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Re-tellings of the Myth of Leda and the Swan: A Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of the myth of "Leda and the Swan" in selected feminist poems by four poetesses, namely Van Duyn's "Leda" (1971), Clifton's Trilogy "Leda 1," "Leda 2," and "Leda 3" (1993), Kossman's "Leda" (1996), and Bentley's "Living Next to Leda" (1996). Common representations of this myth in paintings and literature mainly written by men portray the sexual encounter between Leda and the swan in an ambivalent way, focusing on the vigor of the swan, the hesitation/complicity of Leda, and how their union empowers Leda and results in the birth of Helen. This essentially romanticized; aestheticized version of the myth counters the violation of rape with the glory of the beautiful god-swan and the tacit complaisance of Leda. However, by employing feminist views on rape, violence, and sexual objectification, it is argued that the selected poems directly emphasize Leda's sense of victimization due to being violated by Zeus in the form of a swan without the ambivalence encountered in male versions of the myth like those by W. B. Yeats, Robert, Graves, D. H. Lawrence, and Rainer Maria Rilke. In those feminist revisions, by contrast, Leda's perspective is more dominant. She is adversely affected by Zeus' violent rape, as she is degraded and therefore neither empowered nor endowed with immortality. Moreover, she is abandoned and lonesome, and she is filled with horror as well as helplessness. The last selected poem even shows that Leda has lost her sanity after her rape. It is suggested, therefore, that these detrimental effects of rape on Leda and her deteriorating psychological state are due to being violated by a male deity, and thus Leda has fallen victim to rape as well as patriarchy in such feminist re-tellings of this Greek myth. Such female renderings of the myth, then, challenge prevailing ambivalent or stereotypical representations by fostering a feminist ideology that rejects patriarchal bias or romanticizing attempts.

Keywords: *Leda and the Swan; Modern Poetry; Sexual Objectification; Victimization; Feminism*

INTRODUCTION

In Euripides' *Helen*, Helen says:

> "*...people tell a story about Zeus...*
>
> *how he once feathered himself into the likeness of a swan, feigned flight from a pursuing eagle,*
>
> *lit upon my mother Leda, and won his way with her.*" (cited in Kossman, 2001, p. 16, emphasis in original)

The use of classical myths like the myth of Leda and the swan is remarkably prevalent in the modernist and postmodernist period. According to W. B. Yeats, art which includes mythology reflects civilization, as art "seeks to impose order and comprehensibility upon the diversity and chaos of the experiential world" (Thanassa, 2010, p. 114). Also, in his essay "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923), T. S. Eliot praises the mythical method employed in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922); it involves "the parallel to the *Odyssey*, and the use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division" (p.175), as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (p.177). Therefore, modernists use mythologies because artists are cited as responsible for fixing the problems which the modernist techniques like subjectivity as well as fragmentation bring about. Since postmodernism is an extension of modernism, myths are equally used by postmodernists to give form and order as well. In addition, postmodernists draw upon myths because they like to borrow from the past, thus downplaying the idea of originality in the parody and pastiche

they practice. Importantly, modernists and postmodernists employ popular myths to negotiate certain ideologies and further certain ideas. In this sense, such renderings and re-tellings of those myths differ according to their take on the myth or the position they are expected to communicate.

According to Jenny March (2001), the beautiful woman Helen of Troy in the Greek myth, "over whom the Greeks and Trojans warred for ten long years" (p. 457), is said to be the daughter of Zeus and Leda who is the wife of Tyndareus, a king of Sparta. A princess in Greek mythology, Leda is said to have seven children: Castor, Timandra, Philonoe, Phoebe, and Clytemnestra who are fathered by Tyndareus as well as Helen and Polydeuces, the children of Zeus. Helen was born from an egg, as Zeus, in the form of a swan, has seduced Leda and made her pregnant with Helen. March refers to another myth which explains the birth of Helen, saying that Nemesis is Helen's mother. Zeus, also in the guise of a swan, has had sex with Nemesis who has been in the form of a goose, and an egg has been produced, as a result. The egg has been given to Leda by a shepherd, and Leda has put it in a box until Helen has hatched out, and thus Leda has raised Helen as though she has been Helen's biological mother (p. 358). So, it is typical of Zeus in such patriarchal renderings of the myth to disguise himself before mortal women in order to "trick his unwitting quarry, and to evade his jealous wife, who was always ready to suspect him of misbehaviour" (p. 792).

