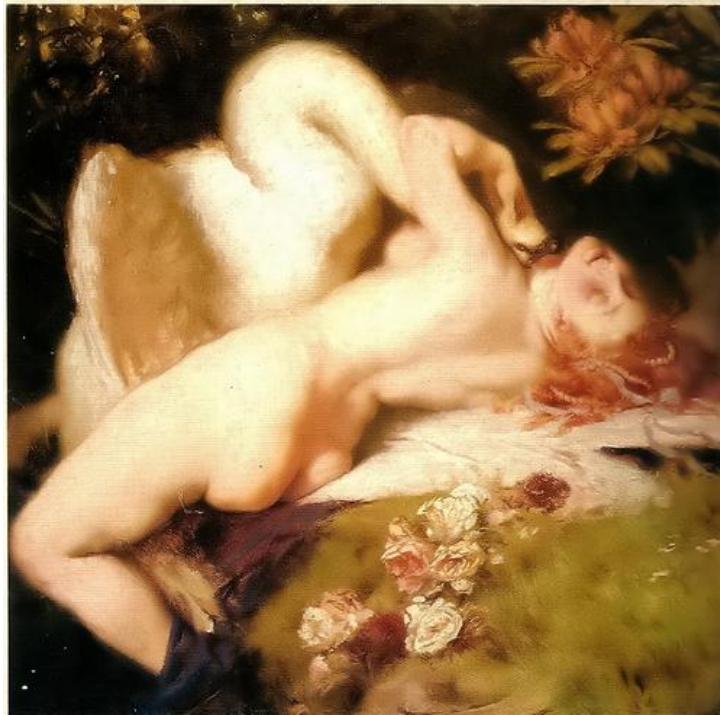


Figure 5. Heinrich Lossow, *Leda and the Swan* (undated, artist lived 1840- 1897)

pink, open, and blooming. They are the same color of her skin, which connects her physical body to her desire and sexuality. A soft brightness makes this appear to be a love scene and not a rape scene. The sex is glorified and made desirable for our senses. Lossow captures a sensuousness that we do not often find in Leda paintings, most likely due to his experience with pornographic works. As an artist, he is trained in making sex holy, and thus the divine presence in this work becomes the sexual act itself.

Ruben Dario's sexualized 1892 poem titled "Leda" also illustrates a romanticized and explicit encounter. The innocence of Leda and the swan is short-lived. What begins as a "swan composed of snow," "white and innocent," and "light" quickly transforms with the setting sun. White changes rapidly to "rose-tipped" pink. The term "rose-tipped" connotes a bud, the developing nipples of a young girl, the vagina, clitoris, or even the tip of the penis. Quickly afterward arrives the "short-lived dusk," and just as quickly, a "crimson dawn." The "crimson

dawn" invokes the red sheets symbolic of the morning after a virgin bride has slept with her husband on their wedding night; this is the literal and figurative dawn of her sexuality. In this world, whiteness and innocence is short-lived. The ephemeral whiteness of chastity is substituted by the beginning hints of sexuality (pink), which is then replaced by fully established vaginal intercourse of the "crimson dawn."

The explicit nature the poem grants us access to the narrative. The swan is depicted as "ravishing Leda in roiling waters,/ thrusting at petals of her sex in bloom." "Ravishing" implies violent pleasure, while the "roiling waters" illustrate either the river that is being disturbed by this encounter, or her "roiling waters"- a physical manifestation of the sexual pleasure she receives as a woman, reminiscent of Beckert's splashing shores. The fact that Zeus is able to "thrust... at petals of her sex in bloom" also makes us question Leda's level of desire in this situation. She is being thrust at, an action which connotes a violent or rough sexual encounter and also the thrusting of swords and spears in battle. Yet Leda is described as having "petals of her sex in bloom," so is this saying that she is ready for him sexually? "In bloom" echoes the organic mating cycles of plants and animals and seemingly indicates that nature may have prompted this encounter. She is being deflowered here, so the petals could further be seen as her oncoming sexuality now ready for intercourse.

Yet Leda definitely does not seem entirely pleased, even if she does obtain physical pleasure from the sexual act. Although her response to her first foray into sex may appear ambiguous, it truly reflects a strong negative emotional reaction. This "stripped, mastered beauty" is shown on the beach "sobbing," for what we conclude to be a long period of time. Most likely she was sobbing from distress, not pleasure. Not only is she merely crying, this Leda is "sobbing," physically rent by intense, uncontrollable emotion. We also see her "stripped," an

involuntary, forceful nakedness. She is both literally nude and figuratively stripped of her innocence after her encounter with Zeus on the Eurotas. The word "mastered" also indicates that she had no choice; that she serves under a master. This "beauty" has been defeated (her being is diminished), conquered, by the ultimate master, "this bird from Olympus" who is described as "bearing love's wound." The "wound" thus signifies loss of virginity, but in this case also stands for the rape. Penetrative sex is always regarded as violent, but in this case the violence is heightened due to the nature of the story. The word "bearing" also becomes important to the sense and narrative of the story. "Bearing" is connected both to the mental weight carried perpetually by a rape victim and also invokes "bearing" a child, a female-specific burden.

These convoluted approaches to sex prompt the question that closes the poem, the question we continue to ask each time we read a poem or see a piece of art about the Leda story. Dario writes, "From some tangled green rushes by the shore,/ sparkle-eyed Pan watches and wonders why." The simple word "why" encompasses so much of our understanding of the story. Why did this happen, and why are we so intrigued? This is a "tangled" story, one that remains unclear and unsure, a liminality that motivates our continued interest in the myth. Even the embodiment of mischief, "sparkle-eyed Pan," does not understand what has happened here. He "wonders why," amid all the glorious descriptions of the swan as "grand," having "silken feathers," and a neck that is "silver and burnished by the sun," do we see a "stripped, mastered beauty" "sobbing" on a river bank. Who are these characters, and why do we continue to see them in such fluctuating ways?

"Watches and wonders why": Eyes that Look in the Leda Story

Dario's line "watches and wonders why" highlights another important category in which we place works about Leda. I now explore the way Leda looks- or does not look- in poems and

artworks created in the fifty years prior to Yeats. Connected with the dynamics of the religious and the sexual, the look helps us distinguish power and agency. Who looks? Why do they look? What do they see?

Sometimes it is difficult to identify the look. For example, the mild, dim, and muted work painted in 1883 by George de Forest Brush seems like a standard portrait (Fig. 6). Browns and greens somberly fill the space of *Leda*. There are few shadows because there is barely any light, a dimness that focuses our attention on Leda and her swan. The soft quality of paint and sharp contrast between the bodies and the background make the figures glow. They radiate a calm, white light. A cream-colored cloth on which Leda sits adds warmth to the piece. Otherwise, the blue greens of the trees create a cold feeling that needs to be counteracted by the cloth, the warm reddish browns of the river bank, and the pale bodies.

Although the colors fashion the overall atmosphere of the piece, the way Leda and Zeus look at each other is the driving force of the painting. We forget that there are bodies external to their eyes. They look at each other, and we follow her gaze to the swan, where we are then re-directed back toward Leda. But why do they look at each other so intently? They investigate and explore each other in a similar manner to how we look at them as viewers of the painting. Their (and our) complete desire is manifested in their gaze.

And in this scene, neither figure dominates. Mutually, the couple longs for a physical connection. To de Forest Brush, this is a beautiful communion of bodies. Their parallel physical postures, coupled with a mutual gaze, reflect a similarity in intention and desire. Together they



Figure 6. Georges de Forest Brush, *Leda* (1883)

form an L shape. In the same way that Leda sits upright on a rock on the river bank, the swan's body and neck become an L (because the swan has his neck outstretched so he can be closer to her). They are connected both visually and emotionally. They take on analogous forms that lessen the differences between the two characters and force a reading of them as exchangeable beings. The desire of one reflects the intention of the other, and is then reversed. With Leda, nothing is definite.

So we continue to ask, who is this young woman? A closer look at Leda's face and body shows that she is not a fully adult woman, but a young woman still in the process of development. Her face and body are not fully mature; there is an air of youthfulness and freshness seen in the slight structure of her face and in the still perky and not-yet-fully rounded breasts. Again, she embodies the young virgin queen visited by a deity to create a noble birth.

Her fresh beauty is targeted as a suitable vessel for Zeus' divine offspring, just as the Virgin Mary was chosen for divine annunciation from God.

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Thomas Sturge Moore's 1906 poem "To Leda," included in his book, *To Leda and other odes*, is also driven by sight. This longer, lofty poem uses Shakespearian terms such as "oft" and "thee" that add a sense of seriousness, sophistication, and culture to the poem. It is a poem that addresses the woman herself, she who was most affected by the encounter. It asks if she knew what was happening, or if it was Zeus who looked down from the heavens to earth?

The idea of looking and sight is indeed an essential element of the poem. We are presented the phrases: "eye of heaven," "thou wast seen," "shrewd small eye," "his glance," "ardent eyes," "to watch thee," and "watched" (repeated three times in one stanza). Such a focus on glance/ gaze/ sight/ eyes is very important when thinking about the nature of the story (Leda, a mortal woman, is chosen by Zeus because he sees her beauty), and also Leda's immortalized life as an artistic theme. Leda is always looked at. The different eyes with which she is looked at also characterize Leda. The first eye, the "eye of heaven" is the all-seeing eye of Zeus. When heard aloud, that "eye" can also be the "I" "of heaven," as well as the single "eye" representative of the penis, and also the "eye" as male and artistic gaze – "thou wast seen."

Another eye that classifies Leda as a complex individual is the "shrewd small eye" of the robin who "ventures, perks with knowing look/.../ Thy picture-broidered train might be a book/ And he a child enacting someone wise." Here "knowing" is linked with seeing; to see is to know. In the case of Leda, she sees the splendor of Zeus, and therefore seemingly gains divine knowledge. Yet is this true knowledge, or is she merely "enacting someone wise" like the robin in the poem? The robin tries to read "they picture-broidered train [that] might be a book," trying

to read the narrative of what is happening/ what happened/ what is about to happen, but cannot truly tell.

Further on in the poem, the narrator graduates to a discussion of the aftereffects of the rape. Again the question of wisdom frames the conversation. After the encounter, "thine arms have known;" "In bliss then thine, hath shared/ Strength," "Strength, that was sudden like the light/ That reddens day-break wan." These images begin to pose the question that Yeats asks: "Did she put on knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" The words "thine arms have known" focuses on the physical aspect of the encounter. Leda physically came to know Zeus through sight and intercourse (another instance of knowing someone Biblically). Her "arms have known" him, and also "hath shared/ Strength." Here is the "power" of Yeats' "knowledge" and "power." In this sense, Leda is empowered. She is both more intelligent and strong than before she was raped.

Such a positive reading is possible because of the continual assertions that Zeus is glorious and holy, and can therefore do no wrong. Although he "burst in... with ardent eyes," "burst" serving as a somewhat violent ripping (the tearing of hymen, later referenced by "the broken wall" in Yeats), Zeus has "delicious down" and is described as the "mightiest swan." Leda has been "most nobly wooed." The poem does not acknowledge the story as a rape, but presents Zeus as a noble chevalier, gallantly and politely courting Leda. Also, the couple is described to have "[e]mbraced," "made rapturous music and was nobly stirred/ To wondrous song." This glorious union generates harmonious music; such "sounds unsealing worlds of bliss." The gorgeous imagery and holy happiness produces "Dream-hallowed, sunset flushed-/ Sounds more melting than a kiss." Romance and love are strongly evoked in these lines. We begin to forget the story, and focus instead on the marvelous wonders we see.

Yet those sounds are prophetic. With great beauty and pleasure must come destruction. The "rapturous music" and "wondrous song" are described as "sounds that made thee know,/ Troy must be burned,/ Helen be loved and blamed;/.../ Those shriek-pulsed towers that flamed." Again Moore is linked to the Yeats lines, "A shudder in the loins engenders there,/ The broken wall, the burning roof and tower." Despite the amazing experience of having sex with a god, there are tangible, negative consequences that emerge.

However, she is forbidden from regretting what happened. Moore writes "Yet never, never if the pain waxed shrewd/ (Though in a vaster pleasure wholly merged)/ Would they great lover let remorse intrude/ Upon that bliss." The phrase "in a vaster pleasure wholly merged" indicates the inherent connection between pain and pleasure. Leda cannot be remorseful of what happened, because why would one regret the perfect happiness of "bliss?"

The lines "Thy heart alone felt shame dissolve away/ In pleasure limpid as the dawn of day" continue to stress the necessity for Leda to live without regrets in a world of pleasures. As she feels "shame dissolve away/ In pleasure" Leda is able to experience the positive effects of sex with Zeus. In this account, shame cannot co-exist with pleasure, a controversial concept that continues to challenge notions of rape and consent today. And when the words "consenting" and "open-bloomed" are also employed, consent again becomes hinged on the natural, and is quickly subverted. The fact that "all thy charms/ Lay, open-bloomed, beneath the eye of heaven" implicates Leda's beauty and charm as a woman, but also presents an image of an "open-bloomed" flower ready for pollination, or, in other terms, a vagina ready for penetration. This description makes the rape seem desired and natural. Coupled with the images of Leda "swimming, like a snow-white plough" and the "beautiful white woman, that white bird," bird and woman are amalgamated. Characterized in the same way, they belong together. In this

version, Leda has no choice but to admit her complicity and pleasure. She accepts how she is seen from above as she looks back.

Yet the lines, "tell me! had thy guesses/ Soared trembling towards Olympus, wonder-eyed?" and "hadst thou sent/ Some fond surmise?" admit hazy culpability of the gaze. These interrogative lines illustrate how the narrator/ viewer/ reader tries to figure out why this happened, namely, who willed the sex. Was Leda the reason this happened? "Hadst thou sent/ Some fond surmise?" The "wonder-eyed" queen is placed under the spotlight, yet also projects her own. She is looked at, but also controls how she looks.

The dynamics of power and responsibility translated through Moore's poem are contrary to John Covert's placid translation of the story as look, painted sometime after 1915 and before 1923. Titled *Leda and the Swan*, this simple yet evocative piece is comprised of a monochromatic background and a few brushstrokes (Fig. 7). The cream color of the background and the rust red of the visible strokes connote the pure white of the swan and virginal Leda's pale body tinged with the blood of her first sexual encounter. Yet the image is not violent, but quiet. The lack of detail creates an open space, a kind of visual silence that permeates the image and maintains calm. The simplicity of the image also creates a minor optical illusion. Leda's hair is separated into three sections that represent curls or the large wing feathers of the swan. Similarly, the curved shape in the foreground of the painting can be seen as both the swan with his curved neck and as the graceful hand of the Spartan queen. Yet again, Leda and the swan adopt the same form. They are indistinguishable, which poses the question: if they are of one body, are they of one intention and motivation? By asking this question we concede that maybe Leda is also implicated. This "maybe" keeps her in limbo.

Also in this piece, Leda's eyes are closed, a concept repeated in a large number of works



Figure 7. John Covert, *Leda and the Swan* (1915-23)

about Leda. But why are her eyes shut? Does she not want to see what is happening or the aftereffects? Is she (rightfully) upset because she is getting raped by a swan? Is she ashamed of herself for putting herself in a dangerous situation? Is she resigned to her fate as woman; has she given up?

These questions of sight highlight the sexual. In such a simple image great emotion is still conveyed. Her eyes are closed as she attempts to shield herself from what has happened. This unwanted encounter may not have been violent, but here it is presented as undesired. Her closed eyes convey a certain resignation; she recognizes herself as a woman, and serenely adapts to her fate. But again we remember that her body morphs with the swan, and thus we wonder: is she also encumbered with blame?

Another artist who attempts to answer these questions is Paul Matthias Padua. Painted in 1917, Padua's *Leda and the Swan* is an opulent chiaroscuro scene of dark blue grays (Fig. 8). Leda lies with the swan on what looks like pale furs or sheets. She wears a jeweled necklace and a bracelet on her left wrist. She is worthy of royal attention.

Her body position also commands our gaze. The angles of her limbs lead us around the painting. Her legs encircle the swan whose neck is arched in pleasure. His beak is open; he seems to be emitting a cry of ecstasy. His wings are raised and separated in a similar manner to



Figure 8. Paul Matthias Padua, *Leda and the Swan* (1917)

her limbs- his position provides an almost parallel version to the supine Leda. Our eyes move from Leda's pubic triangle up her torso, past her breast, and finally to her face. Visual cues direct us toward her ideal, naked body that is presented as object. Yet her face is covered in shadow. Leda's eyes, which are so important because they transmit sight, are again obscured. Her visual power is removed, but it looks as if Leda chose to cover her eyes, perhaps because she does not want to see what happens (because she is upset, or because she is ashamed that she is getting some pleasure out of this interaction). She also may have her eyes covered as a reminder that mortals die if they look upon gods in their pure form. Zeus changed into a swan in order to come down to Leda, but she still acknowledges his divine form as they have sex. This is no ordinary copulation. Her arm also could be in that position because she is throwing back her body in satisfaction. Her left arm and the fingers on her left hand are clenched, which indicates tension, a

physical response to a feeling of pleasure. She is unable to control the physical effects of the encounter, and lies back on the pale furs, submitting her body to the corporal confrontation of divinity.

