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?

At first glance, William Butler Yeats’ sonnet\(^1\) and Marie Laurencin’s painting\(^2\) by the same name, both completed in 1923, share little in common aside from woman and swan: all of the intense sexual violence of Yeats’ lyric is absent in Laurencin’s rather tranquil painting. Laurencin’s elegant curvilinear forms and soft colors seem to allay the very same anxieties that Yeats’ poem, with its overbearing physicality and sexuality, wishes to escalate. As different interpretations or readings of the Leda and the Swan myth in themselves, these works register the multivalent nature of myth. What I will pursue in this paper is a consideration of these two strikingly different readings of the Leda and the Swan myth that reveals why the two Modernists looked to classical myth as the grounds for their work. My approach will take its lead from

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\(^1\) Above left: William Butler Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan.”
\(^2\) Above right: Marie Laurencin’s *Leda and the Swan.*
reception theory, which can help us account for the apparently conflicted readings of the myth presented by Yeats and Laurencin. In view of earlier and influential interpretations of the myth (by Euripides and Ovid, Leonardo and Michelangelo), the readings of Laurencin and Yeats can be situated in a Modernist line of works concerned with aesthetic and political issues of representation. Yeats’ and Laurencin’s readings of the myth both point to the “classical” as a highly symbolic realm of condensed images that have been written over again and again, with Leda and the Swan serving as a powerful example of the elusively symbolic nature of myth. Neither work is a simple illustration of the myth; both must be viewed from within the context of Leda’s history of reception, for both works resist romantic strategies of emplotment and can be read as making different critical moves against that tradition. Yeats’ and Laurencin’s works purposefully use the Leda myth to identify and problematize the patriarchal narratives they see as inherent in the Western cultural tradition.

The myth of Leda and the Swan cannot be traced back to one definitive Greek text but is best understood as an intertextual body of works in which Yeats and Laurencin were participating in 1923. In classical myth, Leda, the mortal wife of the Spartan King Tyndareus, is rarely mentioned outside of her role as mother to Helen, Clytemnestra, and the Dioscuri (Castor and Polydeuces). Her myth is sparse and the different accounts of it often conflict; without any singular account of the myth, there was little agreement among the Greeks about the finer details of her life. Still, the general details of the myth tend to overlap and form a coherent narrative.

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3 Reception theory, as elaborated in the works of Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, foregrounds the creation of meaning in the reader (and not in the author or text itself). This also implies that writers are readers of literary tradition and that literary tradition is itself an endlessly contested point of reference.

4 The prominent ancient sources for the myth include Apollodorus, Euripides’ Helen, and Ovid’s Metamorphoses, although none of these accounts is very concerned with Leda: Leda simply
All accounts of the myth have Zeus taking the form of a swan in order to seduce or rape Leda, who first takes him in to protect him against a predatory eagle. The myth fits in with Zeus’ many other amorous adventures and sexual conquests, as issues of sex, divinity, and power circulate about its reception. In the opening of Euripides’ *Helen* (412 BCE), Helen recounts the story of Leda and the Swan, detailing her past for the audience. She says: “my father was Tyndareus: though / they tell a story about how Zeus took on himself / the shape of a flying swan, with an eagle in pursuit, / and came on wings to Leda my mother, and so won / the act of love by treachery. It may be so.” (lines 17-21). Here one can see Euripides playing up the one-sided and deceitful nature of Zeus’ love, something that Ovid also picked up on in book six of his *Metamorphoses*. Ovid writes briefly of Leda, saying, “Arachne shows… Leda, lying under a swan’s wing” (lines 145, 153). Although succinct, Ovid’s treatment of Leda places her squarely within the context of Arachne’s tapestry, which depicts the many sexually violent conquests of Zeus. Classical receptions of Leda’s myth differ in their details but tend to treat the issues of sex, power, divinity, and representation of those very issues as problematic.

The myth of Leda and the Swan, because of its ambiguous and polysemous nature, contains interesting narrative possibilities. The appeal of the myth to the visual arts seems obviously rooted in the rich physicality that Yeats also picked up on: the union of woman and swan allows for the illustration of nude figures, passion, and sex. For Renaissance artists it was not thought appropriate to paint and display publically a man and a woman engaging in sexual intercourse.⁵ Depicting a woman and a swan together, however, was acceptable. With the Leda

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⁵ For more on this topic and how “most societies have rigorously designated certain kinds of sexual representation as offensive and have prohibited or strictly controlled some of them” (104),

“was not explored as a figure in her own right in ancient literature” (Moog-Grunewald and Smart 374).
and the Swan myth artists were able to showcase not only their figure drawing skills with the nude body of Leda but also a rather taboo, erotic subject. Though the artistic freedom and potential physicality contained in the myth were certainly influential reasons for the painting of this myth and many others, artists of the Renaissance and beyond have had other reasons for reimagining the myth. But in order to understand the wider artistic and ideological contexts of Laurencin’s painting and Yeats’ poem, the visual tradition of the myth’s reception, with which Laurencin and Yeats are in dialogue, must first be examined: the lost but copied works of the “old masters” Leonardo and Michelangelo have held great and normative influence over the myth’s representation since the sixteenth century.