March states that Zeus is infatuated with Leda a lot, and on the day he has mated with her, he has flown "into her arms for protection from a pursuing eagle" (p. 457); Helen has come out of the egg produced as a consequence of that sexual encounter between Zeus and Leda. March stresses the popularity of Leda and the swan, not only in ancient art Before the Common Era but also in postclassical arts like painting and literature in which this subject has become inspiring. For example, the painters Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Correggio, Tintoretto, Veronese, Rubens, Boucher, and Delacroix, among others, have painted Leda and the swan. In addition, Edmund Spenser's third book of the epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590) as well as W. B. Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" (1923) describe the swan's rape of Leda. Thus, this myth is recurrent in various periods and literary genres, including poetry, art, and culture.

The swan is generally represented as beautiful in paintings and sculptures, which may wrongly suggest that Leda welcomes the swan's sexual advances despite her victimization (Olga Hughes, 2016). Sometimes she is even depicted as having a smiling face while receiving the swan. Leonardo da Vinci's and Michelangelo's paintings, for example, portray Leda as "an inviting nude figure" (White, 2014, p. 4). In addition, "Leda" (1921) by the American poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) obviously paints an attractive picture of Zeus represented by his "red wings" (p. 23, line 3), "soft breast" (line 6), "coral feet" (line 7), and "kingly kiss" (line 24), which makes Leda enjoy the intimate encounter with him. Thus, on Leda's part there will be no regrets anymore "nor old deep memories / to mar the bliss" (lines 26-27). In poetry, there is no one unified representation of the encounter between Leda and the swan. A number of modernist poems in the early twentieth century ambivalently portray the swan in different ways, focusing on the nature of the swan more than Leda or romanticizing the act of rape. While Hughes argues that "rape is a violation, a deceit" since "[t]here is nothing ambiguous about it" (2016, para. 1), it is our contention that such a claim works better for some versions of this myth mainly written by female writers. A patriarchal tradition has often portrayed this sexual encounter somewhat ambiguously, highlighting the violence of rape yet trying to justify or beautify it. For example, Rainer Maria Rilke's "Leda," published in1908, initially stresses the swan's deceptive, treacherous nature as well as his apparent lack of self-control:

> 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 (2001, p. 16, lines 1-4)

However, Rilke's poem makes Leda unable to fully resist the swan's hard attempts to get what he loved, for she is "tangled in resisting him" but unable to "withhold" any longer (lines 9-10): "He came at her harder,/ and thrusting his neck through her hand growing weaker and weaker" (lines 10-11). The consummation of the act makes the swan realize that "feathers were glory" (line 13) as he feels himself inside her womb. Therefore, this poem depicts the rape as a glorious act and depicts Leda as succumbing to the swan's will and thus complicit in the sensual act or simply acquiescent. The "splendor" attributed to the swan (line 3)

contributes to the same effect of romanticizing the rape. Similarly, in "Leda" Robert Graves depicts the violence and horror of rape while fusing those with lust:

> Heart, with what lonely fears you ached,
>
> How lecherously mused upon
>
> That horror with which Leda quaked
>
> Under the spread wings of the swan.
>
> (2001, p.16, lines 1-4).

Moreover, the poem juxtaposes the deception and obscenity used by the swan against the erotic delight and emotional softness of his partner after the violation in an attempt to implicate Leda in the sexual act and its consequences:

> Pregnant you are, as Leda was,
>
> Of bawdry, murder and deceit;
>
> Perpetuating night because
>
> The after-languors hang so sweet. (lines 9-12)

In a similar vein, D. H. Lawrence in his poem entitled "Leda" (1929) glorifies the coming of the divine in the shape of a swan and makes that superior to human love of kisses and caresses:

> come with a hiss of wings
>
> and sea-touch tip of a beak
>
> and treading of wet, webbed, wave-working feet
>
> into the marsh-soft belly. (2001, p. 17, lines 4-7)

In this romanticized, tolerant description of the violation of Leda, "the marsh-soft belly" indicates lack of resistance on her part while the "wet, webbed, wave-working feet" mitigate the act of violent penetration. Therefore, and unlike the poems by female poets we will discuss later, such depictions do not make Leda "exactly" a victim of rape.

Some poems, however, represent the encounter between Leda and the swan as violent; therefore, Samuel White (2014) contrasts Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" with Marie Laurencin's painting *Leda and the Swan*, which were both completed in 1923. He argues that the poem depicts the sexual encounter as violent whereas the painting portrays it as tranquil although Leda in the painting has power over the swan, which "problematizes traditional patriarchal narratives" (p. 10) and goes counter to the portrayal of Leda as receptive to the swan's sexual advances in Leonardo da Vinci's and Michelangelo's paintings.