Unconsciously (or consciously- can we ever tell?), she succumbs to the divine advances of Zeus. Certainly, this depiction of Leda presents a triumphant Zeus exclaiming his sexual accomplishments while perched over the ravished Leda. Padua's painting proclaims the male as dominant (almost universally on top) and proud of his numerous sexual exploits. Leda, the "universal woman" instead reclines on a bed fitting for royalty. She has been sexually pleased and responds solely by lying back and being beautiful. Because Zeus is shown mid-cry, he may also be having an orgasm still positioned between the snowy thighs of the recumbent Leda.

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She cannot see him; she cannot see herself. Her obscured vision reflects our quest as readers and viewers to view her experience. This universal woman, this sex object, this woman to be seen, cannot be defined by any one category. Indeed, it is only through her liminality that we can define her.

3. Liminality and Portraiture

Leda

When the god, yearning, entered the swan,
swan splendor shattered him. He let himself
vanish within its flesh, completely entangled.
Trying to fool her, though, he was drawn to the act

before he could probe what it meant to be and to feel
in this strange way. And what gaped wide in her
already sensed that advent in the swan
and knew: he asked for the one thing that she,

tangled in resisting him, could no longer
withhold. He came at her harder,
and thrusting his neck through her hand growing weaker and weaker

he let his godhead disperse into what he loved.
Only then did he realize feathers were glory
and fully became swan in her womb.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

"all thy charms/ Lay, open-bloomed, beneath the eye of heaven"
-from "To Leda" by Thomas Sturge Moore

Leda and the Borders of Liminality

I therefore attempt to situate Leda in the frame of liminal figure most often viewed from the outside. She was a portrait and a theme; viewed and judged by many, understood by few. Her popularity was iconic. She was firmly established in the world of arts, so it is interesting to note

that an article published in 1903 argued that the Leda theme was outdated and overused. In an article in *Brush and Pencil*, Harrison N. Howard wrote about a piece by William Fair Kline, saying that "'Leda and the Swan' is an old theme that scores of artists have tried their hands at exploiting. Indeed, so hackneyed has the old legend become in pictorial art, that one is somewhat surprised at the artist's temerity is perpetrating a new Leda'" (Howard 368). Not only does Howard comment on the "hackneyed" nature of the Leda myth; he also emphasizes the idea of exploitation and perpetration in conjunction with the story. Such an early acknowledgment of the "old theme that scores of artists have tried their hands at exploiting" allows us to more easily recognize the way in which artists and poets represent the Leda story. This is not, and has never been, an egalitarian venture. Zeus dominates Leda; artists craft our reading of the piece; poets manipulate language. And this exploitation serves a singular purpose: through her subjugation or through her empowerment, Leda is an embodied figure of sex. We hide opinions of sex within her story, because a god (in animal form or not) and a beautiful woman appear less threatening than naked man and woman openly having sex by a riverbank.

Howard continues by saying that Kline "has been fairly successful, however, in his enterprise, since, while preserving the poetic character of the myth, he has been essentially true to life in the painting of both the nude figure and the swan." Howard continues his astute observations by referencing "the poetic character of the myth," an aspect of the Leda story that may also have served to perpetuate the myth in the arts because her story is intrinsically connected to artistic creation.

The painting itself is titled *Leda and the Swan* and was completed in 1903 (Fig. 9). It shows a very pale-skinned Leda with the white swan curled against her. They gaze longingly at each other; their eyes reveal desire. This is a scene of affection. Leda is partially covered by a

cloth or garment, but she bares her left side to Zeus, leaning into him, about to embrace him. Leda's left side, which is closest to Zeus, is naked and white, while her right side, that which leans toward the land and woods, is covered by a garment in shadow. Does she bare her breast to the divine presence yet humbly cover her other side in an attempt to shield herself from her other life with Tyndareus? The loose concealment of one half of her body implies her feeble effort to ward off the swan, but also the feminine duty as a Spartan queen to maintain a semblance of propriety. Yet the swan and woman sit together with their heads inclined toward each other as if approaching for a kiss. Kline grants them some intimacy, but then literally cloaks it in modesty.

372

BRUSH AND PENCIL



LEDA AND THE SWAN
By William Fair Kline
Copyright, 1903, National Academy of Design

and by Ivanowitz are exceptionally good. Their fellows in many cases do not adequately represent their painters.

Weir's portrait of Albert P. Ryder is one of the most notable performances in the entire exhibition. It represents the subject at somewhat less than half length—a bearded, round-shouldered man in a black coat. The eyes, suggestive of abstraction, gaze intently downward, the forehead is surmounted by a mass of disheveled hair, and the left hand maintains an easy grasp on one of the lapels of the coat. The pose is eminently natural, and

the face, absolutely faithful, has the convincing quality born of sympathy with an intimate knowledge of the subject. It is without doubt the best canvas that has emanated from Mr. Weir's studio for a number of years. Frederic P. Vinton's por-



EVENING CLOUDS
By R. Swain Gifford
Copyright, 1903, National Academy of Design

Figure 9. William Fair Kline, *Leda and the Swan* (1903)

Kline is seemingly unable to fully embrace the explicit sex inherent in the Leda myth. Yet the paleness of her naked skin is so light that she seems to blend into the swan, a paleness that contrasts sharply with her dark hair and the swan's black beak. This physical unity represents sexual union; two become one. Here is a clear visual translation of Shakespeare's "beast with two backs" (Shakespeare I. i. 118) that begins to challenge the discrete identities of woman and swan.

Also, Zeus and Leda are on the bank of the river, which serves here as the transient boundary between the mortal and immortal world; the former represented by a reserved sex, the latter a world of unrestrained, divine passions. The vague borders of liminality produce an indeterminate space occupied by Leda. She is at once mortal and immortal, shameless and shameful, temptress and victim.

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Liminality, by nature, permits multiple readings. For example, although Kline positively portrays Leda's liminality, Emmanuel Benner's undated *Léda* painted sometime during his lifespan (1836-1896) seems almost contemporary as it acknowledges the hazy violence of the sexual act (Fig. 10). As Leda lies passively on the bank of a river, the swan, with wings upraised, pushes forward with his beak. The angle of view makes it look as if he penetrates her chest. Her head is tipped back, so even though we see her back, we are also see her eyes. She looks up toward another world; toward the sky from which her pursuer emerged. Her legs are stretched out under her and her arms extend out above her head. She passively lies on the bank while the swan acts upon her. Her relaxed posture, and the fact that the swan is aggressively active (the upright wings are tense and are raised up; we sense an inevitable fall or intentional lowering) clearly frame this as victim- attacker. She is the victim laid out on the ground and the swan is the perpetrator caught mid-act. Her dark hair spills out from under her, and almost looks like a pool

of blood. Benner's version of sex is not tame. Leda is not engaged in a passionate act, but receives unwanted sexual attention from the swan. This is not consensual sex; this is rape.

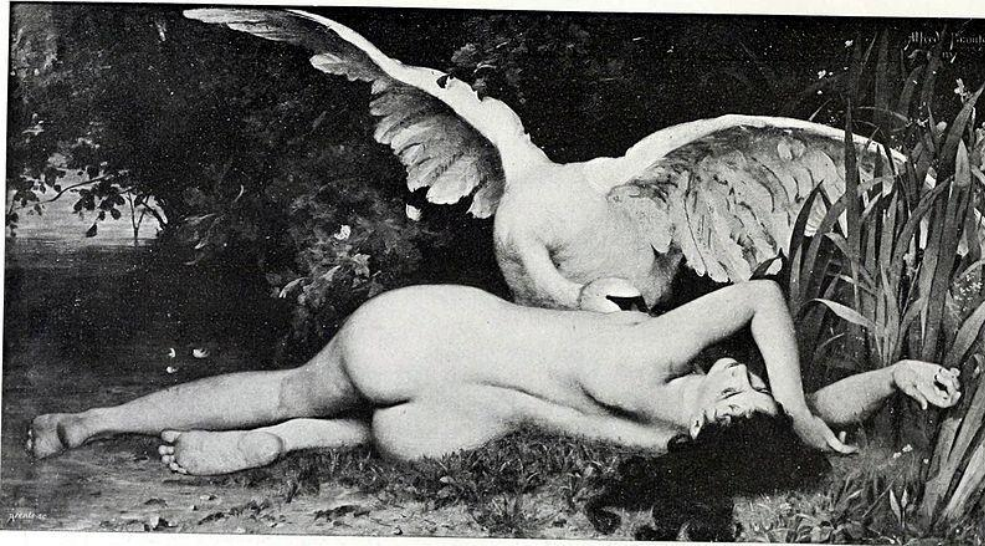


Figure 10. Emmanuel Benner, *Léda* (undated, artist lived 1836-1896)

Yet Benner may not be ready to assign blame. In his painting, Leda is caught among the reeds at the edge of the bank. She is so much on the border, on the boundary between earth and water, that her left foot in fact partially rests in the water. The situation is not black and white. Two worlds have merged together, and the lack of delineation makes it difficult for the viewer to make clear judgments about the morality of the piece. Additionally, the bank and vegetation are painted with great care and detail. Such a realistic painting with non-realistic content makes for a bizarre effect of vague, undetermined reality.

Paul Cezanne's impressionistic realism further positions Leda in this role as liminal actor (Fig. 11). Not only is the 1882 painting simplified and almost characterized; Leda can be seen as play-acting. She is calm, demure, and regal as she reclines on her throne and absentmindedly raises her hand to her avian suitor. The swan- depicted almost as an outlined cartoon- bites Leda's hand. Yet it appears as if she holds it up to him to bite, as though she is somewhat pleased that he gently scolds her. She lies back but does not fight back; it appears that she offers her sex

to him, casually. But then we see her eyes, which accusatorily direct us toward the swan. Despite the appearance of acquiescence (if not desire), her eyes betray uneasiness. She is not happy with what occurs. Even though she does not resist, she does not want this. She offers her body to the swan in hopes that she will be praised and desired, but will remain untouched. Instead, the swan is enticed by the beautiful cartoon maiden and lays his claim.



Figure 11. Paul Cezanne, *Léda au Cygne* (1882)

Furthermore, there is an almost eerie coolness to the painting. The underlying blue-gray hue of the painting mirrors the color of water (the river Eurotas) or the color of the sky (from where Zeus as swan emerged). These two realms demonstrate Leda's liminality; she is able to exist in both of these spaces, but never truly belongs. They morph into each other, and are barely distinguishable. The blue foreground (the cushion Leda reclines on) and background cast a cool azure tinge on the swan's white feathers, and mute them. Hazily, Zeus and Leda occupy this cool liminal space. The only true warmth in the painting is a small golden orange tassel on the side of the cushion, hints of color repeated in Leda's hair and also in the beak of the swan. These golds illustrate the opulence of royalty. Both parties involved are royal, although Zeus to a greater

degree; Leda is royal by marriage and birth, while Zeus is fundamentally and inherently divine-distinct similarities highlighted by their blurred positions in this space.

In many ways, the parallels between the two royal characters intermingle and dissolve. Victim becomes assaulter and assaulter does not appear harmful. Leda becomes divine and mortal. She plays one role but is able to easily take up another. This happens with not only with the Cezanne. Each new work about Leda generates another image of her and another stance about sex. Yet instead of making it easier for scholars to come to terms with her elusive character, the multitude of sources makes the task more difficult. For how can we understand a figure who lives in the haze of the in-between? To what can we credit her liminality?

**

For one, the doubt of liminality is enticing. Guilt and desire intertwine in an uncertain matrix of moral judgment. One example is Rudolph Tegner's dominant yet still somewhat dependent Leda (Fig. 12). Again, undecided Leda is both empowered and victimized. She holds the swan up, but he also clutches onto her. His legs clasp her legs. She is drawn into him; her head rests on his chest. Her posture suggests that she is either asleep, exhausted, comfortable, or physically spent after their sexual encounter. To be sure, the couple looks very intimate in this piece. The curve of Leda's back supports the curve of his chest, and the two figures seem to meld into one. This appears to be a mutual union. They have developed into a connected couple embracing after copulation. Her legs support the swan who has just conquered her. The divide between pursuer and pursued is transcended and abolished, and therefore ceases to exist. Instead, this loving, royal couple consummates what appears to be a desired relationship, a representation that creates moral disquiet when we remember that this is the story of a rape.

Yet Zeus is a god, and is therefore often considered immune from such moral judgment. His wings spread outward like the wings of angels, which further highlights his descent from the heavens. He has a rightful air of majesty, except it appears as though Leda also wears a crown (although her hair may just be highly textured or patterned).



Figure 12. Rudolph Tegner, *Leda and the Swan* (1902)

And although the sculpture looks as if it could have come from ancient Greece, this is a modern interpretation made in 1902. It seems as if Tegner was too nervous to completely abandon tradition, and needed to rely on the safety of a classical medium to portray somewhat progressive ideas about sexuality. So what does that say about the story? In this seemingly ancient, yet surprisingly modern presentation, Leda holds the swan lovingly. The sculpture evokes ancient stonework traditions yet presents sex as a mutual venture. Leda is able to comfortably exist within this positive relationship as either character. In a liminal space, personal distinction merely blends with another.

**

Another tangled interpretation of the story is Rainer Maria Rilke's 1908 poem titled "Leda," written in the regular form of the sonnet like the Yeats. The first two quatrains set up the story, but in this interpretation, Zeus is the sympathetic character. Only when we hear quick mentions that he is "trying to fool her," that she is "tangled in resisting him," that "he came at her harder," do we remember that Leda is being attacked. And even then we do not sense a complete resistance. Yes, Leda fights back, but she is "tangled in resisting him" and "her hand [grows] weaker and weaker." Her resistance is not definite; there are parts of her that rebel. The words "tangled in resisting him" capture this indecision and uncertainty. She is "tangled," mixed up, intertwined in her desire to resist.

So too does Zeus illustrate an unclear identity. In fact, the focus remains on Zeus as we perceive his transformation throughout the poem. L.R. Lind writes that, "for Rilke, it is the moment just before and immediately while Zeus undergoes his curious transformation which is the focus of emotion. Zeus is bewildered, even frightened in an animal way" (Lind 14). Although the poem is titled "Leda," this poem is about Zeus and "his curious transformation." His "terror... [which] arises from an intense introspection" (14) is the more potent issue here, not Leda's physical struggle with the swan. Indeed, this poem recounts a struggle between God and swan, and only peripherally mentions bits of Leda (the title, "her," "she," "her hand," "her womb").

This absence of Leda allows for an increased presence of Zeus in multiple forms. He is a "god" who "entered the swan," but upon taking on the physical form of the swan, "swan splendor shattered him." Although he is Zeus, the king of the gods, "swan splendor" is able to completely break apart his divine identity. Throughout the poem such verbs cause a disintegration of the cohesive self. Zeus is "shattered," he "let himself vanish," "he let his godhead disperse." In all of

these cases, Zeus is not the active symbol of power that he normally categorizes. Instead, "he let himself" fall apart. The god he was slowly dissolves and he takes on another form.

Yet this transition is not a complete abandonment of one character and an adoption of the other. For Rilke (and Yeats), are "poets of edges, of the juxtaposition of surfaces, and their poems are full of thresholds, bridges, streams, and shores which, where they join the 'other,' provide tangible images for the 'continuity of the apparently discontinuous'" (Merivale 259). The Leda story is literally situated on one of these "streams, and shores," and thus provides an apt backdrop for a tale of transition and ambiguity. Zeus' vague status as swan-god develops throughout the poem and illustrates the idea that "another way of crossing the border is to let one realm fade into another so ambiguously that one cannot tell when the border has been crossed" (260). As the poem progresses we sense Zeus' introspective understanding, but find it difficult to identify exactly when his full transformation occurs. It is not until the end of the poem when Zeus becomes aware of who he is: "Only then did he realize feathers were glory/ and fully became swan in her womb." This beautiful, divine swan realizes his physical metamorphosis only when his power is transmitted through the sexual act of engendering Leda's offspring.

For "what gaped wide in her/ already sensed the advent in the swan," and "he let his godhead disperse into what he loved;" both characters are explicitly exhibit desire through their sexual organs, while still remaining unsure. Yet this desire is more than just physical fulfillment. Indeed, the sexual organs of vagina and penis that "sensed" and "loved" are the few things in this poem that actually imply some sort of understanding. And "only then," when these two sexual organs join together and he "fully became swan in her womb," is he able to realize his powerful identity. He is able to live only through his sex that vaguely morphs and melds from one realm to another. He too exists in the in-between.

Rilke's attention to Zeus' experience allows the reader to approach the story from a different perspective. With Zeus as the sympathetic character now, how are we to interpret the story? Can we consider the two to be dually implicated in what is here presented as a traumatic event for both? What borders remain? Which borders are crossed?

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Broached borders are further presented by Romanian-born French sculptor Constantin Brancusi's *Leda* pieces. The first is a marble and concrete work produced in 1920 (Fig. 13). A



Figure 13. Constantin Brancusi, *Leda* (1920)

simple white marble figure rests on a somewhat rough cement cylindrical base. This sculpture is simple and pure. The white marble may represent the swan, or it may represent Leda's curved and upright body- a distinction never definitively made. Also, both the marble and cement are very light in color. In fact, it becomes difficult to differentiate between the forms. A dark shadow underneath the figure is what allows us to really tell the two objects apart; otherwise the simplified figures morph into one idea. Leda and the swan mesh into one being. They become one form, a simplicity reminiscent of the physical act of sex. Two individuals are subsumed as one- one body and one story. Leda is physically liminal here. Not only does the story remain

ambiguous, but Leda physically takes on the form of the swan, and the swan becomes Leda. They are eternally undifferentiated.