Leonardo da Vinci’s and Michelangelo Buonarroti’s lost but copied paintings of Leda and the Swan romanticize the myth by depicting Leda as an inviting nude figure. Francesco

Melzi’s *Leda and the Swan* painting⁶ is an influential and close copy of Leonardo’s last sketch on the subject.⁷ Set in a blooming marsh, Leonardo’s Leda is seen standing in *contrapposto* in the center of the image, grasping the swan’s neck. With its outspread wings and phallic neck, the swan desires more from Leda. The viewer is invited to stare with the swan at Leda in awe of her nude figure. There is no sexual abuse, just a pastoral encounter between a woman and a swan. Hence, the myth is romanticized and divested of its conflict in its idealized portraiture of Leda and her acquiescence or attraction to the loving swan. Michelangelo’s lost painting *Leda and the Swan*⁸⁹ presents a slightly different reading from Leonardo’s, although both function in similar ways. It depicts Leda and the swan during the sex act, embracing each other in the throes of passion. As Leda and the swan kiss, their bodies are intertwined in a somewhat confusing mess of limbs and wings: Michelangelo sets the scene to showcase his figure-drawing skills with the naked and twisted body of Leda. Amidst the passionate scene the swan’s neck reaches up over Leda’s chest, and its body lays between her legs, its dark black feathers covering up her genitalia. Leda contorts her unnaturally lengthened body around the swan without any apparent tension or resistance. The ease of her limbs suggests her mutual feelings for the swan, and the saturated red hue of the drapery behind them furthers this sense of passion. The painting seems

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⁶ Above left: Francesco Melzi’s *Leda and the Swan*.
⁷ Whether or not Leonardo ever actually finished a full painting of *Leda and the Swan* is questionable. Barbara Meyer, in her article “Leonardo’s Hypothetical Painting of ‘Leda and the Swan’,” maintains that Leonardo drew Leda at least once standing and once kneeling. Meyer also contends that Leonardo achieved no more than a sketch of a “standing Leda embracing the swan by her side with four infants at her feet in a marshy, floral environment” and that this sketch may have “became a part of Francesco Melzi’s inheritance” after Leonardo’s death in 1519. I will refer to Melzi’s copy as Leonardo’s painting here (Meyer 288).
⁸ Above right: Michelangelo Buonarroti’s *Leda and the Swan*.
⁹ Michelangelo’s rendering of the myth was lost but copied by several artists, and the image used here was copied by an anonymous follower of Michelangelo.
to take its lead from Ovid’s description of “Leda, lying under a swan’s wing” and silences the “treachery” of Euripides’ or Helen’s description. Leda is stripped of agency and any signs of resistance or individuality. In both Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s paintings, Leda is made acquiescent to the swan and the viewer’s male gaze.

Marie Laurencin’s Leda and the Swan engages in dialogue with past representations of Leda. Laurencin, who during her career was hailed as one of Europe’s most famous female artists (for she was always called a “female artist” and not just an “artist”), has since the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s been largely dismissed by critics. In “The ‘Strength of the Weak’ as Portrayed by Marie Laurencin,” Bridget Elliott discusses how Laurencin was unfortunately cast as a “naively essentialist and compromising” figure of femininity (Elliott 291). Elliott points out, however, that this pejorative labeling of Laurencin has itself been uncritically advanced on the basis of the artist’s constructed persona. Although “[e]verything about Marie Laurencin—her artistic practices, her temperament, her appearance, and even her voice—has been saturated with signs of femininity,” a closer look at her work reveals a series of “tactical incursions into avant-garde space” (Elliott 277, 291). These tactical incursions subtly critique the male dominated space of Cubism with which Laurencin was often associated. So despite Laurencin herself being “highly ambivalent and inconsistent in the way she constructed her femininity,” viewers of her images do not have to put on her persona. Instead, by looking closely at her paintings, the various ideological implications of her work can be brought into view (Elliott and Wallace 120). With her Leda and the Swan Laurencin makes one such purposeful subversion of both avant-garde and traditional Western norms.
In Laurencin’s *Leda and the Swan*, the figure of Leda violates the viewer’s expectations of Greek mythical figures. Expecting a female nude not unlike Aphrodite, the viewer is given an Orientalized semi-nude woman. Expecting passion or sex, the viewer is given some sort of awkward rendezvous in an ambiguous, garden-like setting. The light skin, slender arms, pink lipstick and blouse all advance Leda’s femininity. She becomes voiceless in her Orientalized depiction. The difference between Leonardo’s romantic Leda and Laurencin’s is striking—Laurencin rewrites her femininity to the modern extreme, giving her the light skin, soft arms, and elegant touch of a geisha figure. Without knowing the title one might even miss the classical reference altogether. The modernized feminization of Leda, along with Laurencin’s signature style of blurry non-realistic brushstrokes, serve to highlight the fact that this is a representation—not some sort of “pure” retelling or illustration—of the classical myth. In fact, Laurencin’s style
works to mark art *qua* art, not as mimesis or illusionism. The work is self-conscious in this Modernist fashion, bringing attention to itself as a work of art created in a larger context of social issues.