It should be mentioned at this point that the poem which Yeats has written using this myth, "Leda and the Swan" (1923), portrays a helpless Leda and an indifferent powerful swan. For that, the union between Zeus and Leda is represented as violent because the poem depicts the swan's "attack" on Leda this way:

> 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. (2001, p. 17, lines 1-4)

The sudden blow, the terrified fingers, and brute blood indicate sexual assault as well as the swan's power over "helpless" Leda, while the indifferent beak indicates the swan's sexual domination over his rape victim. For Yeats, this violence portrayed in the poem is a reminder of the violence to come in the Trojan War (because of the offspring of this rape, i.e. Helen) and the murder of Agamemnon by Helen's sister Clytemnestra. Moreover, this violence has allowed Ruzbeh Babaee and Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya (2014) to argue that this encounter stands for the forceful violation of the defenseless Ireland by "a foreign power — Great Britain" (p. 170), and thus Leda stands for an Ireland that resists the British occupation and oppression. By contrast, Yeats also describes the swan in romanticized terms as the "feathered glory" (line 6). The "loosening thighs" of Leda (line 6) prepare us for the following ambiguous end:

> 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? (lines 12-15).

Yeats's poem foregrounds the mastery of the swan over Leda, and yet Leda's complicity in this rape. Her erotic arousal or being in the grip of desire is indicated by her being "caught up" in the sexual act. Moreover, the positive

connotations of the word “mastered” (line 13) reduce the violence indicated by the swan’s “brute blood” in the same line.

In their examination of this Annunciation poem, Babaee and Yahya look at the bright side, thus arguing that Zeus' sexual encounter with Leda has resulted in "the outset of the modern time" reflected in the birth of Helen. They liken the birth of Helen to the birth of Christ in that both children have made dramatic changes in the world (p. 170). Babaee and Yahya's analysis of Yeats' poem seems to indicate that the encounter between Leda and the swan, though violent, has proven fruitful, leading to Leda's empowerment, and the violent tone of Yeats' poem "enacts Yeats’s idea of violent transformation connected to the cyclical movement of history and its mechanism of renewal operating within culture" (Thanassa, 2010, p. 115); in this respect, Thanassa refers to the birth of Christ and to the swan's rape of Leda. In other words, violation which reflects violence in Yeats' poem "operates as a principle of destruction that precedes the act of creation" (p. 118), i.e. the birth of Helen, and thus Leda surrenders to the swan in order for life to go on and for change to take place.

The present article, nevertheless, does not aim to shed light on the nature of the swan or the good things which the encounter between Leda and the swan yields. It studies the representation of the myth of Leda and the swan in selected poems from a feminist perspective, instead. So, it is the purpose of this article to examine how this myth is tackled in selected poems by four female poets, and how Leda is depicted in all the poems as helpless and victimized due to having been raped by Zeus. The present article, in this sense, employs feminist views on rape and violence. Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), for instance, has changed the way rape is viewed. Brownmiller affirms that rape is always deliberate and violent (p. 391); so such a view on rape and violence will be employed because it allows for an understanding of how rape indicates Leda's oppression in a patriarchal society as well as the adverse effects of rape on her life and psychological state. The selected poems which the present article examines for this purpose are "Leda" (1971) by the American poet Mona Jane Van Duyn, the trilogy "Leda 1," "Leda 2," and Leda 3" (1993) by the American poet Lucille Clifton, "Leda" (1996) by the Russian-American poet Nina Kossman, and "Living Next to Leda" (1996) by the British poet Barbara Bentley.

DISCUSSION

In *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* (2002), violence is defined as abuse encompassing "physical, sexual, and psychological or emotional abuse committed against persons, harmful cultural practices, and in some contexts, damaging words and images;" in addition, it has detrimental effects on women's "quality of life and leisure; psychological and sexual well-being; the general status of women; and physical health" (p. 482), a fact which makes feminists firmly believe that all forms of violence perpetrated against women should be prevented.