Underneath this figure of dual identities rests the concrete cylinder which looks like a basic capitol that would reside at the top of an ancient Greek column. This supporting structure brings to attention the difference in scale, size, and color of the two objects that compose the sculpture. The larger circular structure is at the top- not the soundest structural design, but perhaps a metaphorical attempt to illustrate how myths often have inadequate "factual" bases. And by associating Brancusi's piece with ancient Greek art, we recall the origins of the story and the significance of myth. Or, when viewed in terms of sex, the relationships between Zeus and Leda (and also many others) are often founded on a structure or belief that is insufficient. What appears sturdy is always, inevitably lacking. They are partially indefinable because they have no definite base.

Then in 1925 Brancusi made a companion piece to his initial Leda sculpture, this version constructed of polished bronze (Fig. 14). It is essentially the same form, but instead of a solid construction of marble and concrete, the sculpture and its base are shiny and reflective. This shininess detracts from the three dimensionality of the sculpture itself but adds a new aspect of perceived depth; although the form of the sculpture is almost lost in the reflections, the reflections themselves are what take on the weight in this piece.

There are multiple ways to look at the reflections. First, Leda was at the river bank when Zeus appeared to her, so the reflectivity of the sculpture almost parallels the idea of her reflection in water. Then we immediately think of Narcissus, whose own beauty enraptured him so much that he died, and also the paintings of women looking in mirrors, supposed illustrate female vanity. Such nuanced readings of the artistic and mythological references present in this piece



Figure 14. Constantin Brancusi, *Leda* (1925)

add to its strength. Not only do we see the unified Zeus and Leda, we now see ourselves in the piece. We are drawn into the abstracted sexual act which quickly becomes personal. How are we situated within the story? This question endures as one of the most pivotal queries surrounding Leda today.

An Exterior View of Leda as Portrait

We are initially situated as spectators who observe the hazy story from an exterior perspective, one of the most dominant frames through which we see Leda. From this perspective, we look at her, not with her. Presented as portraits and landscapes, this type of Leda distances us from the story itself, but allows us to see how others view her. By viewing her from an outside perspective, we are able to better determine her identity.

**

Before Yeats, such exteriority was common. Leda was portrait. This external approach is demonstrated by two artists, Tony Robert-Fleury (Fig. 15) and Hugo Poll (Fig. 16), who created

undated pieces about Leda during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These works are undeniably similar in composition but present Leda in strikingly different ways. In both Robert-Fleury's painting and Hugo Poll's pastel, we see Leda and the swan positioned almost identically



Figure 15. Tony Robert-Fleury, *Léda* (undated, artist lived 1837 to 1911)

on the canvas. In both paintings Leda leans her head down toward the swan who raises his wings to her in either a blow or an embrace. Leda's right foot is slightly raised, which makes her right knee partially cross her left knee in a position of slight modesty. By somewhat crossing her legs, she attempts to cover herself.

In addition to this feeble pudica, Leda displays active resistance. She lifts her left hand in a fist, a position that illustrates tension and action. In order for her arm to be raised and her fist to be clenched, she has to be actively deciding to do this. She is not relaxed; there is something else

happening. The fist itself is symbolic of the strength and movement also reflected in the motion implied by her raised foot. Maybe this is Leda's effort to block the swan's advances, or maybe



Figure 16. Hugo Poll, *Leda with the Swan* (undated, artist lived 1867-1931)

it indicates that Leda is about to move away, to escape from the situation. Indeed, Leda's posture is indicative of her lack of (straightforward) sexual compliance. In both Robert-Fleury and Poll's works, Leda plays demure and coy but in fact resists Zeus' attempts. Both men depict a coquette who entices men but then denies (or attempts to deny) sexual fulfillment.

Despite their compositional similarities, the two pieces are otherwise separated. Hugo Poll's piece is a pastel drawing with a quicker, Impressionistic feel unlike that of the painting by Robert-Fleury. In Poll's drawing, the vibrant brush strokes occupy the space, especially in the water, leaves, and feathers of the swan. Another aesthetic difference between these two works is

that Robert-Fleury's Leda has blonde hair, while in Poll's pastel Leda is a brunette with more natural-looking skin color. Because a painting of Leda is a painting about an exquisitely beautiful woman, maybe the difference in hair and skin color was simply due to the artists' personal preferences; each man has a different definition of beauty. Poll's Leda is not the transparent white vision of chastity, but a buxom woman with ruddy skin. She looks more (em)bodied.

Yet the largest variance between these works is the scenery. Robert-Fleury's work is spare. A simple bank with dark blue-green woods on the other side of the river provides a smooth backdrop for the glowing girl and swan. Their paleness stands out clearly against the river bank as the divine swan reflects onto what seems to be an almost angelic Leda. In Poll's painting, however, a light shines through the trees onto the empty bank. Is this space caused by a path through the forest? If so, to where does it lead? The possibility of escape toward light suggests a very different atmosphere than that from the dark trees represented in Robert-Fleury's painting. There is hope in Poll's work; even after this bizarre sexual encounter, there is still a possibility of going toward the light. This light can be seen as enlightenment, knowledge, energy, God, happiness, some divine hope that is gained from Leda's encounter with Zeus.

In this regard, Poll's painting, although linked compositionally to Robert-Fleury's piece, differs greatly in meaning and content. While Robert-Fleury's work is a subdued, pale painting of a divine couple, Poll on the other hand presents Leda as human. Her dark hair and ruddy skin ground her to the mortal world where she truly belongs. Instead of being pitted against human mortality (white swan and woman versus dark background), the vibrant Leda takes her place firmly on Earth.

Yet the encounter has changed her. This living and breathing woman has had sex with a god, and the light in the background may represent Zeus' divine presence in her life, manifested both by her sexual experience with him and also by the offspring she bears. Sexually, Poll's piece can therefore be viewed as a more liberating, experienced image. We see Robert-Fleury's painting- pure and still- while Poll's drawing is an Impressionistic pastel that exudes vivacity. To Robert-Fleury, sex is equivalent to a static death, while according to Poll, sex creates life.

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After attempting such an understanding of the fickle Leda, it appears soothing to grapple with a more tangible artifact like Paul Gauguin's 1887-8 stoneware vase aptly titled *Leda Vase* (Fig. 17). The roughly hewn vase is covered with crude drawings and the rim is uneven. As if we



Figure 17. Paul Gauguin, *Leda Vase* (1887-8)

are unable to independently process the imagery, Gauguin has spelled it out for us. Rudimentary drawings of three swans are carved into the vase with childlike precision. These swans have seemingly hatched from an egg; they are Leda's children (presumably Leda and the Dioscuri).

But there is also another shape carved into the vase that appears to be the egg from which additional cygnets are hatching. Four short swan necks poke out of a broken cylindrical shape which clearly symbolizes Leda's divine egg, and now includes Clytemnestra.

On another side of the vase is the portrait of a woman, assumedly Leda. It is a well-made face, but not one of exceptional beauty. Her eyes are directed downward with a vacant expression. Her hair and eyes are painted on, but her face is the base color of the stoneware. Instead of the pale faced Leda we normally see, this Leda has rough, brown skin that foretells Gauguin's fascination with the native women of Tahiti (and the "sauvage" in general), to whom he would go three years after the completion of this work. Gauguin's fetishization of savage women is captured by such a portrait as we look at her and see her dark skin contrasted with the paleness of the swan, a figure implied by a whiteness that wraps around the vase. The swan may also represent Gauguin himself, a white male enamored by dark skinned, simple women (as opposed to the extravagance and finery of pale, powdered Paris) like the Leda portrayed on the vase. Sophisticated man is able to control primitive woman, just as the swan is agile in his ability to control the space, both on the vase and in the story, and just as Gauguin crafts our experience as viewer.

Another exterior portrait was made from 1898 through 1900 by artist Maurice Ferrary. Ferrary's sculpture presents Leda in a more traditional manner (Fig. 18). In this work, Leda is made of marble and lounges casually on a base of green onyx and bronze. Her arms support her as she loosely drapes herself over the swan, who curves his neck toward her. We see here a standard image of activity and passivity. Leda lies on what could be a river bank, or simply a pedestal, with her hair loosely tied up on her head. Her left leg rests on the platform, while her right leg is bent up and under her body. Passive woman is ready for the active man. At the same

time her body exhibits such relaxation, we clearly perceive tenseness in the swan. The swan raises his wings under Leda, actively curves his neck, and stretches his wings around her. He is that which supports her and simultaneously is that which causes her to need support.



Figure 18. Maurice Ferrary, *Leda and the Swan* (1898-1900)

The contrasting colors of this piece also add to the menacing atmosphere surrounding Leda and the swan. Constructed out of white marble, she softly glows like a beacon of innocence, laid out on the riverbank for our gaze and for Zeus' sexual enjoyment. In contrast, the swan's dark, hard, metallic body makes Leda appear even paler than actuality. And while Zeus' divinity may be tainted by his many extramarital affairs with mortal women, he is the king of the gods and is therefore not vilified. Instead, the swan is represented by gleaming bronze, a rich color of power and pleasure and strength. He acts, while Leda lays back and is acted upon.

Clearly, Ferrary does not just re-tell the myth. In his classic interpretation of the story, Leda is the object of desire- woman returned to her traditional artistic position of beautiful victim. According to this depiction, women accept the passive role and the dominance of the active male. Sex is a hierarchical model, and to Ferrary, men remain on top.

Indeed, from this point of view, Leda is an object of the external look who serves solely as a means for male pleasure. This sentiment is displayed by Aristide-Joseph-Bonaventure Maillol's 1902 small bronze, a piece unique in its representation because it shows only Leda (Fig. 19). Zeus the swan is not present; instead Leda raises her left hand in a gesture of warning as she turns her face and shoulders away from an absent foe. Her posture makes it clear that she is



Figure 19. Aristide-Joseph-Bonaventure Maillol, *Leda* (1902)

reacting to someone else, be it Zeus or the viewers who look at her naked body. She seems to be interacting with her audience. By looking downward and away she demonstrates both modesty and shame.

Here Maillol uses Leda to illustrate the objectification of women into sexual objects. Sitting on a stool (almost a pedestal), Leda becomes a piece of art venerated for her beauty by the outside eye. Yet Leda displays uneasiness; she is not pleased with her status, but shifts uncomfortably on her pedestal, trying to avoid this primarily male attention. Although she is situated in this position, she clearly does not want to remain. She does not want to be in this exposed setting, and is on the precipice of action.

In fact, her legs are somewhat raised as though she is about to get off her seat. Action is implied. Her raised left hand signals motion; she does not just sit placidly on her throne, but turns herself away from the voyeur and tries to push him away. We still view her in a frontal position that privileges our gaze, but she resists. This clearly negative representation shows her entire figure, an ideal female form, but subtracts the story. Instead of an image of both Leda and the swan that implies the narrative, Leda rests alone on her pedestal. She simply becomes an object of sight who receives external action and interpretation, a status that both sexually and artistically eliminates her humanity.

**

Our exploration of exterior Leda continues with Léon-François Comerre's light, airy painting (Fig. 20). Painted in 1908 and titled *Le Triomphe du Cygne*, the title immediately creates uncertainty as to who is the focus of this piece. Does the title highlight the fact that the swan triumphed, or does it bring attention to that which he has conquered (Leda)? Is the swan the most important actor here, or is defeated Leda the main subject of the piece?

When we look closer at the painting, Zeus quickly becomes secondary. One glance at the swan immediately directs us toward Leda- his elongated neck ends at Leda's chest, and we follow the forward direction toward her face. Her empty facial expression illustrates satisfaction caused by orgasm, or stunned disbelief after an attack. And although her face is blank and expressionless, she looks directly out of the painting. It is unsettling, this vacant focus on us. Her hair lies outspread, her right arm thrown back. This is the swan's *trionphe*.

There is also vagueness in her body position. Her left arm is bent and upraised and her hand directly blocks the beak of the swan. The tips of her fingers are curled yet relaxed. Is she

protecting her face? She does not lie outstretched, but with legs bent. Again, does that mean she was resisting, or that she is merely relaxing after a sexual encounter? Also, the swan is not



Figure 20. Léon-François Comerre, *Le Triomphe du Cygne* (1908)

between her legs (as he is often shown), but approaches her from the side. In this painting, he does not physically express his desire for her, but rests: this is *Le Triomphe du Cygne* after the act. He has triumphed; he has won this battle.

But this does not seem like a violent aftermath. A light glows from behind the two figures, golden rays that filter in through bluish green foliage. The lighting is soft and barely creates shadows. Sunlight dappled vegetation frames Leda and the mostly obscured swan. She is put on display in the center of the painting. Yet again we must remember that the piece is titled *Le Triomphe du Cygne*, and not *Leda*. She is an object of conquest, not an active participant. Successfully conquered by this glorious, white animal, her languid form is one of relaxed pleasure. This Leda is representative of women who desire sex. Her nakedness invites men; her sultry regard beckons future suitors; her body willingly accepts male penetration. Yet Leda does not actively pursue physical gratification, but passively gains pleasure by being examined.

As seen in many of these works, exterior views are primarily positive. H.D.'s 1919 poem titled "Leda" also seems to endorse the act. In this poem, the rape is again glorified by an outside source. Colors of gold evoke images of precious, valued, and rare splendors, and the reds, and purples, coupled with images of sunset add to the fullness of color. Leda is made even richer through this encounter; she already wore the crown of Sparta, but is made still more royal through the transfer of divine power from the Olympic crown "flecked with richer gold/ its golden crest." Zeus, as king of the gods, has bestowed upon Leda the highest crown possible.

This royal rapport between man and woman is essential and beautiful, very romanticized and glorious, and definitely not for this world. Words such as "kingly kiss," "gold," "bliss," "soft," "warm" all compose this positive rendering of an unpleasant tale. Even the implied sexual encounter is gentle and subdued. We do not see thrashing on the bank, but a "slow river/ [that] meets the tide," a lily "caressed," a floating "where tide and river meet," a "kingly kiss." The "river/ [that] meets the tide" is a euphemism for male ejaculation, in this case Zeus', while the "tide" invokes the ocean, salt water, and the female menstrual cycle. "Where tide and river meet" therefore is the meeting of these two sexual waters, that is, copulation.

H.D.'s 1924 poem titled "Helen" additionally promotes this loving vision of sex. In this poem, Helen is identified as "God's daughter, born of love." "Born of love" implies that the meeting between Zeus and Leda was desired. Again Leda is represented as voluntarily giving birth to Love and War, and as such, is bestowed a grand responsibility. In both "Helen" and "Leda" H.D. appears to describe the venerable Zeus and the magnificent thing he did for Leda, but not the fact that she was raped.

Without prior knowledge of H.D., these poems appear as a woman validating the glory of Zeus and his actions. However, both poems were incredibly uncharacteristic of H.D. In fact,

H.D. is described as having an "obvious preoccupation... with female victimization and male power, [but her] 1918 poem "Leda" contains no hint of either the suffering or the violence that marks most other modernist accounts" (Sword 313). Sword argues that this poem speaks in opposition to other works by H.D. In her "Leda" poem, "Leda herself, figured not as a flesh-and-blood woman but as a 'gold day-lily,' seems wholly lacking in the passion and anguish that characterize so many of H.D.'s other heroines" (313). The omission of her usual vehement opposition to male dominance places emphasis on the substance of the poem. As readers, we are used to H.D.'s criticism of men, so when she praises an (in)famous male playboy, we take notice and cannot but ask why she would ironically speak about a classical rape story in such positive terms? Because she characteristically speaks negatively about such situations, her lofty praise seems to bitingly proclaim the opposite.

So although on the surface level everything about this sex appears glorious, H.D. in fact argues that what society perceives and claims to be wonderful (i.e. male dominated sexual relationships that rely on the subjugation of women) are truly glaring misconceptions. When coated in beautiful images or descriptions, this notion of sex is merely romantic, but when the more realistic motivations are uncovered, the harsher side of reality is made strikingly apparent.

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Oliver St. John Gogarty, a friendly rival of Yeats, approaches Leda from another perspective. The two Irishmen had a collaborative and competitive authorial relationship and their works reflect similar themes. Both poets wrote poems entitled "Leda and the Swan," yet Gogarty's 1920 version is much different from Yeats' later rendition of the story. Yeats' "Leda" staggers across the page in exquisite beauty, and Gogarty's "Leda" is characterized by nakedness, immaturity, and irreverent questions.

Almost immediately we see Leda, who "taking all her clothes off,/... went to swim." Without warning, Leda appears naked. We watch her. This disobedient daughter chooses to undress and then submerges herself into the poem. Completely exposed, with "not a flag-leaf/ By the river's margin/ That might be a shelter/ From a passer-by," Zeus appears just as suddenly as did the naked form of Leda. He is "a sudden whiteness/ in the quiet darkness" that demands our attention. Although we have just been introduced to both Leda and the swan, "the place was lonely/ And her clothes were hidden." Leda is naked; that which identifies her as human (her clothes) are literally "hidden" as the animal swims through the verses toward her. She is further portrayed as the nude with phrases such as: "how lovely only/ Leda's Mother knows!," "her body bare," and "in, without a stitch on." She becomes the object of sight; a nude taking the central position of a portrait.