The relationship between Leda and the swan in Laurencin’s painting, although left somewhat ambiguous, counters that of Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s. While in Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s works the swan reaches its phallic neck up toward a receptive Leda, Laurencin’s Leda actively rejects the swan’s advances. The swan curls its neck down, as Leda’s hands keep it away from her. The swan is denied any contact with her, and the passion of Michelangelo’s couple has been utterly erased. A chair’s barred back separates woman and animal, warding off any impending sexual threat. Moreover, the lower half of Leda’s body is left out of frame, and her side nearest the swan is blurred out and covered up by the green brushstrokes of the background—there is no red-hot intensity here. Instead, the background and frame subtly erase Leda’s sexual desire. The pink hues of Leda’s lips and blouse signal her femininity but not any subservience to the male gaze. She looks down toward the swan, away from the viewer, as if the painting were its own self-contained world into which the viewer remotely peers. The swan, on the other hand, appears to look out at the viewer in frustration at his lack of agency and inability to consummate the myth’s action. Laurencin’s fragile Leda figure thwarts the masculine power of the swan, and Laurencin even equates Leda and the swan in several surprising ways. The light skin color of Leda matches perfectly the feathers of the swan, as do her eyes and the swan’s. Leda’s left arm mimics the serpentine length and curve of the swan’s neck and head, as it dangles closely to the swan’s drooping head. The eye senses no real phallic, male power, such as Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s swans so possessed. The relationship between Leda and the
swan, in Laurencin’s rendering, is not one of physical dominance or passionate contact but is, rather, rife with conflict.

The sources of conflict in Laurencin’s painting complicate the representation of the myth. Leda’s slanted dark eyes, black hair, light skin, and pink blouse connote what is “Oriental” and what is “feminine” at the same time, collapsing the two categories. To identify Leda with the East is to identify her with ideas of powerlessness, receptivity, and all that is considered irreducibly “other” to the Western mind. It is also to identify Leda with the voiceless, silent others that had been written over in Western history and literature for centuries by Laurencin’s time. Laurencin’s Leda, then, brings into crisis cultural ideas not only about sexuality but also about power more generally. The viewer is not invited to desire Laurencin’s Leda in the same depth as Leonardo’s, because the identification is much more distant. Furthermore, the barred chair that sits between Leda and the swan suggests a divide between her genitalia and that of the swan, making it unclear how the myth’s plot will be fulfilled by the actions of the two characters. Finally, the black brushstrokes in the upper-right corner of the background, which form some kind of extended and ruffled wing not so clearly connected to the swan’s back, forebode the violence of the swan’s eventual conquest of Leda. In Laurencin’s reading of the myth, however, such a conquest seems unlikely or at least obviously one-sided. All of this tension arises in the painting to create a space for discussion of the myth’s past representations and the cultural norms surrounding such stories.