For feminists, rape is definitely a severe form of violence. According to *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory* (2009), rape started to be considered a "crime of violence" after the publication of *Against Our Will* (1975) by the American feminist Susan Brownmiller (p. 476). This way of identifying rape counters the way rape has been identified in history, psychoanalysis, and New Criticism, as historically rape has been regarded as a "sexual act done by a man to a woman as a way of claiming property or as part of a legal right to the woman’s body;" psychoanalysis views women to be desirous of rape, considering rape to be "a sort of masochism that they seek and enjoy at an unconscious level" (p. 475). Since in New Criticism the focus is on the text, i.e. the words on the page, a reading of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan," for example, would be "unconcerned with the fact that the poem’s metaphor for the birth of Greek civilization is a woman being raped" (p. 476). However, after the rise of feminism as well as the publication of feminist texts like Brownmiller's, rape has been reinterpreted, and the way women are represented in literary texts has been questioned.

Igor Primorac (1998), as an example, traces the changing views on rape, saying that until decades ago the woman's social and legal status was determined by her relation to her husband, father, or brother. This explains the fact that sexual assault on wives has not been considered rape, and the fact that raping women in wars has been "but another way of hitting at the enemy himself" (p. 498). And the general view was that sexual intercourse tended to involve the exertion of pressure on men's part and a pretense at unwillingness on women's part, making it hard for the rape victim to prove rape in courts of law and making it easy for men to commit rape. Primorac then draws upon the pioneering study

of rape by the feminist Brownmiller who argues that rape "has little, if anything, to do with sex, and everything to do with violence" (p. 500). Susan Griffin in her 1971 article "Rape: The All–American Crime" even deems rape to be a terrorist practice, as it limits women's freedom and independence. Consequently, rape has started to be seen as a social practice reinforcing gender inequality as well as degradation and sexual oppression against women. Thus, in their 1994 article "Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape," Larry May and Robert Strikwerda hold men responsible for the prevalence of rape and the negative effects it has on women. Other radical views about rape are Robin Morgan's and Catherine A. MacKinnon's. In her 1980 article "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," Morgan argues that rape occurs whenever the sexual intercourse is not initiated or desired by the woman herself.

MacKinnon (1989) argues that gender inequality and the dominance of men over women permeate all sexual intercourse, prostitution, pornography, sexual harassment, and rape. In addition, she defines rape as "sex by compulsion, of which physical force is one form. Lack of consent is redundant and should not be a separate element of the crime" (p. 245). MacKinnon also suggests against the idea that rape has to do with violence rather than sex, as this argument "fails to answer the rather obvious question, if it is violence not sex, why didn't he just hit her?" (p. 134). For MacKinnon, both sex and violence are inherent in rape. Such radical views do not limit rape to the absence of the woman's consent to have sex; women may consent involuntarily. MacKinnon's conception of rape counters the liberal definition of rape as "nonconsensual sexual intercourse," and the fact that just "in the most extreme case of rape a person is compelled into intercourse by the use of sheer physical force" (Primorac, 1998, p. 503).

In *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), Brownmiller defines rape as "a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear" (p. 15, emphasis in original), which makes rape a weapon used by men to oppress women and to have dominance over them. Thus, rape for feminists has started to be considered a crime against the woman herself rather than her husband or father. Brownmiller also writes that "rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear" (p. 391). Hence, Brownmiller insists that while rape involves violence on men's part, it also involves fear on women's part.

Brownmiller refers to rape in Greek mythologies, saying that the gods Zeus, Apollo , Pan, Hades, and Poseidon have raped goddesses as well as mortal women like Hera, Europa, Io, Leda, and Cassandra "with zest, trickery and frequency" (p. 283), and the direst consequence of these rapes is the women's or goddesses' getting pregnant. In this regard, she makes reference to Yeats' interpretation of Zeus' rape of Leda, saying that Yeats considers the myth "a myth of superheroic proportions responsible for the eventual fall of Troy" (p. 284). So, Brownmiller seems to argue that rape has been depicted in a positive way in myths, as it has yielded positive results. Therefore, the representation of one myth which involves rape and which has been tackled in many modernist, and by extension postmodernist, poems─ namely the myth of Leda and the swan─ should be reexamined by way of observing a different take on the myth that counters common (mainly patriarchal and ambivalent) renderings identifying with the swan or romanticizing the rape.