And this typical nude is white just like the swan, the "whitest of all earthly/ Things, the white that's rarest,/.../... the down is fairest/ On the breast and pinions/ Of a proudly sailing swan." She has "limbs that on the surface/ Whitened into snow." Like the swan, she is also white, even though she is also described as "golden/ Was her body there." Similar in color, Leda and the swan morph into one. As they rest in the water, the pale white of Leda's skin and the snowy white of the swan's neck become indistinguishable. In a confusion of forms and colors, "she had stretched unnoticed." Leda is unseen by those around her, but not by the poet/ narrator or by Zeus. We have been made vividly aware of her presence.

Despite such physical ambiguity of sight, Leda's character is clearly defined as immature. This is a juvenile Leda who is warned against the dangers of the river but then swims despite her mother's instructions. Although "her Mother told her/ Not to go a-bathing,/ Leda loved the river/ And she could not keep away." Leda's disobedience becomes blameworthy as if she were a

schoolgirl reprimanded for skipping class. And yet we also ask why does her mother not want her to "go a-bathing?" Is it because she would be exposed and naked, or because she recognizes how people see her daughter? Either reason emphasizes Leda as a sight. But Leda the child defies her mother, not to show off her beauty, but because she likes "wading" and "walking by the water." Leda likes to play, but this play places her on the edge, right on the bank. She walks precariously on nature's boundary, and her mother is frightened by the (inevitable) possibilities.

Some other examples of her immaturity are found in questions asked throughout the poem, such as: "What was it she called him:/ Goosey-goosey gander?/ For she knew no better/ Way to call a swan." It is almost as if she plays a game in the role of disobedient child. This is another daughter who comes up with excuses for bad behavior in an attempt to deceive her mother. Clearly, some blame is placed on Leda. And not only is she deceptive, but she is also strange. Her peculiar behavior is located in the oddity of her story, itself stressed by the shortness of the line. In an otherwise fairly standardized format, Leda's "odd" story stands out.

Despite the impending action and descriptive details, the narrator interjects by asking, "what's the use of talking?/ There was no one in the way." No one is there to defend Leda. Her naked body is exposed and vulnerable on the river bank, and there is nothing she can do to protect herself against the conniving god. The phrase "what's the use of talking?" both recognizes Leda's inability to be kept safe ("How could she protect her/ From the winged air?"), but also is a self-reflexive statement that comments on the poem's status as literary description. The "talking" is the poem itself, and serves no purpose to this naked daughter. "What's the use?" There was nothing we can do to prevent what happened, and thus poetic description contemplating if or what may have been possible seems pointless.

More questions direct the latter half of the poem. In dialogue that is almost humorous, we hear, "What was there to say but,/ Glory be to God?" This query becomes almost sacrilegious. The poet disrespectfully praises "God" as a last resort as we struggle to make sense of what happened. For this rape does not answer, but instead poses a myriad of questions that remain unanswered. The only definites are the predicted aftereffects of the attack. But still we receive them through interrogative form: "Who would dream there lay there/ All that Trojan brightness;/ Agamemnon murdered;/ And the mighty twins?" Even though we are presented with the "effects," we still see them through the lens of doubt.

The penultimate stanza is in fact comprised entirely of questions. The swooping queries force the reader to think not just of the specific narrative that unfolds throughout the poem, but also of Leda's greater implications. Why is she important, and what does she say about us? While Leda is an extreme example, this one copulation in fact leads to "all that Trojan brightness;/ Agamemnon murdered;/ And the mighty twins." These "effects are/ Greater than their causes." But why? And "why should causes often/ Differ from effects?," "Why should what is lovely/ Fill the world with harness?/ And the most deceived be/ She who least suspects?" Repetition of the word "why" forces our attention on the unknown implications of this sex. We know what happens, we know the effects, but like Dario's Pan still wonder why. In this poem Leda is seen as a sexualized child, and she does not understand where or why she belongs. Even after hundreds of years of inquiry, Leda is still indecipherable by artists and poets alike.

The Beginning of a Shift Towards Interiority (Pre-Yeats)

Prior to the publication of Yeats' sonnet, most art and writing about Leda was presented from an exterior perspective. Yet there were hints of an imminent change. Few scattered pieces

began portraying the story from the interior. In these later works, she is more of an empowered actor, and not just an observed participant.

An early example of this impending transition was a drawing produced by Dutch draftsman Jan Toorop in 1896 called *Girl with Swans (Leda)* (Fig. 21). *Girl with Swans (Leda)* is a stylistic drawing in which Leda holds her hand up to two approaching swans. This is either a gesture of warning, one of admonition, or merely a gentle reminder that she wants the swans to



Figure 21. Jan Toorop, *Girl with Swans (Leda)* (1896)

keep their distance. She does not look at them, but directs our gaze toward her hand and flowing skirt with her downcast eyes. Four other birds fly in the background. They look like simplistic renditions of four white doves of innocence, but they may also represent her four most famous children.

Yet instead of focusing on the perceived action or story behind the piece, our eyes move to the patterns and textures of the work. The folds in Leda's dress swirl, and her hair billows

from behind her in a manner that evokes the ripples caused by the swans in water. These ripples are the only feature of the drawing that indicate movement from the swans. The swirling movements of her hair and dress also signify a sense of motion and completeness lacking in the swans. The swans are drawn almost two-dimensionally, while Leda's form is rendered in a more three-dimensional way. The shadows on her face make her a fuller character; she is alive, while the swans merely are props or cut-outs interacting in the space.

Another important detail is that Leda wears clothes, which is very uncommon in depictions of the story. Most often Leda is sprawled naked on a riverbank, languidly reacting to either what has just taken place or what is about to happen.

Along with the fact that she is clothed, Leda physically dominates the scene with her strong posture and position as she pushes the swans back with her hand. She takes up more than two thirds of the picture. She is in control. One swan leans its beak towards her and the other has its head down, yet neither swan seems to actively pursue her. Despite the fact that there are two swans in the drawing versus one Leda, she still maintains a sense of authority. Leda interacts with the swans (representations of dominant men) as an equal, and not as a subjugated woman. She is beginning to have her own distinct identity, one that is affected but not shaped by the swan.

Huxley's All-Encompassing *Leda*

Aldous Huxley's *Leda* is essential when reviewing this altering climate during the half century prior to Yeats' sonnet. The year 1920 was monumental for Leda. An increased mention of Leda in periodicals and newspapers occurs around 1920 due to the fact that Huxley had just published a book of poems entitled *Leda*. Many articles about Leda were written from around 1915 to 1920, the most common being book reviews of Huxley's *Leda*, in addition to numerous

newspapers and art journals that record auctions of classical artworks. There are also records of acquisitions by museums, which may have been because of the increased attention on Leda due to the publication of Huxley's book.

Around 1920 the name Leda was a common reference. Some articles criticize Huxley's approach to the popular myth. Off-hand allusions to Leda frequently appeared in both articles and newspapers. Authors assumed knowledge of the subject; Leda was household name. Because people definitely knew her story, new representations prompted greater scrutiny.

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Leda begins with Huxley's nineteen page account of her story, and classifies the myth into many of the categories I highlight. Sight is important in this semi-explicit account that offers Leda to us as Eve, a liminal figure, and an object of a portrait. Such various definitions may be why this poem was so popular; Huxley does not attempt to define Leda, but instead presents readers with the frames presented earlier in this work. It is then up to the reader to decide.

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The eponymous poem begins with a prologue. The Eurotas River is "singing;" there is an emphasis on the "soundless bay;" the sounds, silence, ghosts, mirrors, and echoes of a glorious time of beauty. Quickly the laughing women interject. There is talking and conversation among the women on the bank, and for the first time Leda is given speech and expresses opinions. As the conversation continues, Leda shares her ideas about love and independence. Love is a trick. She is a proud woman, described as "God-like" in her "statued queenliness." Already she has taken on her position in the artistic canon; in this account, she is "statued" even before she has sex with the swan.

After only a few pages, Zeus is introduced and becomes the focus of the poem. The king of the gods is "hugely supine" as he talks about his past conquests- the "ravished," "adulterous," "snare" at which he "laughed remembering." He is a physical god. Imagining the beautiful women of the world gives him an erection as he "pulses," "sweat[s]," "moan[s]," and tries to identify a woman with whom he can fulfill his physical desire; to quench the "fever in his blood." He is a vain god. As he searches for a woman who is worthy to have sex with him, he asks why there are so many ugly people made in his image? and "what strange deity-/ So barbarously not a Greek!- was he/ Who could mismake such beings in his own distorted image?" In these lines we begin to see that he is also a racist god. The deity who creates the people of the world must be "strange" and "barbarously not a Greek!" Not only is this god classified as different and therefore lacking, this god is also equated with barbarians and savages. Indeed, as he travels the world with his eyes, he moves over each continent and disparages each race other than the people of the Mediterranean. These are the "un-Hellenic dancing girls [who] contort/ Their yellow limbs, and gibbering masks," "the monstrous shapes," "the bastardy of apes," the "gaunt folk," "the "fierce men, as hairy and as huge as [huge hairy snuffling beasts]" who cannot compare to the "bodies fair,/ Minds comely" of the Greeks.

This critical male gaze is further exemplified as Zeus looks at the women around the world. While he visually explores these women, his gaze is described as a "beam of light" which passes over them. They are made physically aware of this presence; in this case, gaze is embodied. This process also illustrates women's subconscious feelings about sex- how they view sex, how they react to sexual attention, and how they feel physical desire. As Zeus continues looking at the women, "mantling her limbs with fear and maiden shame/ And strange desire" she is at once "longing and terrified." The "fear and maiden shame" is coupled with a "strange

desire," and that is what makes these women "terrified." At the same time they recognize themselves as objects and feel a greater presence which surveys them, judges them, and desires them, they crave this attention, "longing" the sexual pleasures proposed to them. They are not "terrified" to be seen as sexual objects, but "terrified" of their "strange desire." They are unused to this deviant side of longing. It is enticing to be attractive to another, and here the poem acknowledges desired women as physical, sexual beings similar to the figure of Zeus who longs for sexual fulfillment.

Leda too feels his glance as she swims. She "was conscious of that hungry glance,/ And knew it for an eye of fearful power/ That did so hot and thunderously lour." At this moment Leda is both an object of sight and something to be eaten. The "hungry glance" is the visual gaze, the instinctual appetite, and also the desire to completely control and consume.

This total conquering of the body manifested by the idea of sight is reflected in the violent war imagery that occurs when Zeus (Jove in this poem) appears to Aphrodite and the two plot the consummation. After Jove sees Leda he claims that "he must possess/ That perfect form or die- possess or die." Like a warrior or soldier in battle, Jove must either win or perish. And in this case, to win is to "possess/ That perfect form," to become master of the object he desires. Most explicitly, Jove and Aphrodite are described as a "treacherous pair" "planning their rape; while she,/ who was to be their victim, joyously/ Laughed like a child." Here Huxley directly acknowledges the predetermined motivations of what he clearly states to be a "rape." This can therefore not be considered anything other than a violation.

Jove is also equated with another male tempter. His "snow-soft plumage" quickly becomes serpentine as the "warm softness" of his down is harshly contrasted with the image of his "feathers inlaid like little scales/ On his sleek neck." Jove is at once God, swan, and serpent.

The "little scales," and the fact that when "feeling [the scales] she shuddered, and her teeth/ Grated on edge; for there was something strange/ And snake-like in the touch," inextricably link Jove with the serpent's diabolical intentions. As serpent and devil, he serves only himself and his desires. He deceives Leda into thinking he needs refuge from the eagle (Aphrodite), and thus is willingly accepted into her lap despite her obvious doubts about his motivations.

Despite all the negativity surrounding the figure of Jove in the poem, however, he is still characterized as "dazzlingly white," "a splendid swan," "her lovely, hapless swan," "proud-arching opulent loveliness." This appears to be a positive portrait of a rapist. Toward the end of the poem "her eyes, [are] how happy now/ To see the swan still safe." Again the idea of sight directs the poem. This is an account of what happened as narrated by the different eyes through which we see the action; later descriptions of the swan appear to be Leda's thoughts about her soon-to-be assailant.

Only at the very end of the poem is this "love" actualized. From the outside, we watch as Leda rubs the swan's "eager neck" (a neck that also can stand for the penis; she may give him a hand job). Jove the swan gives Leda "for every kiss a little amorous peck/.../ Leaving upon her young white breast and cheek/ And arms the red print of his playful beak." The "red print" highlights the whiteness and innocence of Leda before this encounter, and the physical redness of sex; the redness of genitals and virginal blood stands in stark opposition to the pristine backdrop of Leda's slowly penetrated flesh. They lie, "mingling," until "she felt/ That downy warmth strike through her flesh and melt/ The bones and marrow of her strength away," a subdued image of the tearing of the hymen that connects to "the broken wall" of Yeats. She is physically overcome by his power; her "strength" is destroyed. She is physically disembodied through the pleasures of this sexual encounter and is also a conquered woman. Jove is in control.

She lies "scarce breathing, deathly still;/ Save when a quick, involuntary thrill/ Shook her sometimes with passing shuddering;" even her orgasm is completely manipulated by Jove. This "involuntary thrill" is unasked, but Jove does not care because he is satisfied. He pretends "to be her veil and keep her from the shame/ of naked light and the sun's noonday flame," yet merely does so out of a sense of obligation. Her "shame" is the same shame that "terrified" the women Jove originally looks at. Yeats must have read Huxley; Huxley's "shuddering" of "terrified" women is later echoed in Yeats' lines- the "shudder in the loins" and "terrified vague fingers." Even though Leda may desire physical pleasure, she is ashamed and "terrified" of what happened.

The poem also cycles back upon itself as it ends, just as it begins, with a sonic reference. Huxley concludes his narrative poem by writing, "Then one sharp sound, that might have been a cry/ Of utmost pleasure or of utmost pain,/ Broke sobbing forth, and all was still again." Even at this point, we are still not sure what the sound is; the cry could either be "pleasure" or "pain"- sounds indistinguishable during sex. Because every penetration is violence enacted on the female body the "pain" reading seems logical, yet there is also "pleasure" received in this violation through orgasm. The reason Leda could only produce the "utmost" is because Zeus is divine, and therefore extreme in his characteristics. His divinity makes this an intense sexual encounter. But again, the conjunction "or" creates doubt. Her reaction is not predictable, because it could be either "or." Leda is expressly liminal in this severe depiction because the two options are the opposites of the dichotomy. In order to situate Leda one must make an arbitrary distinction because after the "cry/.../ all was still again." The word "still" seems to imply a calm lack of motion. With one extreme noise there was action, but now silence. We do not hear anything else. Additionally, "still" may also mean "still" in terms of as it were before; hearkening back to the

traditional times of the past. "Still" also prefigures "the great wings beating still" from Yeats' poem, written three years after the publication of Huxley's work. Yeats' first line ("A sudden blow: the great wings beating still) remains in this hesitant boundary. "Still" implies both action and inaction, but instead of coming to a consensus persists forever undecided.

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The mood was thus set for Yeats. People recognized Leda as a commonly referenced, culturally significant mythological figure, and were also aware of more modern representations of the myth. A special cable sent to the *New York Times* and published in the December 15, 1923 issue further illustrates the importance of Leda at this time. The article refers to Michelangelo's *Leda and the Swan* as "one of the most famous paintings in the world" ("London Leda" 2), and explains how art expert Maurice Roy can prove that the version in London is not Michelangelo's famous original work. The mere fact that this debate existed illustrates the enduring significance of the story. No matter what time period, we are shown that Leda is an indistinct persona, very much worth the trouble of debate.

4. Yeats and Leda

Leda and the Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

-W.B. Yeats

"I am king of the cats" –W.B. Yeats

Writing "Leda and the Swan"

"Leda and the Swan" was written on September 18, 1923, and was published in *The Dial* in June 1924 (Jeffares, *A Commentary* 295). Why did Yeats choose to write the poem about Leda? He said that he "wrote 'Leda and the Swan' because the editor [George Russell, AE] of a political review [*The Irish Statesman*] asked me for a poem." *The Irish Statesman* did not

specifically ask for a Leda poem, but Yeats thought: "after the individualist, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularised by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries.' Then I thought 'Nothing is now possible but some movement or birth from above, preceded by some violent annunciation'" (295). Zeus' rape of Leda while in the form of a swan was the "violent annunciation" he was looking for. Indeed, Richard Ellmann writes in *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, that the myth

held his mind since his first use of it in 'The Adoration of the Magi' in 1896, where he had prophesied that 'another Leda would open her knees to the swan' and begin a new age. The bird's rape of the human, the coupling of god and woman, the moment at which one epoch ended and another began, the antinomies engendering breast to breast- in the act which included all these Yeats had the violent symbol for the transcendence of opposites which he needed (Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man* 241-2).

This was a new cycle of destruction and life; a new interpretation of Leda. In this sonnet, Yeats created a "violent annunciation" that began "a new age" (241). This was an age of opposites that questioned whether "power and knowledge [could] ever exist together in this world, or were they, as he had reason to suspect, contraries ever at war? Was wisdom the ripe fruit obtainable only when the sense of taste was gone?" (242). Was this poem only possible in an age devoid of meaning and hope? Was violence the only impetus of formation?