The self-conscious manner in which Laurencin paints the myth takes it out of any attempt at presenting the myth’s original reality or truth and into the symbolic realm of aesthetics and representation, in which any image or myth may be continually problematized. There is a divide between the “real” and mediated access to it, which Laurencin exploits to full effect by shifting
the mirror of art from nature back to art itself. By overly romanticizing and feminizing the figure of Leda, and by simultaneously giving her power over the swan, Laurencin presents a reading of the Leda and the Swan myth that problematizes traditional patriarchal narratives. By cutting off the semantic flow of the “classical,” she brings its representation under scrutiny. The criticisms of Laurencin that she is “naively essentialist” and a “feminine” artist are misplaced—they buy into her public self and apparent style without recognizing the ways in which her works operate on a formal level. In addition, she seems to acknowledge a limitation on the individual’s ability to speak outside of a hegemonic discursive system. Her *Leda and the Swan*, accordingly, does not attempt a radical break from past representations of the myth but, instead, parodies them—insofar as it is in artistic dialogue with them—in order to point out their ideological projects as deeply invested in patriarchy and its representational authority. She does not attempt a complete restaging of the myth’s plot but complicates the myth’s romanticized narrative. Laurencin simultaneously plays up Leda’s femininity and blocks off her sexuality, implying that Zeus’ eventual conquest of her (foreshadowed by the ruffled and extended wing in the upper right background) was obviously and aggressively rape—something covered up by Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s romanticizing depictions of the myth. One can see why Laurencin was once dismissed as compromising on a stylistic level, but her work challenges its viewer to see him- or her-self as full of ideological assumptions. Her strategic use of the “classical,” then, responds to the long tradition of its reception and the condensed layers of meaning wrapped around such profoundly anxiety-producing myths as Leda and the Swan.

First published in the same year that Marie Laurencin completed her painting, William Butler Yeats’ *Leda and the Swan* engages the myth in a very different but equally strategic manner. His poem, too, is in dialogue with past representations of the myth, although to a lesser
extent: its compressed imagery and rapid movements make it more of an engagement with the myth’s basic content than its reception. By seeing Yeats’ poem through the lens of Laurencin’s painting, by taking a close look at the way in which Yeats engages the myth and the cultural tradition of the West in the poem, we can see that Yeats’ poem functions similarly to Laurencin’s painting, even though the two may approach the myth in fundamentally different ways.

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?

Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” appears in the form of a broken half-Shakespearean, half-Petrarchan sonnet. Already the reader can see that Yeats wants to play with the romantic tradition of Leda’s reception, as he breaks the sonnet’s form to fit the violent content of his explicit lyric. The poem’s explosive beginning (“A sudden blow”) knocks the air out of the reader and jumps right into the action of the poem. Quickly, participles begin to pile up, as do visual images of the swan atop Leda. There are no breaks between lines for the reader, so that the images rapidly multiply and blend together into a perplexing series of bodily actions, becoming harder and harder to visualize in all their detailed physicality. How is one to picture the swan’s wings “beating still” or Leda’s “thighs caressed / By dark webs,” all while the swan holds Leda
suspended in air? Yeats’ third person narrator bombards the reader with a series of sexually violent images and nameless characters so that he/she struggles to comprehend the totality of the female character’s (Leda’s) experience. As Helen Sword has suggested, the narrator’s lack of identification actually leads the reader to identify with both characters (Sword 309). Even though it is made clear that the swan is exerting its will to power over the “staggering girl,” the two are metonymically equated in the phrase “breast upon… breast”: the incantatory repetition of the word breast links them together and makes it hard for the reader to identify the human and divine (or bestial) apart. Just as Laurencin’s painting suggests a certain resemblance between Leda and the swan, Yeats’ complicates the autonomy of their respective bodies. Amid all the turmoil of the scene, identification becomes hopelessly difficult: the possessive articles of “body” and the “strange heart” are denied to the reader in favor of a more suggestively ambiguous form. The first quatrain of the sonnet is powerful, extraordinarily so, but it gains its power at the expense of the reader’s complete knowledge of what is happening. The action interrupts onto the scene and spills forth onto the page, with the poet only slowing down to traditional, full syntax in the fourth line.

From the second quatrain and on, Yeats’ narrator intrudes upon the graphic scene and attempts to grasp its significance. With the lines “How can those terrified vague fingers push / The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?” the reader first gets the sense of a narrator’s human consciousness, of mediated narration between him- or her-self and the action of the poem. Still, the narrator does not so much enlighten the reader with a more complete vision of what is happening to Leda as complicate the reader’s understanding of the poem. More like exclamations than questions, the hypothetical visions posed by the narrator essentially say “but how could it be otherwise” (Shaw 38). Leda’s body appears “caught up” in the moment, “laid in that white rush.”
Again, Yeats emphasizes how subjected she is to the swan’s brute force, its “feathered glory.” In the final sestet, the orgasmic “shudder in the loins” is terrifyingly generative. It will produce, against Leda’s will, Helen and Clytemnestra, who will eventually bring about the downfall of the Greek heroes in the Trojan War and beyond—“The broken wall, burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead.” Each one of these images of utter destruction signifies the humiliating defeat of the phallus as transcendental signifier, which Janet Neigh argues can be seen as a primary thematic concern of Yeats’ *The Tower* as a whole (Neigh 154). The rape, rather than consolidating phallocentric power, has undermined it. After this greatly compressed vision of historical destruction, the narrator reflects back on the abused figure of Leda again. The narrator’s final, haunting question implies that Leda has “put on” Zeus’ power while also asking if she has put on his “knowledge.” “Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air,” was Leda able to comprehend her transcendent experience? Did she come to know Zeus’ knowledge (whatever exactly that is) or was she merely subject to it like the rest of us?

Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” challenges its reader to rethink meaning as something subjectively embodied or felt rather than abstracted or deduced. The difficulty of identification gives way to an interrogation of Leda’s experience, which in turn makes the reader question the scene as a whole. Yeats’ sonnet, which has “inspired, precisely because of its ambiguities, more diverse and often contradictory explications than perhaps any other short lyric of its era,” is notoriously abstruse. It denies the reader complete knowledge of the scene, blocking off any attempt at reaching closure; the swan’s act of power is inconclusive and ambiguous. Where is Leda to go from here? The reader can feel the tension, the “brute blood of the air,” but struggles to satisfyingly define its scope and meaning. I would argue that it is precisely confused images like the “brute blood of the air” and exceedingly powerful lines like “how can body, laid in that
white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies” that actively work to cut off explication, making the poem as a whole more felt and experienced than thought and rationalized. The poem as a whole tries to evade interpretation by making the reader sympathize with the now tragic figure of Leda, as she is subjected to the brute power of Zeus, the Western patriarch. By disorienting the reader and making him/her see the myth from the victim’s point of view, then, the answer to the poem’s final question—“Did she put on his knowledge with his power”—is both yes and no, that truth is something embodied and lived, not merely thought and asserted over others.

This is Yeats’ critique of Western culture, which withers in the fractured sestet of the sonnet: that its shameless and blind silencing of others has ultimately brought about its own downfall. Writing just after World War I and independence of Ireland, Yeats’ poem re-imagines the union of Leda and the swan as a violent conflict, one whose implications are devastating from the silenced perspective of the victim. What did Leda get out of the experience? In the classical myth, Leda has four children. In the romanticized paintings of Leonardo and Michelangelo, she gets a passionate lover. Yeats’ sonnet, in defiance of these earlier retellings of the myth, ends aporetically, undermining any sense of resolution for the reader: the same anxieties about the rape of Leda that are allayed by turning her into a seductive nude are escalated here by showing her as an utterly tragic victim. Yeats’ sonnet undermines the authority of representations that share the patriarchal outlook of Zeus’ swan by exposing the traditionally silenced other side of the myth.

By taking the story of Leda and the Swan out of its mythological context, both Yeats and Laurencin allow themselves to re-envision the myth in two strikingly different ways. Like Laurencin, Yeats uses the myth to point out how the West has historically used such myths to
allay certain anxieties, anxieties that have been only displaced by writing over the silenced “other.” Although critics have mostly followed Yeats’ lead by interpreting the poem as part of his philosophy, it is productive to see Yeats as not constructing his own occult-like narrative out of the Western tradition but, rather, as complicating and problematizing certain elements of that tradition. His sonnet challenges us to reconsider the ways in which we read our cultural “other.” Laurencin’s painting effects a similar reflection from the reader, although it rewrites the myth in a completely different manner. They both arrive at similar critiques of Western cultural tradition, but they get there by reading the sexuality and power inherent in the myth in different ways in accordance with how they position the reader. Yeats aligns the reader with Leda’s subjectivity; Laurencin places the viewer squarely outside the painting as to distance him/her from both the work of art and traditional ways of seeing. Empathy and detachment are the two conflicting modes of these 1923 readings of the Leda and the Swan myth, as both find ways to undercut the stability of the traditional patriarchal narratives that form the Western tradition. Yeats’ and Laurencin’s Ledas are products of the more self-conscious method of the Modernists, in which it is made clear that the artist is seeing the myth as having political implications in the real world, outside of myth. Such attention to subjectivity and representation should not be entirely surprising from two modern artists, but how Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” and Laurencin’s Leda and the Swan use myth to arrive at politically-charged critiques of Western cultural and artistic practices illustrates the variegated narrative possibilities of working back to the canon from outside of its own constituent terms.

Samuel White, ‘14
Bibliography


Laurencin, Marie. Leda and the Swan, 1923. Oil on canvas, 67.3 x 81.3 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.