Leda's Degradation in Mona Jane Van Duyn's "Leda" (1971)

Mona Jane Van Duyn's "Leda" opens with the question asked in the last two lines of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan": "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" (2001, p. 17, lines 13-14). As already mentioned, Babaee and Yahya (2014) describe "the sexual encounter" between the mortal woman Leda and the divine swan as violent; however, they argue that this union causes Leda to gain "some kinds of divine power and knowledge" (p. 171). Therefore, they compare Leda to Ireland that resists the British occupation. On the other hand, Van Duyn's poem states another opinion. Right after quoting the question in Yeats' poem, the persona in Van Duyn's poem replies in the negative: "Not even for a moment" (2001, p. 17, line 1). In this poem, Leda does not become stronger and more knowledgeable after the violation. Arguably, Zeus' rape of Leda results in Leda's degradation:

> In men's stories her life ended with his

> loss.
>
> She stiffened under the storm of his wings to a glassy shape, stricken and mysterious and immortal. But the fact is, she was not, for such an ending, abstract enough. (lines 9-12)

The poem makes it clear that the union between Leda and the immortal deity, Zeus, does not counter Leda's mortality. And Leda remains the passive "object" of this rape. In addition, this union has not made Leda special or privileged. She is still an ordinary person, and this is best reflected in her marriage to an ordinary man and her involvement in everyday life: "She married a smaller man with a beaky nose, / and melted away in the storm of everyday life" (lines 15-16). After being used for the swan's own ends, Leda is abandoned, and she is absolutely not endowed with immortality. Conceivably, in Van Duyn's poem Leda never gains power after her union with the deity. After the sexual encounter, Leda has "felt relief" (line 8), but she has eventually become aware of the fact that this union does not add anything to her life. Consequently, she has married an average mortal man and led an ordinary life. Unlike most versions of this myth written by male writers, this poem is told from the perspective of Leda rather than the swan and in a direct condemnation of the rape. And unlike the romanticized or ambivalent renderings of male writers, this poem is direct in its statement that Leda gained no dignity in this love.

Leda's Sense of Loss and Abandonment in Lucille Clifton's Trilogy "Leda 1," "Leda 2," and "Leda 3" (1993)

Lucille Clifton has written three poems about Leda and the swan: "Leda 1," "Leda 2," and "Leda 3" (1993). Like Van Duyn's "Leda," Clifton's "Leda 1" does not depict Zeus' rape of Leda as a good thing. "Leda 1" is written in the first person, and it is narrated by Leda herself. Right from the beginning, Leda expresses her dissatisfaction with the rape, saying: "there is nothing luminous / about this" (p. 59, lines 1-2). Leda sadly describes the major changes that have happened to her life after she has been raped. In Van Duyn's "Leda," Leda is degraded. And in Clifton's "Leda 1," she experiences abandonment and loss. She complains that her children have been taken from her, not mentioning to which place and not mentioning whether these children are Tyndareus' or Zeus'. Obviously, this is to stress her agony and to lament her state, as she is abandoned and alone. She says: "I live alone in the backside / of the village" (lines 4-5). Not only has her children been taken from her, but her mother has willingly abandoned her as well and "moved / to another town" (lines 6-7). The only one left around is her father, but that is no better due to the image Leda has of him; she says that her father follows her while "his thick lips slavering" (line 9). In other words, the behavior of Leda's father has the desired effect. Hence, Leda is never safe and sound in this patriarchal society that degrades women. What has made Leda suffer most is the fact that she has recurring dreams about Zeus' rape of her; she points out: "and at night my dreams are full / of the cursing of me" (lines 10-11). According to Leda, her sexual encounter with Zeus is a real rape and violation, and she is not made special by it; rather, rape is but a curse put on her. This curse results in the deep sense of loss Leda feels after her children and mother have left her, and she is saddened by the fact that her dreams are spoiled, and her ugly father is around.

Clifton in "Leda 2" and "Leda 3" continues to highlight Leda's sense of victimization after the rape; the swan appears to Leda not only in dreams but also in reality. This is reflected in the fact that the subtitles of both poems are about visitations. In "Leda 2," the main focus is not on the state of Leda after the rape, but rather on the appearance of the god Zeus to her, as the subtitle of the poem "a note on visitations" suggests. Such visitations make "the old husband suspicious" (p. 60, line 9) because "the inn is strewn with feathers" (line 8). In "Leda 1," Leda states that "there is nothing luminous" (p. 59, line 1), and in "Leda 2," the speaker argues that the only thing that shines during the sexual encounter between Zeus or the swan and Leda is the swan's fur. In addition, "Leda 3" which is narrated by Leda also stresses that the swan is subtly shining. The male symbolism of the poem is evident. As Leda says:

> always pyrotechnics; stars spinning into phalluses of light, serpents promising sweetness, their forked tongues thick and erect, patriarchs of bird exposing themselves in the air(p. 61 , lines 1-6)