Personal and political factors also affected the creation of Yeats' poem. After living for several years in England, Yeats returned to Ireland in the spring of 1922, after which he received honorary degrees from Queen's University and Trinity College, was appointed to "the Senate of

the newly formed Free State," and in 1924 won the Nobel Prize in literature. Despite all of these successes, he wrote bitter poems from 1922-27 (240); what appeared as a successful life was in fact tainted. This bitterness may have been caused by his father's death in New York in 1922. Life and work became difficult to write about; "no static unity was possible for him; he had to submit every integration to 'the shock of new material,' destroying then rebuilding" (240). World War One had decimated the lands and people of Europe and called for rebirth; Leda's violent rape led to the birth of her children and the ensuing Trojan War. In order to be rebuilt, one needed to destroy. The Irish civil war that took place between June 1922 and May 1923 also "affected Yeats deeply" because he identified "his country's troubles with his own" (240). His country's problems became personal; his was a world of turmoil that demanded hope. On top of that, Yeats was beginning to age- he was going blind in one eye, starting to become deaf, and was becoming increasingly physically inactive (241)- all factors that set the climate for writing "Leda."

Yet when actually crafting the poem, what were Yeats' influences? In his book *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*, Norman Jeffares claims that "the poem was founded upon Michelangelo's painting which Yeats had seen in Venice and of which he has a large photographic coloured copy; it was on his table as he wrote the poem"(Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats* 202)- although in his *Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, Jeffares writes that the poem was based on either Michelangelo's painting or an Etruscan bas-relief in the British Museum (Jeffares, *A Commentary* 296). In his article, "Yeats Without Analogue," Ellmann acknowledges both of these possibilities, suggesting that Michelangelo's *Leda* may be the image upon which Yeats based the poem, but that the bas-relief in the British Museum was the more likely inspiration. He describes that "in [the carving] the details are in fact the same as in the first part of the poem. The

resemblance is too close for coincidence" (Ellmann, "Yeats Without Analogue" 32). Ellmann considers the striking similarities between the content of the bas-relief and the action described in the poem to be conclusive evidence linking the two works. The poem mirrors the bas-relief through the first two stanzas, but then introduces the results: the "shudder," "the broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ And Agamemnon dead" in the final sestet. From where did Yeats get these aftereffects? Yeats saw the rape in the bas-relief, but not the "burning" of Troy. This must be where Yeats as author intervened and produced a Leda greater than the rape. She is not just a victim, but an influential character in history.

"Leda and the Swan"

The title itself establishes Leda as an important figure. This is not a story in contention; "Leda and the Swan" is foremost about Leda, and secondarily about the swan. The alternate version of the story in which Nemesis is the woman pursued does not exist here. "Leda and the Swan" positions Leda as the main, acting character, first mentioned, and more importantly, named. Zeus, a male deity represented by "the swan," is never named. Naming, a form of identity, power, and voice, is given to Leda even though "the swan" is the one acting here. Yet, "the swan" is "the" swan, not "a," or not "her" swan. Although not named, he is "the swan," the one and only, just as he is the sole king of the gods. Jane Davidson Reid posits that although Zeus is not named, "as bird, however, he is magnificently present in Yeats' poem. For it is Zeus in the swan... [who] let her drop" (380). Reid continues by arguing that "the god, then, is all-present- alarming, caressing, enveloping, rushing, pounding in brute blood, always in that large feathered glory, and always indifferent to the fate of mortals, in his pleasure creating a new world of misery and glory, of brightness and dark falling" (380). Zeus omnipotent exists, although only indirectly, indifferently; Leda is acted upon by his "indifferent beak." So even

though Leda is granted power by being named and through the retelling of her story, Zeus is still able to maintain his powerful function as king of the gods.

This question of power and authority immediately strikes us when reading the title. We automatically speculate: who is the authority figure of this poem? As the poem progresses, we continue to ask questions- questions that are raised when analyzing the Yeats sonnet and that remain pertinent in the greater study of the Leda story. Does giving in physically indicate mental acquiescence? Leda is often depicted as experiencing sexual pleasure- seen through her facial expressions or posture- so does that imply that she desires this interaction? We have seen that giving in physically does not necessarily imply consent; an initial unwillingness that is replaced by physical acquiescence does not indicate desire; you can be physically overcome, but mentally resistant. So to what extent is this physical pleasure indicative of her desire? It may depend on the creator, or how we read the piece.

I also have attempted to answer the broad question of what exactly does Leda gain or lose? "Knowledge" and "power"- she is named and renamed throughout history and plays a huge role in Greek myth and history. She gains divine insight through her encounter with Zeus, but she is still the victim of a rape. And her trauma is retold for our entertainment, not to help her cope with her past. The multiple retellings of her story can therefore be seen as another rape; that of the author's imposition of his or her views about what happened. Her story is told, but not on her terms. She has been transformed by culture/ history/ literature/ art into an object of telling and sight; she is a theme, not a woman.

So then we ask, "what actually happened?" a question we can never truly answer. The ambiguity surrounding the origin of the myth, coupled with the multiple interpretations of the same story, create a vague atmosphere dominated by authorial choice. This inability of certainty

tempts us (we Pandoras and Eves), and, as humans, we continue to search for answers to an unanswerable question.

Because ultimately we ask the biggest, vaguest, most unanswerable query: who is Leda? The different frames presented earlier give us access to Leda; she becomes more tangible when we place her into these various categories and perceive her through many frames. She can be seen as explicit- a veritable porn star of antiquity, a woman who sees (or does not see), a liminal figure, an exterior portrait, a representation of the eternal female. She is a woman of extreme beauty (Zeus chose to sleep with her) and gave birth to Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. She is associated with Eve (tempted by a serpentine figure, she brings mankind to a fall), and also with the Virgin Mary (both women are impregnated by a divine power and have momentous births). Furthermore, she is a symbolic vessel through which we implicitly talk about sex. Leda allows us to talk without using explicit terms; to hide our opinions; to couch sex in symbolism. Our attitudes towards sex are both reflected and affected by Leda, whoever she may be.

Narrative and Form

The form of the sonnet helped Yeats create such an atmosphere of questioning. Helen Vendler writes that Yeats often wrote Petrarchan sonnets "because of its two-part verse structure, [which] falls easily into such dialectical structures as question and answer, or one view versus another view" (Vendler 148). This dialectical structure "appealed to Yeats, with its two or more potentially contrastive parts, as formally embodying- as a more linear structure could not- that quarrel within ourselves out of which, he said, we could make poetry" (148). Discord creates meaning because we attempt to understand the dissimilar parts of an issue. The "quarrel within

ourselves" is therefore both the fundamental human state of questioning, and also the development of ideas and meaning created as the sonnet progresses in doubt.

Such a "quarrel" is shown through the in-between mixture of sonnet forms. In "Leda and the Swan," "Yeats composes a hybrid Shakespearean-Petrarchan sonnet, its parts 'mismatched' on this occasion to represent the engendering (by Zeus on Leda) of the half-divine, half-human Helen. Yeats emphasizes the several parts of the sonnet by separating them with white space" (173). These two individuals do not belong together. The two forms of the sonnet do not match, just as Leda and the swan make an unnatural pair. As Vendler writes, this clear divide between two realms is further shown in the structure of lines:

'Leda and the Swan' structures itself at first in half-lines, then in whole lines. The half-lines represent the two participants in Helen's conception, and the speaker is uncertain whether he should ratify the absolute right of Zeus to set destiny going in a new direction or should sympathize with Leda's initial terror. Ascribing parts... to the two participants, the speaker goes back and forth from the swan-god to the hapless 'girl,' until the two protagonists join in a mutual single-line climax, (174)

a division between opposing elements highlighted in the first quatrain. The first three lines of the quatrain are divided into two parts, as "the staggering girl" sustains "great wings beating," "her thighs caressed," and "her nape caught in his bill." Only then can the concluding line of the stanza be complete: "he holds her helpless breast upon his breast." The action has momentarily calmed. Our eyes are able to smoothly read through the line and the action is less disjointed; we see the entire action, and not just fragments of "dark webs" or "thighs caressed."

The narrative structure of the poem also clearly illustrates the action. After the two beginning quatrains frame the action and explain what happens (a rape and Leda's developing acquiescence), the concluding sestet then reveals the results of this incident. We follow the narrative trajectory of Leda's encounter with the swan to see the initial complicated movement of struggle and submission followed by a bifurcated description of the ensuing effects and enduring consequences: physically and historically (the tangible results), and then mentally and intellectually (the "knowledge" and "power").

And while the narrative is constructed by the contents of the poem, it is also very skillfully fashioned by the form of the sonnet. The dialectical structure helps create an atmosphere of questioning, and enjambment highlights the ambiguity of ideas. With enjambment, an idea is not over at the end of the line, and we try to figure out what will come next. For example, there are "wings beating still," a vague phrase that recalls Huxley and prompts the question: "still" what? Are they still beating, or are they still, as in motionless? The phrase we are finally given, "wings beating still/ above the staggering girl" does not answer the question, so we face three solutions. Either the wings are still beating (they have not stopped), or they provide a contrast ("the staggering girl" is set against what used to be "beating" wings that are now "still"), or they are a physical description of a bird flapping his wings (he hovers but appears to be "still"). In any case, this is a moment suspended in time and captured by the author; an arrested moment of trauma that resonates throughout history.

Use of enjambment continues to create uncertainty throughout the poem; we question: what is it that "those terrified vague fingers push;" what is it that "a shudder in the loins engenders there;" by what are "her thighs caressed?" We want the answers immediately, but enjambment forces us to continue reading to the end of a line, and then to pause, and then to

move our eyes down and to the left at the start of the following line. We do not know what the next line will bring, but must wait to find out. Anticipation carries us forward- we do not know the answers to these questions, but continue reading because we are eager to know. This is both a demonstration of Yeats' mastery of form as content and also a reflection of the broad public interest with Leda, demonstrated by the various interpretations and ambiguities surrounding the myth. We are never sure of what has happened, what is happening, or what will happen.

Because although the sonnet appears initially to be a declaration, the majority of the poem is structured around three questions. First, "how can those terrified vague fingers push/ the feathered glory from her loosening thighs?" Second, "And how can body, laid in that white rush,/ but feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" And thirdly, and most importantly, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" These questions are, in fact, the catalysts of the work, and for our understanding of the poem.

In order to understand from where these queries emerge, however, it is necessary to follow the chronological development of the sonnet. The first three strong words ("a sudden blow") are offset by a colon and introduce the rest of the poem (or at least the first quatrain), which consists of the explanation of the sudden blow. Immediately, this "sudden blow" slaps us in the face. Without delay, we are hit by the action. Reid writes that "Yeats, with his first words... enters the experience of the girl 'staggering' under the impact" (Reid 378); that "the movement of Yeats' lines is not only arrested, as it were, in mid-air; the girl caught up, never quite dropped, by the omnipotent bird; it is a movement within Leda's experience (378). The readers of the poem feel the blow alongside her. We are buffeted by the "great wings beating" as our mouths emphatically pronounce each violent syllable. "Staggering," we read the second line, difficulty pronouncing the dactyl of the "staggering girl" as she lurches at us, only to fumble

her/our way through the line. Thomas Whitaker also agrees that, "'Leda and the Swan' begins, like 'Two Songs from a Play,' with overwhelming emphatic participation... After subjecting us to that incursion of a starkly physical power, the octave prolongs the hovering moment of anticipation and moves from direct perception into questions that heighten our awareness of the swan's nature even as they imply the speaker's imperfect apprehension of the event" (Whitaker 107). Whitaker also notes our "emphatic participation." This is not a pretty poem that allows us to sit back and read it through; it is an experience of "direct perception" that takes us along with it; a moment captured in time that then transcends time as it brings us from the Eurotas, to Troy, to Greece, and then, finally, to us the readers.

Indeed, we begin to enter Leda's experience along with her. Leda's exteriority is subverted and replaced by interior experience. Vendler describes how the quatrains "project Leda's view of what is happening" (Vendler 175). According to Vendler, "the first quatrain sketches the elements of the scene, and the second poses two rhetorical questions, best seen as reflecting Leda's own thoughts, of which the first justifies her physical submission and the second justifies her acquiescence in pleasure" (175). We are not outside of Leda's experience anymore, but exist within it. Ellmann agrees with Vendler's argument when he says that "the interest is centered on the mortal woman, on the psychological implications for her and, by extension, for us. We watch Leda's reactions, not the god's" (Ellmann, "Yeats Without Analogue" 33). Zeus becomes a lesser character. This story is no longer about his "glory;" it now replicates Leda's interior experience.

Yeats skillfully recreates her experience for us and with us; we feel the story with her as we too are manipulated- this time by Yeats' verse. While reading, we are tricked into believing the affectionate language of the poem, even though we are bombarded by a turbulent scene of

violence and affection. We experience oppressive wings, a "staggering girl," helplessness, caresses. And while being "caressed" seems loving and affectionate, here it is undeniably rape. Although Leda appears to be seduced by the swan, this is a rape story.

Furthermore, the "great wings beating," later mirrored in the "beating" of "the strange heart," produces a mood of violence coupled with affection. Using the same, strong action two times in the poem sets one usage against the other. In the first quatrain we see "the great wings beating still" and the second quatrain presents "the strange heart beating where it lies." Both instances show an active "beating," the former, of "wings," the latter, a "strange heart." Determining from where these sources of "beating" emerge thus becomes vital to our understanding of the poem. Clearly, the "wings beating" come from the swan (rather, Zeus disguised as the swan). However, the "strange heart beating where it lies" is amalgamated with the "body." In this poem, "body" is a metonymy for Leda, but still does not establish the "strange heart beating" as Leda's. Indeed, the "strange heart beating" could just as logically be Zeus'. If it were Zeus' "heart beating," it would be "strange" because it is not hers; it is a foreign heart. Yet it also makes sense to think of the "strange heart beating where it lies" as belonging to Leda. With that reading, her heart is "strange" because she does not recognize it; these feelings of physical pleasure and bodily desire are unknown to the virgin queen. Also, "beating where it lies" invokes the image of Leda sprawled on the river bank either before or after sex with the swan. She takes on the form of what Bram Dijkstra refers to as the "nymph with the broken back" (Dijkstra 97). According to Dijkstra, fin-de-siecle artists often painted women in nature lying outstretched in contorted postures as if they had "injured, perhaps even broken, [their] back[s]" (100). This position evoked feelings of vulnerability and passivity, but also a desire for sexual aggression—all sentiments commonly associated with Leda (100).

The "wings beating" and the "strange heart beating" further serve to replicate the sound and action of "beating" as the multiple stresses and single syllable pound down on us. Additional examples of words that echo action are the words "loosening," "terrified," "rush," "shudder." These words are almost onomatopoeic; the "loosening thighs" seem to slide open with the long "o" and the smooth "s"; the "sh" of "rush" projects the sound and motion forward; the word "terrified" trips over itself in fear; the two strong syllables of "shudder" shake in spot next to each other. The story that occurs in the poem truly takes place on the page as we read. The assonance of "s" sounds in the first quatrain creates a hissing sound that may reflect the sound made by an agitated swan. It is a gentle sound with an underlying connection to the brutal swan, and also with another animal tempter- the serpent from Eden.

One more commonly used sound is the "b" sound. In this sonnet the "b" sounds bring violence; "blow," "beating," "broken," "burning," "brute blood" are all words that forcefully push themselves off the page. These "b" words press themselves on us almost as if they punch their meaning into us- and all are vital to the narrative of the sonnet. The other few "b" words in the poem are body parts that become related by sound. "Bill," "body," and "beak" are now inextricably linked through a sound device despite their disparate associations. Leda is a woman (human) who interacts with a swan (animal).

Animal, God, Leda

Yet the descriptions of both characters produce animalistic identities. Leda is identified by name only in the title; afterward she is represented as a human only when she is "the staggering girl." Otherwise, we see her only as "fingers," "body," "heart," "thighs," "loins," "nape," and "breast." In comparison, Zeus is never named but is similarly recognized as the individual parts of "breast," "wings," "feathered glory," "webs," "bill," and "beak." Therefore

both Leda and Zeus are regarded as animals, but their animalism has different implications. Zeus has chosen to transform himself into a swan in order to chase a woman he desires. Leda, on the other hand, has been animalized by Yeats, the male author, a move which may have been Yeats commenting on what at the turn of the century were considered the base, bestial desires of women; on "woman's appetite for elemental pleasures" (Dijkstra 318). Using similar language to describe woman as he did the swan equates Leda with the beast and also makes it rational that she, a beast herself, would desire sexual intercourse with an animal.

This animalization is also illustrated by the word "nape," which connotes the scruff of an animal's neck by which a mother animal carries her young and also the scene of animals mating when one animal grabs onto the submissive animal's nape during copulation. Leda's "nape [is] caught in his bill," which supports both senses of an animal relationship. And when "her thighs [are] caressed," they are not touched by human hands but are "caressed/ by the dark webs." These "webs," which should be hands, contrast against her "terrified vague fingers." The fingers themselves are described as "terrified" and "vague"- immediately there is a sense of distant, insecure hesitation; she is both scared and quivering, but also "vague"- even the word itself lacks strong meaning. The "dark webs" however, have weight. They are "dark," and thus carry an oppressive, animalistic power. Also, the phrase "dark webs" produces a disembodied vision of the webbed feet of a swan, but also connotes intricate spider webs, artfully designed to capture prey. In no way are these "dark webs" human.

Another characteristic of Zeus as animal is found in the words "bill" (at the start of the poem) versus "beak" (in the last line of the poem). The word "bill" has a decidedly animal quality. A "bill" is a beak, but a person would never be described as having a "bill." "Bill" connotes a hard, sharp object, one of two powerful parts that come together with force. A person,

however, can be described as having a "beak;" for some reason "beak" implies a more human organ. It is a solid, single, almost cylindrical object. In this case, the beak represents the penis. A swan's neck is thin, sinuous, and snakelike, which immediately associates swan with phallus. And at the end of the neck (the shaft) there is a head that acts on its desires. Using "bill" here would draw us away from these associations- something that "beak" does not. Instead, "beak" implies a strong, forceful, weapon-like image of the penis. We are made to think of a head pursuing what it desires; in this case the penis of the swan chasing after Leda so they can have sex.

The "glory" is also a representation of the penis. It is at once glorious because Zeus is a god, and also because his penis brings physical pleasure to Leda. The sexual encounter of "breast upon his breast" seems almost human- for how would a swan and woman position themselves while having sex? Face to face (consensual sex, characteristic of humans), or coming from behind (standard to most animals; associated with often unwanted domination in order to procreate)? Yet positioning themselves "breast upon his breast" would have been physically possible because swans are one of the few avian species with a phallus, and they also engage in strikingly humanlike mating behavior. Not only do swans "reportedly mate for life" (seen in the "nine and fifty swans/.../ lover by lover" in Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole"), as do humans, they mate with the "female sitting low in water, [then the] male mounts her, sometimes causing female to become submerged, and grasps her neck-feathers in his bill until copulation is complete. In postcopulatory display, immediately after coition, pair rise out of water breast to breast, necks extended, bills pointing up, with prolonged snorting" (Ciaranca). Obviously men and women are not often described as grasping each other by the necks and snorting, but they do characteristically engage in face to face copulation. Also, the fact that the male swan "grasps her

neck-feather in his bill" and that "immediately after coition, [the] pair rise[s] out of water breast to breast" corresponds anatomically with Yeats' description of the sex, with "her nape caught in his bill,/ He holds her helpless breast upon his breast." The physical act of human and swan copulation is definitely possible- Zeus knew what bird to change into in order to woo Leda successfully. However, the word "feathered" (although vaguely alluding to human pubic hair) insists that this god is not in the form of a human man but has taken on the role of a lascivious waterfowl.

Yet he is also a god, and manipulates Leda to his physical liking. As the poem progresses, Leda transitions from struggle to unconscious physical pleasure to some form of influence and power. The first quatrain is the most physically confrontational; there is an image of "wings beating," a "staggering girl," "her nape caught," and finally, the fact that "he holds her helpless breast upon his breast." At this point of the sonnet Zeus is fully in control. Leda is being "held;" a word that means both nurtured, but also captured. She is "helpless," and thus unable to act or respond. Her "helpless breast" evokes a physical image of beauty, as well as her nakedness, and the heart that will soon be "beating where it lies."

Physical Resistance and Pleasure

The next quatrain continues to depict Leda's wavering resistance. Yeats asks: 'how can those terrified vague fingers push/ the feathered glory from her loosening thighs?' Leda, along with the readers, is unsure of what is happening. By asking the question, Yeats hints at the impossibility of resistance, although her "terrified vague fingers" attempt to hold back the godly swan. And then Yeats asks, "and how can body, laid in that white rush,/ but feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" She has no choice but to feel that heart. The "white rush" here generates

the sound and commotion of the white swan, the sound of rushes growing on the river bank, or the sudden, rushed moment of ejaculation.

The sexual imagery in the poem is also developed in the "loosening thighs" and especially by the "shudder in the loins." Both of these are moments of physical acquiescence, although may be fear reflexes. Even if Leda resists, her body is unable to combat the physical pleasure received through penetration. She is still resisting, but her body concedes pleasure. The "shudder in the loins [that] engenders there/ the broken wall" symbolizes orgasm and also the loss of virginity. Often Leda was perceived almost as a virgin queen, equated with the chaste Virgin Mary (Jeffares, *A Commentary* 297), so when she and Zeus had sex, "the broken wall" is the "broken wall" of her hymen, as well as the "broken wall, the burning roof and tower" of Troy. And while her pleasure appears involuntary, Leda as woman is breaking down- in the title she is named; then she becomes "the staggering girl"; then she is divided into various body parts; then she becomes "body"; then finally all that remains are the consequences of this event- the "shudder in the loins"- that causes the Trojan War, and also the death of Agamemnon.

Leda as Authority: "Knowledge with his power"?

Agamemnon's death is made unavoidably present in the first part of the sestet. The eleventh line of the sonnet is divided into two parts; "and Agamemnon dead" exists in the blank space on the page, alone. Just as Agamemnon was killed unexpectedly, the line ends quickly, abruptly, and prematurely. The empty space on the page forces the reader to pause before continuing to read the rest of the off-set eleventh line. As Reid writes, "the effect of the broken eleventh line is calculated and perfect. Agamemnon- and with him mortals- lies dead on some vast empty space of the page. And from that huge, unutterably dead glory shudderingly engendered, the line turns to Leda in acute precariousness" (Reid 381). Only after complete

destruction can Leda become the focus. Her physical struggle is over; Leda is "caught up," "mastered."

Yet at this point in the sonnet, the language betrays Leda's authority. She has been physically conquered, but her mental capacity has been enlarged. She has transformed from being "caught in his bill," to being "caught up"- excited and eager to portray her new agency. But to pose Yeats' final question: "did she put on his knowledge with his power/ before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" To an extent, yes. Although she is physically "mastered," she is still able to gain something through the encounter. She has "put on" this divine "knowledge" and "power" like a garment she would wear, an image very unlike the powerless associations of "staggering," "caught," "holds her helpless," "terrified" that occur in the early parts of the poem. Now Leda is able to "put on"; she "engenders."

Whitaker writes that what is seen as "postcoital indifference merges with the indifference of that destructively creative power toward the vessels of its impulse, and the climactic question almost answers itself by being asked. The visionary speaker, at least, feels the power that courses through history without being able to understand it" (Whitaker 108). Through this encounter, Leda has taken on a role of historical, lasting figure, an influential role we acknowledge, even if we do not truly understand. In her analysis however, Vendler clearly elucidates this transfer of power onto Leda by writing:

We see, for a moment, the swan-lover-god in one three part epithet, as Leda, knowing him in all three of his aspects for the first time, understands that she has been caught up and mastered by the 'brute (animal) blood (human) of the air (divine).'. . . Although he has had to let Leda assume his generative power, Zeus does not want Leda to descry his plan: if she does, he loses his uniqueness as sole

knower of the future. Yet, was it possible... for Leda to enter into physical oneness with all three aspects- swan, lover, god- of Zeus and *not* gain some access to his mind? (Vendler 176)

She is thrice "mastered," but by being "mastered," gains a greater understanding of the world- Zeus' gift of foresight. She is able to physically know the animal, human, and divine qualities of Zeus, and thus gains an intimate understanding of the "knowledge" and "power" that unites her with the immortal world of the gods; no longer is Zeus "sole knower of the future." The "knowledge" and "power" represents a higher level of consciousness that transcends our mortal world; she has been affected by Zeus, king of the gods, and now cannot escape this influence; "putting on Zeus' knowledge would be for Leda the assumption of an intellectual power to match the biological power that she certainly 'put on'; and the question posed in the draft suggests that Zeus could not have it all his own way. Descending to the human, he gives the human access to the divine" (176). But once touched by divinity, she was never able to return fully to the normalcy of our mortal, human world.

This "knowledge" also may refer to different forms of intellect. Multiple readings of "knowledge" evoke both the Biblical form "to know" versus the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Indeed, sometimes it is not good to search for God's knowledge. Eve pays a price for the knowledge she gains by being made to suffer and "labour" indefinitely. So although Leda gains such "knowledge," she has been made both greater and lesser by this gift.

Violent Annunciation, Universal Body

Sword agrees that Leda is active- physically manifested in the "body" that "engenders." She is an important figure in history; again the text connects to Yeats' poem, "The Mother of God." In "The Mother of God" we see the "[w]ings beating about the room;" feel "[t]he terror of

all terrors that I bore/ The Heavens in my womb" (Yeats, "Mother of God") that are reflected in the "wings beating" of "Leda and the Swan." To Sword, Leda is not a passive vessel. She writes, "as a locus, then, of both human potentiality and historic process, Leda's body participates in and indeed encompasses the whole cycle of birth, destruction, and regeneration that her rape initiates, embracing if not necessarily reconciling the dialectically opposed forces- humanity and divinity, spirit and flesh, motion and stasis, male and female, love and war- that inhabit and energize the poem" (Sword 308). Through her body, Leda has become universal. She (unfortunately and tragically) becomes influential because she was assaulted. These dialectically opposed forces create an atmosphere of destruction leading to rebirth- from one opposite emerges its disparate counterpart. For, as Whitaker questions, "but may Leda, in suffering a more complete violation than that suffered by this speaker, have been momentarily opened to fuller vision? When the walls are broken, the veils rent, light may flood the soul" (Whitaker 108-9). From the rape emerges enlightenment otherwise impossible; only with destruction is Leda able to grow.

Talking about "Leda"

This representation of female power may have emerged from Yeats' intimate predilections. Toomey explains that "Yeats was interested in power, and, as both his personal experience and the numerous goddesses, queens and witches who populate his poetry suggest, he was also drawn towards powerful women" (Toomey 249). Accordingly, it makes sense that Leda is first seen as victim but then ultimately as a powerful woman, as she gains power through Zeus. Indeed, all we would have known about Leda before her rape is that she was a queen of extreme beauty. She gains power and influence (textually, historically) through her rape, and the consequences thereafter. Some may say that her irresistibility to Zeus is a form of power. She was a beautiful, virginal queen; Zeus could not help himself.

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For this poem is not truly about Leda, but is a vehicle to talk about the ideas surrounding her story. In his essay, "Yeats Without Analogue," Ellmann comments on Yeats' focus "on the psychological implications for [Leda] and, by extension, for us. We watch Leda's reactions, not the god's. And Yeats goes beyond the strangely assorted pair to meditate on the destructiveness of sexual passion, on its power to upheave the world" (Ellmann, "Yeats Without Analogue" 33). To Yeats, passion leads to destruction; sex, and the ensuing conception of life, leads to destruction, and an apocalypse. Toomey accredits this attitude to "his early absorption in the Romantic and Decadent traditions, his admiration of Pater, Wilde, and Moreau, and his own unhappy personal experiences, [that] combined to produce in Yeats an adherence to what Giorgio Melchiori calls the 'decadent idea of the fusion of love and death, of beauty and destruction" (Toomey 228). Thus Leda is an ideal symbol to illustrate these ideas- her perfected body and beauty, coupled with intercourse with the divine swan, could only but lead to death and destruction. Because "the price of immortality, however, is death" (230); beauty of her degree demands devastation; in this world there is no other choice than to be destroyed.

Yet we desire this destructive creation; indeed "the urge to destruction, like the urge to creation, is a defiance of limits; we transcend ourselves by refusing to accept completely anything that is human, and then indomitably we begin fabricating again" (Ellmann, "Yeats Without Analogue" 42). Ruin intrigues us. According to Yeats, we know that from one apocalypse emerges the next birth, but are cleansed by this interaction with loss because while losing, we inevitably gain.

Answering Yeats' Final Question

There remains an incalculable divide separating the different spaces of existence in Yeats' sonnet. Our diverging, contradictory ideals are illustrated by its dialectical structure; this dialecticism produces a divide between the incompatible realms of mortal and divine that Yeats loved to play with so much. "Leda and the Swan" is generated from "a feeling [Yeats] had from childhood of the tantalizing imperfection of human life; his own experience told him that power and knowledge could never exist together, that to acquire one was to lose the other" (33). So what does Leda end up with? If, as Ellmann writes, Yeats believed that "power and knowledge could never exist together," what has Leda gained? Are "knowledge" and "power" incompatible? Or is she endowed with these qualities through her divine encounter? This transfer of power is only possible because she loses control of her physical body; in order to transcend the mental capacity of mortals, she needs to lose control of her physical, mortal self.

In fact, she is inspired by this loss. Because of her violent encounter with the swan, she "engenders." As Yeats writes in "Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop," "But Love has pitched his mansion in/ The place of excrement;/ For nothing can be sole or whole/ That has not been rent." (Yeats, "Crazy Jane"); "Love" is not the beautiful, romantic concept of devotion, but a violent, albeit necessary act of creation. At once Leda is both "rent" ("the broken wall") and she "engenders;" two words that connect "rent," or being torn open, with rendering, and then with engendering. Without this violence, she is incapable of engendering- physically illustrated by the hymen that needs to be ripped during the first sexual encounter in order to engender new life.

Indeed, she is not able to produce historically important births until she is raped by Zeus. Sword argues that "although poets and mystics throughout history have figured creative and religious inspiration in terms of sexual union and shared sexual ecstasy, the dark side of

inspiration is violation, a violent overwhelming of self by Other that finds its sexual analogy in rape" (Sword 305). Insight and inspiration can be viewed through the metaphor of sex. Desired, good sex leads to positive associations with inspiration, but inspiration can also be seen as an unconscious, uncontrolled penetration of the mind. Effectively, the "sexual analogy in rape" manifests itself through our incapacity to control ideas that subconsciously, or unconsciously, emerge.

So while on one hand Leda gains influence, "knowledge," and "power," she does so on someone else's terms. She is not master of herself, but a doll lying on the river bank manipulated by the swan, and then by Yeats, and also by every artist and writer who constructs new tellings of her story. Although she appears to gain "knowledge" and "power," her identity and experience are crafted by others, and never by herself.

5. Conclusion: "The great wings beating still"

"The swan made a lumpish jump forward and settled on her loins. She thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came down all around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realising she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. The obscene swan had mounted her. She screamed again. There were feathers in her mouth. She heard the curtains swish to amid a patter of applause and thought it was the sound of the sea"

-from *The Magic Toyshop* by Angela Carter

The Leda theme continued to proliferate following the publication of Yeats' iconic sonnet. Yet she was a transformed Leda. After World War Two, artists approached erotic art through the lenses of dissent, deviance, and violence (Mahon 37), drawing on "eroticism's other half- Thanatos, the violent, death drive- as the most powerful polemical strategy for making society look at itself through new eyes" (37). In the years during and after WWII, death was omnipresent. For these later artists, sex, procreation, violence, and destruction existed as one. Eroticism and violence speak similar languages, and thus "sex and aggression are not easily parsed out; the slap that is, for some, a sexual turn-on is not easily differentiated from a 'merely violent' punch" (LeMoncheck 162). Such ambiguous readings of "sex and aggression" mesh easily with the model of Leda. As evidenced by the diverse depictions of Leda's rape, both physical pain and pleasure are associated with (and experienced at least somewhat during) sex, an idea reflected by Yeats' insistence that destruction and creation are essentially mutual entities.

However, this vision of Leda soon became subverted by the more contemporary artist. Violence and destruction remain causes for creation, but in later Leda works such violence is condemned.

This transition from exterior passivity to interior violence is clearly illustrated by the relationship between Louis Bouquet's 1923 painting *Leda carrée* (Fig. 22) and Jerzy Hulewicz's 1928 piece titled *Leda* (Fig. 23). Both men employ a similar color palette of browns and neutrals and depict the woman and swan with eyes closed and apparently united as one. Bouquet's

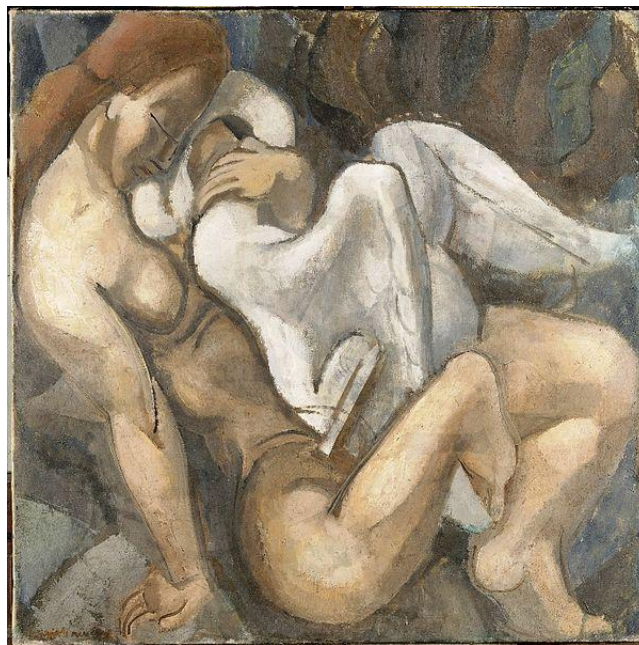


Figure 22. Louis Bouquet, *Leda carrée* (1923)

painting, however, uses soft fragmentation, as opposed to Hulewicz's sharper form of Cubism. Hulewicz's post-Yeats piece illustrates an interior fragmentation of self as could be experienced by a victim of trauma, a difference that exemplifies the transition from exterior to interior representations. Bouquet's piece is stylistically Cubist, while Hulewicz also uses his Cubism to convey the conceptual. Bouquet's softness (representative of the soft, romanticized paintings observed from the exterior) contrasts against Hulewicz's sharp, clearly defined lines and forms

(characteristic of the violent and resistant depictions of internal experience). Through Hulewicz's stylistic representation of experience, Leda speaks her voice.



Figure 23. Jerzy Hulewicz, *Leda and the Swan* (1928)

We hear her voice again in Cy Twombly's 1962 *Leda* painting, a work that undoubtedly demonstrates this new approach to *Leda* (Fig. 24). When I first saw his piece at MoMA New York, I was struck by the violence of the frantic abstraction of reds, blacks, and browns that tear over the white background. Geometric forms, abstracted hearts and wings, scribbles, and red phalli explode from the center of the white background. The activity central to the piece is sometimes smoothed over with white, but the rapidity of the scribbles continually moves the viewer's eyes around the painting. This is an aggressive approach to the subject. No longer do we see *Leda*'s smooth peach skin as she lies on the bank of the Eurotas, the sun shining on the glistening swan. The stark white background adds a sterility that Twombly quickly destroys. Such a violent burst of energy captures us and lures us; the little details and forms encourage the viewer to keep looking. Again, *Leda* is an object of inspection and we have not deciphered all



Figure 24. Cy Twombly, *Leda and the Swan* (1962)

her clues. No longer is Leda romanticized; here she is victim of violence.

Leda Speaks as Rape Victim

Many of these more recent pieces have been produced by women who use Leda not to promote subjugation and domination, but to portray her as personalized victim. What once was an exterior approach to Leda (male artists looking at female subjects) emerges now from an interior source: experience. The interior mind replaces the exterior focus on (female) body as object. Traditional, romanticized portraits of Leda and the swan set in pastoral landscapes, along with poetry written about Leda by an outside author, are now exchanged from more personal, expressive pieces told from Leda's perspective. Instead of relying on an outside source (although we still do, as I later concede), Leda is given voice. She speaks her experience. This breakdown of traditional works brings rough, raw, and real translations of Leda *qua* Leda. Instead of looking at her from the periphery, we look from within her core, her *self*, and her rape.

A very violent depiction of the story is told by performance artist Ana Mendieta. In many of her pieces she uses "the idea of rape... to show an acute awareness of the tension... between a vulnerable body whose limits can be pushed and a body that is all-powerful because it knows no limits" (Creissels 181). Her pieces acknowledge the extreme violence and dehumanization of rape, but also concede certain strengths to the limitless human form. So although the violent mating "humiliate[s] the female body" (181), the disintegration of limits produces a boundless individual. However, "in the identification of woman with animal, what is at stake is the loss of identity by the surpassing of limits" (181); while breaking through those imposed limits, Leda loses her former identity. She is a fragmented, transcending being who exists between realms. Her piece "*Blood and Feathers* thus depicts Mendieta literally becoming one with the animal, pouring animal blood on her body and covering herself in feathers. The power of metamorphosis appears clearly here as transcendence of hierarchies and limits" (182). At once she is woman and animal. She becomes one but cannot fully remove her other self. Violently, explicitly, we begin to see the convoluted interior design of Leda.

In order to fully grasp this switch from art about Leda to art from Leda, we look closely at other recent pieces that present Leda as personalized victim. One of the most poignant of these depictions of Leda as rape victim occurs in Angela Carter's novel, *The Magic Toyshop*, originally published in 1967. The central scene of the novel is when the main character, Melanie, acts in a puppet show in which she plays Leda against a larger than life-sized swan puppet. The assault by the swan is enacted by her cruel Uncle Philip, who builds and controls his puppets. God of the house, Philip manipulates his puppet to rape Melanie.

The manner in which Carter creates the atmosphere surrounding the puppet show reflects a more human depiction of Leda. No longer do these characters inhabit the realm of myth; this is

a real girl being assaulted by a real (what seems real to her) swan. During the rehearsal for the play, Melanie takes on the role of Leda. As Melanie (and Finn, her actual love interest of the novel) practice for the play, she feels awkward at first and does not know how to act. But then "she sprang away from Finn and it was no longer a pretence" (Carter 149). In these lines, the myth becomes real. Melanie takes on Leda. When "she clutch[es] at Finn to save herself but pull[s] him over with her" (149), the scared Melanie/ Leda actually pulls closer to her pursuer as they fall to the ground. As is often shown in images of Leda, despite her resistance, she brings the swan closer to her. Indeed, they are shown "clinging to each other" (149), either grappling in struggle or "clinging" together like lovers. And as they fall, Carter begins to insert the mindset of a rape victim into the description. As happens with many victims of trauma, they "toppled in slow motion" (149). As we experience extreme events, we perceive that time stops. Melanie loses track of temporality and lives solely in the moment when they "toppled."

All this occurs before she is actually raped. This is just practice; almost an even greater insult. As Finn says, Uncle Philip/ Zeus, the toymaker who creates toys and puppets- inanimate, controllable life- tries to get Finn to take Melanie's virginity. In his coarse way of speaking, Finn states that "'he wanted me to fuck you'" (151). The switch from euphemisms about sex i.e. "copulation," "intercourse," "encounter," etc. to the strong expletive "to fuck" highlights the shift from hidden sexuality to a straightforward assignment of blame. In no way can Uncle Philip be deemed a positive character. Just as he creates life and animation for his puppets, he tries to orchestrate a human rape. And although Finn does not have sex with Melanie during the rehearsal, she is later raped during the grand puppet show. In the show, the assault is enacted by girl and puppet, and Melanie feels the effects of a real rape. What is often depicted as glorious, divine copulation is replaced by violent assault.

In *The Magic Toyshop*, not only is the experience of rape shown, but the subsequent narration vividly depicts the emotions and mindset of the victim after an assault. As Carter writes, "anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality itself and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers" (166). The rape quickly becomes real as Melanie/ Leda is removed from her body and watches herself be attacked; "she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality" and is "the black-haired girl who was Melanie and who was not" (166). Such a sense of disembodiment occurs during or after rape. She cannot understand the world as she did before, can never experience the world without the memory of her assault, and loses all sense of herself. Although Melanie may not be conscious of it, she loses sense of all personal awareness after her attack- when "all her laughter [is] snuffed out" (166), her personality and coherent sense of self are also destroyed.

Her perception is thus changed because her world appears shattered and surreal. Carter describes how Melanie "was hallucinated" (166). She is deceived by the reality of the show and sees things that do not exist. She does not imagine she will be violated by a swan puppet while acting in a make-believe production; she does not think this performance will assume reality.

The show is also described as "this whole fantasy" and "this staged fantasy" (166); again Melanie does not want and is unable to accept the "reality" of what happened. In a double sense, she plays a disembodied role; at once she is on stage acting, yet she also plays "in this staged fantasy" while a greater force (Uncle Philip) directs, designs the action. He serves as director and producer of "this staged fantasy" and forces Melanie/ Leda to play the unwanted role.

Also, the language at the end of the above passage transforms puppet show into bodily rape. The swan "towered" over her with "its empty body... white and light as meringue, its head bobbed this way and that on its prehensile neck" (166). The body floats above her, yet the heavy

head threatens with "its prehensile neck." The word "prehensile" gives the head a greater purpose- it too can manipulate the struggling girl. The "heavy head" is both the head of the swan puppet and also the head of a penis that heavily forces itself upon the defenseless actress. And derisively, the music itself "throbbed to an excruciating climax" (166). As Melanie/ Leda resists against the swan, even the music seems to painfully have an orgasm around her.

Above, around, and within; Melanie's attack comes from every angle. Uncle Philip yells at her, the swan has just raped her, the music explodes, and she loses sense of herself. These experiences are filtered through her mind; we feel her pain and confusion as she sees the world from tainted eyes. We are made aware of her "gap of consciousness" (167) as "she looked at [Finn] as if he were a stranger... noticing [his ears] for the first time... she tried to recall where she had seen him before" (167). Things and people that were previously so familiar are now completely altered. She neither recognizes herself, nor the people around her. As she attempts to recall Finn's identity, she remembers that he "was her friend, whatever that was" (167). Someone who is so close to her becomes anonymous, and her basic structural definitions of relationships and objects are distorted. The phrase "whatever that was" linguistically illustrates the disintegration of Melanie's comprehension of the self within a social construct.

Her senses are also impaired. Life continues, but Melanie exists outside of life. Immediately following the conclusion of the puppet show, "a tumultuous ovation... seemed to go on for hours" (168). The word "seemed" provides a clue that what she hears, sees, and feels, are merely her hallucinatory perceptions of what occurs; what she experiences does not coincide with actual events. Similarly, "she still felt detached, apart" (168), and "she ate her slice [of chocolate Yule log] but tasted nothing" (168). She exists, but barely as a human being. She cannot taste properly; she cannot hear; her sense of self disintegrates. To Melanie/ Leda,

"everything was flattened to paper cut-outs by the personified gravity of Uncle Philip as he ate his tea. She felt she cast no shadow" (169). Although she literally is still a human being, she has been reduced to less-than-human form. She is a paper doll, a flat image of her former self. And not only does she lose her humanity, but she is aware that Uncle Philip, a bodily creator, is the one who has manipulated her reality. His weight contrasts sharply with her decimated sense of self. In comparison to heavy, controlling Uncle Philip, Melanie is dehumanized to the point of invisibility.

Yet despite the fact that Uncle Philip and his swan are clearly identified as villains in the story, Melanie also displays a slight desire for the swan. After she is raped, "she looked around for her swan" (167). Even though it just assaulted her, she looks for it because it is the only thing that she knows is real. She cannot imagine the past, cannot conceive of time to follow, but recognizes the present (the attack). Although she is injured and distressed, she is also uncomfortably comforted by this idea of "her swan." When she uses the possessive "her," she claims Zeus for her own, almost accepting him into her life. Instead of pushing him away, she seems to momentarily bring him close, and we echo back to accusations of Leda's complicity.

In spite of our desire to place blame on the obvious assailant, even Carter's version of the story acknowledges certain ambiguities about sexual assault. The sentence, "it was nothing like the wild, phallic bird of her imaginings" (165), illustrates what can be considered Melanie/Leda's latent desire for a violent, "wild," animalistic lover. She has imagined and fantasized about such a lover; "she seemed forever to be pleading to be taken by force" (Dijkstra 100). Dijkstra's argument that some women desire violent sexuality casts uncertainty even on Carter's seemingly straightforward rape, and we see how her "imaginings" unconsciously and manipulatively shape her desires.

Carter's nuanced writing forces us to acknowledge such frightening realities about sexual assault. Often we cling to that which harms us because in the past we have received support and love from that same assailant. Our idealized notions about our lovers replace painful realities that we are not willing to confront. We are attracted by those who damage our well-being; the "bad-boy," despite his obvious flaws, often appears much more attractive than the meek, church-going man. Coupled with the "Western cultural ideology, epitomized in female representation from pulp novels to pornography, that encourages female sexual accessibility with the curious rationale that since women really want to be raped (taken, used, ravished), there is no use asking them: 'no' will always mean 'yes'" (LeMoncheck 168), our cultural insistence that strong, potentially violent men are sexually attractive promotes such sexual violence. Supposedly, some women want this.

Novels such as Carter's begin to dispel these false assumptions through their painful recreation of trauma, yet cannot completely eliminate the negative intricacies. These unexplainable, terrifying details, emotions, and experiences that surround rape are what prolong our study of Leda and force artists and authors to never stop questioning her story.

Indeed, the dialogue continues. Another female author who portrays this interior, tormented Leda is Lucille Clifton. Her poem series "leda 1," "leda 2," and "leda 3" published in her 1993 book *The Book of Light* denounces the rape for its inherent violence. The poems vehemently describe the after-effects from Leda's point of view. Now she is not passively acquiescent but fights back with her strong words. She has been attacked, and uses coarse, bodily language to illustrate what happened to her. Presented as her "personal note[s] (re: visitations)," these poems document the mental journey of a rape victim following an assault. In "leda 1" she feels isolated and threatened, both by her "father/ [who] follows me around the well,/ his thick

lips slavering," as well as in her "dreams... full/ of the cursing of me/ fucking god fucking me." In no way does Clifton represent the story as one of love or consent. Her double use of the word "fucking" violently reflects the brutal action of the rape. Although she claims to "live alone in the backside/ of the village," she remains haunted by the rape. She can neither escape the unwanted attention she receives from those around her, nor the memories that stay in her dreams. She is initially "fuck[ed]" by the swan but then continues to be assaulted in her dreams by her undesired and unconscious memory.

As the series progresses, so does "Leda's" relationship with the rape. Violence enacted, she now has time to think. The "dagger-fingered men,/ princes of no known kingdom" represent the symbolic violence of Zeus. The phallic hands which approach her are weapons carried by the "princes of no known kingdom." These princes come from another realm, potentially that of Zeus, in order to violate her. Animals emerge as she flashes back to the swan, and her previously normal life is destroyed ("sometimes it all goes badly") when the swan attacks. She is equated with the Virgin Mary; references to "the stable door" and "the inn" create a sense of innocence and greater obligation, but "the inn is strewn with feathers,/ the old husband suspicious." From the husband's point of view, women are regarded as those who desire this type of violent sex; "the myth that women want to be raped is matched by the belief that rapists are suddenly overcome with uncontrollable lust in the presence of a seductive and tantalizing woman" (LeMoncheck 181). This contentious idea suggests that Leda wanted the rape at the same time that she had no choice. Clifton's verse seems to argue against this, but cannot deny the cultural assumptions that the characters portray. In this stage of the poem series, the suspicious husband and "the fur between her thighs" produce an image of women's bestial desires that both "leda 1" and "leda 3" combat. She is made into an animal with base desires and instincts despite the fact

that she so vehemently opposes the "fucking god fucking me." "Leda 2" can therefore be seen as an intermediary step between initial anger, intermediate confusion and guilt, and eventual wonder, distress, and forceful accusation.

"Leda 3" is the strong conclusive end piece to the series, a summation of experience that condemns Zeus. In this poem, Leda simultaneously acknowledges and mocks Zeus' grandeur. The "pyrotechnics;/ stars spinning into phalluses/ of light, their forked tongues/ thick and erect" are almost ironically presented. While highlighting his glory, she also desperately tries to find humor in her experiences. She portrays his extravagance as unnecessary; a superfluous display of brutal masculinity that drives her away, and uses phrases such as "stars spinning into phalluses" to portray Zeus as ridiculous, almost silly, and therefore to regain some control. She, a woman who has suffered, further challenges her attacker when she concludes by saying: "You want what a man wants,/ next time come as a man/ or don't come." After a poem of fairly standard line length, the short final line of the poem forcefully tells the swan to leave her alone. She has no need for him as swan, but prompts him to return in human form. She does not want to re-experience the dehumanization of being forced to have sex with an animal, but desires physical, sexual encounters with "a man." Even after beginning "leda 1" with the lines "there is nothing luminous/ about this," Clifton's poem acknowledges the confused attitudes and urges of victims following assault.

Leda as Beast, Zeus as God

The seeming inconsistencies in Clifton's poems hint at certain earlier works that depict Leda as the lover who desires the swan. Weak, irrational, lusty woman is pitted against Zeus, king of the gods, and he is immune from our criticism. Maybe this is because Zeus is a god and is therefore not accountable for his mortal pursuits. Even though he commits an act of bestiality, the focus of these works is Leda, not Zeus. We take for granted his guilt because he is a god; a

glorious, perfect divinity who cannot be in the wrong, and we seem to forget that this is a story about bestial rape.

In classical mythology, this type of male infidelity was tolerated, but women were labeled as whores if they strayed. Indeed, "according to Pamela Foa, since a woman's sexuality in such a culture is characteristically used to identify her, rape makes evident the essential sexual nature of woman... her sexuality has traditionally been used to brand and degrade her (as whore, adulterer, temptress, bitch)" (LeMoncheck 166). Also, the traditional belief "that men are naturally sexually aggressive and woman naturally resistant and... the stereotype of the woman as liar and temptress" make it "so that only an inordinate amount of verifiable resistance would constitute nonconsensual sex" (181). In her case, woman is guilty until proven innocent. Although she is raped, she is blamed, not the perpetrator. Her morality is sabotaged by our ancient assumptions of female sexuality. Instead of the rapist being blamed, the victim is deemed guilty and is therefore newly assaulted by shame-inducing accusations of (misplaced) guilt.

This inversion of victim-assaulter is especially relevant to Leda and Zeus' relationship. Leda is not immediately and solely identified as victim because artists and authors have presented her as a temptress who seeks pleasure and tries to gain power. These individuals believe antiquated notions of female sexuality, blaming woman for "her moral weakness and sexual attractiveness" (168). Such a construct entitles outside viewers to see Leda as at fault- she was a beautiful woman, she was asking for it. These ideas also create one of the most devastating effects of sexual assault: the "perceptions that the victim was somehow responsible for what occurred" (168). Not only has she been raped, but now she thinks it was her fault. She cannot but "wonder what she could have done differently" (168). Maybe Leda would not have been attacked if she had decided to not go bathing that day. If she had been ugly, definitely not. Such

destructive thoughts pollute a victim's mind and reside in her consciousness until she is able (if ever) to realize her own self-worth again.

This mental struggle seems particularly futile with Leda. How could she have resisted Zeus? He is not even just a god; he is the king of the gods. How could she say no? Out of all women in the world (notwithstanding his various other mortal and divine lovers), Leda was chosen. Some people consider this an honor. We see here the agonizing paradox faced by attractive women: they are praised for their physical beauty and then blamed for their rape. Women are valued because of their beauty but are then objectified and demeaned. No matter what, women cannot escape the construct of beauty and sexuality by which they are defined. Undeniably, both men and women are subject to this sexualized look, but women are the most common victims. For "men see and women are seen. This dominant dynamics of desire, or the 'play of desire within and generated by looking at images,' which occurs both within the work of art and in the spectator's looking at it, lies at the heart of our appreciation of canonical and contemporary erotic art" (Mahon 41). Through our gaze, we desire. When we look at Leda in paintings, sculptures, poems, novels, articles, etc. we see the version of Leda that we want to see.

This may help explain the varied personal interpretations of the myth. The mythic origins of the story remain unknown, so artists and authors must arbitrarily produce what they see, what they desire. Our ability to translate Leda into any medium, language, and form further enhances her popularity; her malleability as character captures our collective curiosity and encourages us to continue creating. As Mahon writes, with this type of erotic art "we can both indulge and confront our fantasies. Erotic art brings us face to face with love and sexual desire, titillation and carnal attraction, as well as the desires of others which we may find repulsive. It tests our individual and collective idea not only of what is 'pleasing' but also of what is 'decent' or

'proper'" (Mahon 11). Not only do we think about Leda, but we inescapably think about ourselves. Our constructs of morality are challenged by questions of decency, consent, and consequence that are raised by such works. By asking these questions about her, we ask questions about ourselves. When her morality is questioned, we too stand under the microscope.

Leda as Real (Powerful) Woman

So when I argue that Yeats "produced a Leda greater than the rape" (pg. 95), I present her both as artistic theme and relatable figure. In the former sense, Leda has been given life, identity, character, and image through different depictions of her story throughout history. From this viewpoint, she is not just victim but an actor. By us hearing the story, she becomes important. She is not particularly famous before her rape, but afterward we hear her story and see the historical effects. Unfortunately, her rape gives her influence. Without this we would not know her famous, albeit nuanced, name. Yet despite her prevalence in art and culture, we still cannot easily identify her and force ourselves to keep defining Leda.

One definition of Leda is "woman who becomes more powerful after her rape." In some ways, Leda is more important than Zeus. We cannot deny that Zeus is the one who makes the decision to rape Leda, yet in most of the works the piece is titled either "Leda and the Swan" or just "Leda." She becomes the enigmatic, remarkable character examined as primary personality. Few works deeply explore Zeus' complexities. Especially in works post-Yeats, Leda is not just given attention, but is embodied with and by her own voice, while Zeus remains a peripheral figure.

Then we ask, does this attention enhance Leda's importance, or does it detract from herself as acting character? On one hand, her constant objectification by artists and authors is degrading, but the attention can also be read as a compliment. And the power she gains through her interaction with Zeus does make her a stronger character, for she cannot be exposed to Zeus'

all-knowing mind without gaining some greater knowledge. Now Leda takes on a role reminiscent of Tiresias; she can see from both sides. Following her rape, Leda is a universal being.

Conversely, we cannot forget that Leda carries this influence because she was raped. This story did not happen on her terms. Like the Virgin Mary, Leda receives power and influence but does not ask for it first. These women gain a power they do not seek. However, despite the fact that Zeus and God decide to impregnate these women, the physical women themselves are required for the birth. Without Mary's body, Jesus would not have been born. In this sense, Zeus and God bestow importance on the women as mortals, as mothers, as those who create. As mortal women, they are fundamental to the continuation of life.

And although Leda does gain some power, being retold so many times throughout history is not necessarily indicative of authority. She is always told by someone else, and therefore I reiterate that her story is retold for our entertainment, and not for therapeutic reasons. If Leda herself actually told her story (as opposed to artists and authors posing as Leda), then she would gain power. We remember Brison's "psychological imperative... to keep telling one's story until it is heard," because only "after the story has been heard and acknowledged, one can let it go, or unfreeze it. One can unclench" (Brison 110). If Leda was given a voice- and she is figuratively vocal in some of the later adaptations- then she would be able to heal from her trauma. Before artists and authors began presenting Leda to us from an interior perspective, she was merely another object to be looked at, a sad victim on display for our view. Now, although she is a woman of myth, she becomes realer to us, more human. She takes on the role of woman, not solely theme.

Physical Betrays the Mental: Contemporary Leda Critics

Yet recent accounts that portray Leda as personally affected victim co-exist with a society that is still unable to completely accept that role. Although the *Leda and The Swan* street sculpture made of steel, neon, and laser beam and located outside Hotel Estrel, Berlin in 1996 shows Leda in a fairly traditional position (on her back underneath the thrusting swan), its public placement may cause contention (Fig. 25).



Figure 25. Tatjana Arzamassova, Lev Evzovitsch, and Evgenij Svijajatskij, *Leda and the Swan* (1996)

The work itself is a fairly standard Leda piece made by Tatjana Arzamassova, Lev Evzovitsch, and Evgenij Svijajatskij of AES Gruppe. The swan is constructed out of golden yellow neon. His neck is raised; his beak open; his wings spread. Both Leda and the swan's backs are arched. She lies propped up on her elbows with her head tilted back. Her legs are bent and her toes are pointed. Her hips are slightly raised toward the golden swan; her light pink (almost white) legs encircle the golden light of the swan.

Interestingly, however, we see within her belly; her fallopian tubes, womb, and egg are visibly constructed as coils of red neon. Within the pale pink outline of Leda, the red coils loop toward the golden swan. These red tubes are the acting force; the unifying link. Without those interior coils, Yeats' "broken wall, the burning roof and tower/ And Agamemnon dead" would not exist. These thin tubes engender love, war, and monumental history.

But the public placement of the work outside a well-known hotel forces passerbys to look, and automatically prompts moral judgment. When accessible to a large audience outside of an art museum, one sees a swan and woman having sex; outside the context of the myth, works about Leda are considered obscene because bestiality is taboo. Even recently, an article published in the Huffington Post on April 30, 2012 titled "Police Force Gallery to Remove Leda and the Swan Image for 'Condoning Bestiality'" reported that a policeman ordered The Scream gallery to remove a photograph titled *A Fool For Love* by Derrick Santini from the window of the gallery (Fig. 26). The "lenticular image that moves when you walk past it" shows a beautiful,



Figure 26. Derrick Santini, *A Fool for Love* (2012)

well-endowed woman having what appears to be pleasurable sex with a swan that has mounted her (Parker). Set against a black background, the image is as obscene as traditional Leda paintings and sculptures located in museums worldwide; however because it was placed on the street (and because it moves, and therefore appears real), the policeman ordered its removal. Outside of the confines of the canon, art becomes dangerous.

These London policemen must not fully appreciate the cultural and artistic significance of the piece, nor do they realize that erotic works such as *A Fool For Love* "are more than the sum of their parts; they reflect the very specific notions of beauty and taste promoted in their day; they use the perfect body, female and male, as a reminder of greater truths, greater beauties. We find more than pearly flesh... we also find moral codes" (Mahon 17). Recent Leda pieces present the myth conceptually, and therefore people who are not familiar with the story will find a woman and swan having sex as offensive, even if the artist or writer is just using the theme to argue an interrelated point.

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So to what degree do we censure our art? This is not a question I will attempt to tackle in this last section, but it is necessary to note when studying Leda. The romantic images of Leda outstretched on the bank of a river next to a gloriously oil-painted swan are praised because they are classic works. Yet when art becomes more conceptual, when the viewer is given an active role in the work, censors become wary. Especially in cultures where sex is taboo, any blatant representation of sex is regarded as a threat to ordered society. Blinded by their fears, people cannot see the concepts behind the works. As Susan Bordo writes, "it's almost impossible to portray something as forbidden without also portraying it as enticing" (Bordo 126), and thus

representations of taboo sexual practices are staunchly avoided by conservative critics. They are afraid that we will see art and be immediately corrupted.

Even certain current politicians have antiquated views about sex and rape. In August 2012, Congressman Todd Akin (August 21, 2012) declared that "if it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down" ("Congressman"), a claim uncannily similar to "the 1756 edition of Burn's *Justice of the Peace*, the standard guide for English magistrates, [that] cites authorities back to the *Institutes* of Justinian to the effect that 'a woman can not conceive unless she doth consent'" (Laqueur 161-2). These outdated notions of sexuality do not accurately reflect modern thinking because the notion that pregnancy equals consent was disproved by the 1820s. By the early nineteenth century, "the view that rape was incompatible with pregnancy was proclaimed in a much-cited text as 'an extraordinary dictum of the ancient lawyers,' a 'vulgar idea, from which some ignorant persons might still infer that a woman had consented, because she was proven pregnant,' thus adding unmerited stigma to the other burdens of the unfortunate victim of the crime" (162). Not only is Akin's statement viewed as outrageous by contemporary scholars, politicians, and citizens, it is also considered by nineteenth century cultural standards to be "a 'vulgar idea from... some ignorant persons.'"

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While the example of Akin is atypical, it does call attention to our latent fear of sex. Today movies, advertisements, magazines, and popular media employ sexual connotations to sell products, but people are still uptight when talking directly about sex because taboos make us uncomfortable. We are made to feel ashamed about sexual activity; it is not considered a fundamental human function, but a clandestine, seedy act that high schoolers are forced to do in the backs of cars. We do not want to be caught in this act.

Yet when something is hidden, we can pretend it does not exist. When cached under an advertisement, or within a classical sculpture, sex becomes slyly appropriate. By talking obliquely about sex, we are able to see woman and swan and avoid the negative feelings surrounding the story. The underlying theme of bestiality is instead replaced by an aesthetic and mythological significance, and people accept Leda's story for the myth itself. Only when adaptations become more explicit (as in *A Fool for Love* by Santini or Ana Mendieta's *Blood and Feathers*), do people take notice. Even though they have been exposed to the same narrative, they are shocked by the violence or reality of woman and swan because they do not see them in a subdued, chaste form.

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So when we read poems like Carl Phillips' "Leda, After the Swan" and Frank O'Hara's "An Image of Leda," we are momentarily soothed by seemingly innocuous representations of the myth. Both poems are told from Leda's point of view, but do not employ the violent language of Clifton or the explicit imagery of Mendieta. They portray Leda as told from Leda. Again, we are inside her experience. Both poems admit an awareness of what was happening- Phillips' Leda says "I recognized/ something more/ than swan, I can't say," while O'Hara writes "Oh what is/ this light that/ holds us fast?" In the Phillips poem, Leda is able to recognize, yet not understand, similarly to how O'Hara realizes that it is a "light that/ holds us fast." They know they are being manipulated, but cannot figure out by whom.

These poems also illustrate Leda's internal confusion. Unlike early translations of the story where only the external Leda is shown, these poems explore her mental journey both during and after the rape. Phillips' indefinite poem describes mental unreality that accompanies traumatic events with words such as "perhaps," "strike-or-embrace," "I can't say," "barely," "neither black nor blue," and "seemed." Again, Leda does not know what to think, to say, or how

to express herself. The phrase "strike-or-embrace" also accurately presents the larger question of sex as loving versus violent and invasive. By not assigning judgment to "strike-or-embrace," it is up to Leda (and the reader) to determine the type of interaction.

However, the imagery of the poem soon makes it clear that this is not a particularly ambiguous encounter. "Fallen" connotes a physical sense of falling as well as the Fall of man. Yet Leda is "crippled," unable to move, helpless. Coupled with these images, the "weight/ settling" forces itself upon her. She feels the emotional and mental weight of what happened, and also the physical effects of the rape.

At the end of the poem all of these images come together. Not only have we seen the physical attack, but now we experience the mental effects. At this point, she (we) experience the "hour forever,/ it seemed, half-stepping/ its way elsewhere." Time shifts. She remembers time as it pauses, slows down, speeds up, and becomes jumbled with everything all at once- the "everything, I/ remember, [that] began/ happening more quickly."

O'Hara's poem also portrays a skewed sense of perception as a result of the attack. Again the self is divided; the extreme enjambment of "we our-/selves" physically and linguistically separates the self. Moreover, this bifurcated self is once more helpless. Our bodies are outside of our control. The environment around us changes "despite us," and "holds us fast" as our "limbs quicken even/ to disgrace." As we lie "naked" and "spread-eagled," we mirror Yeats' Leda- "caught," "helpless," and unable to control our physical reactions. From this point of view, Leda looks like the weak victim. She is either open, vulnerable, "spread-eagled," ready for sex, dead or unconscious. Zeus (represented by the cinema) directs the action.

Once more, however, the narrative shifts. Leda is not just a victim but an active participant. She is confused about her physical desire for the swan, because it contradicts her

moral and mental refusal to be assaulted. The last section of the poem clearly illustrates her dilemma. O'Hara writes:

We scream
chatter prance and
wash our hair! Is
it our prayer or
wish that this
occur? Oh what is
this light that
holds us fast? Our
limbs quicken even
to disgrace under
this white eye as
if there were real
pleasure in loving
a shadow and caress-
ing a disguise!

The quick bodily description helps us visualize the commotion on the river bank as it echoes Yeats. His description of "thighs caressed" is evoked in O'Hara's lines "caress-/ing a disguise," and in the "white eye" and "light" that take on the form of Yeats' "white rush."

And just as Leda was unable to identify what was happening, we too are uncertain as to what causes our response. For "what is/ this light that/ holds us fast?" Even though we presumably have the choice to react, we are stuck in one place. And we too are physically

implicated. Once again we confront one of the largest themes and questions of the Leda story (as posed by Yeats and many others): did Leda enjoy mating with the swan? And if so, was it solely physical pleasure, or mental pleasure as well? O'Hara seems to claim that the only type of pleasure Leda experienced, and that we experience, is characterized by "disgrace." We cannot feel "real/ pleasure" when "loving/ a shadow and caress-/ ing a disguise!" because it is not real. A "shadow" and "disguise" are simply impartial substitutes for the real thing, and they cannot ever replace a full, real, human experience.

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In what may seem one last humorous point I recall another Leda fantasy; a Leda in disguise. Bjork's iconic swan dress at the 2001 Academy Awards created a stir (Fig. 27). *Wow*, people thought, *what a silly outfit. A swan and woman- who would have thought?* When I saw the dress at age ten, I was excited that a bird was on her dress, yet today when I see the images of



Figure 27. Marjan Pejowski, *Bjork's Swan Dress* (2001)

Bjork's dress, I am brought back to the image of Lynch's burlesque Leda. But now the stripper has been replaced by a pop singer and the stage has been replaced by a red carpet. Again she carries the swan on her body. The physical swan covers her and manipulates her; she cannot abandon the swan or else she will be naked. Yet it also makes her beautiful. Thus when we see Bjork's dress, we are reminded of the bank of the Eurotas and the flapping wings. Demurely, she steps onto the carpet or the bank. She is a queen of pop or a queen of Sparta. We see the beautiful woman. We eye the graceful swan. And then we feel, heavily, those "great wings beating still."

List of Images

Figure 1. Gustave Moreau, <i>Leda</i> (1865-75)	31
Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, " <i>Leda</i> " design for a plate – <i>Honi Soit qui Mal y Pense</i> (1889)	35
Figure 3. Paul Beckert, <i>Leda mit dem Schwan</i> (1912)	37
Figure 4. Sandro Botticelli, <i>The Birth of Venus</i> (1486)	38
Figure 5. Heinrich Lossow, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (undated, artist lived 1840- 1897)	40
Figure 6. Georges de Forest Brush, <i>Leda</i> (1883)	44
Figure 7. John Covert, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1915-23)	49
Figure 8. Paul Matthias Padua, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1917)	50
Figure 9. William Fair Kline, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1903)	54
Figure 10. Emmanuel Benner, <i>Léda</i> (undated, artist lived 1836-1896)	56
Figure 11. Paul Cezanne, <i>Léda au Cygne</i> (1882)	57
Figure 12. Rudolph Tegner, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1902)	59
Figure 13. Constantin Brancusi <i>Leda</i> (1920)	62
Figure 14. Constantin Brancusi, <i>Leda</i> (1925)	64
Figure 15. Tony Robert-Fleury, <i>Léda</i> (undated, artist lived 1837 to 1911)	65
Figure 16. Hugo Poll, <i>Leda with the Swan</i> (undated, artist lived 1867-1931)	66
Figure 17. Paul Gauguin, <i>Leda Vase</i> (1887-8)	68
Figure 18. Maurice Ferrary, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1898-1900)	70
Figure 19. Aristide-Joseph-Bonaventure Maillol, <i>Leda</i> (1902)	71
Figure 20. Léon-François Comerre, <i>Le Triomphe du Cygne</i> (1908)	73
Figure 21. Jan Toorop, <i>Girl with Swans (Leda)</i> (1896)	79
Figure 22. Louis Bouquet, <i>Leda carrée</i> (1923)	110
Figure 23. Jerzy Hulewicz, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1928)	111
Figure 24. Cy Twombly, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1962)	112
Figure 25. Tatjana Arzamassova, Lev Evzovitsch, and Evgenij Svajajatskij, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> (1996)	125
Figure 26. Derrick Santini, <i>A Fool for Love</i> (2012)	126
Figure 27. Marjan Pejoski, <i>Bjork's Swan Dress</i> (2001)	132

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