The swan is shining because of a deceptive sexual display, but Leda is alone and in a terrible state, and thus this poem as well as "Leda 2" juxtaposes Leda's state with the swan's sexual nature. The speaker in "Leda 2" says that "the fur between her thighs / is the only shining

thing" (p. 60, lines 10-11), and in "Leda 3" Leda says: "this skin is sick with loneliness" (p. 61, line 7). The fact that Leda is in a bad state, as opposed to the swan, makes her dissatisfied with the sexual encounter with Zeus, rebuking him in this manner:

> You want what a man wants, next time come as a man or don't come. (lines 8-10)

This clear, direct criticism of the spectacular display of the deceptive swan is not like the tolerant or romanticized renderings in male poems. Leda assumes that if Zeus were in the form of a man, she would have better contact, would feel less lonely, and would not be abandoned. In Lawrence's poem "Leda," we have argued earlier, Leda wants the swan himself with his wings and beak as though coming as a man with kisses and caresses makes her feel personally violated or degraded. Nevertheless, Clifton's poem reverses this situation. Leda wants the swan to come as a man as long as he wants what a man wants, so she feels dehumanized and victimized for being loved and violated by a swan or a deity. From a feminist perspective, dehumanization and victimization reduce any sexual encounter to an instance of rape rather than intimate love.

Leda's Fear and Helplessness in Nina Kossman's "Leda" (1996)

In Nina Kossman's "Leda," the swan is depicted as a violator, and thus Leda is picked on and is a victim of his sexual violence. The speaker begins by identifying with Leda and describing her feelings, apparently during the rape. They are not feelings of satisfaction; instead, Leda is in a state of fear because a "god" in the form of a swan has appeared to her. The fact that Leda quakes with fright due to the swan's violence and nature has been depicted in early modernist poems as well. In Kossman's poem helpless Leda is frightened, for no birds have come forward and helped her out. Even worse, Leda is not able to cry out to the white birds for help. The speaker points out:

> She recalled the fear that had overwhelmed her soul, something had seized her throat so she couldn't cry out to them, white birds, wild, light, drifting in the sky which had turned the most remote black. (2001, p. 18, lines 1-4)

As in the previous poems, Leda is by no means happy about her relationship with the swan, a relationship full of fear as well as helplessness on her part. Not only do the white birds fail to rescue her, but the landscape escapes from her scream of terror as well: "the familiar landscape fleeing from her cry for help" (line 12). It can be argued that the white birds, the landscape, and everything around do not move nearer to Leda out of fear of Zeus. After the rape, the speaker describes Leda as fatigued and lazy, saying: "hung in lulled air like an ancestor's soul, heavy, / languid, and waiting for an infusion of flesh" (lines 7-8).

One of the differences between Leda and the swan this poem stresses is the fact that compared to the swan; Leda is helpless, trembling with fear. Hence, Leda is not in command of anything and of herself whereas Zeus is in total command since he is an immortal god, which makes him make use of Leda as he pleases:

> perhaps at the behest of a god, with his sad immortality, knowing the images to be thus seized and begotten from this shivering flesh— … (lines 13-15)

Apparently, Zeus acts violently and, therefore, intimidates Leda; this view about rape which indicates violence and involves intimidation is strongly emphasized by Brownmiller (1975). In Kossman's poem, Leda is shivering, and this is another indication of her fear and helplessness. By contrast, Zeus has full control not only of Leda's body but also of the birds in the sky, as the birds have not dared to approach Leda and save her from Zeus: "wild birds, flying, / no, words, healing ... white and fleeting, up in the lightened sky" (lines 15-16). Zeus also takes command of Leda's memory, and thus she remembers what has really happened alone. The myth made depicts Zeus as the "man / of fire" (lines 19-20) who is "taking her moistened lips; his voice, / chasing her, has become her children's" (lines 20-21). Leda and Zeus have children, and Leda is even described as "the mother of the nation of mythmakers" (line 18). However, she herself cannot yet talk about her memory due to the seizure of her throat. So, in this patriarchal society Zeus is fully in command of everything whereas Leda is a helpless victim filled with fear. In a nutshell, Kossman's version of the myth is direct in its exposition of the fear and loneliness experienced by the rape victim. Rape becomes a bitter and sad memory, with

nothing romantic or special about it as one would expect in a typical re-telling of the myth.

Leda's Psychological State in Barbara Bentley's "Living Next to Leda" (1996)

In Barbara Bentley's two-part "Living Next to Leda," Leda is portrayed as a traumatized victim of deception. This version of the myth is devoid of romanticizing attempts and equally direct in its condemnation of the rape, of "the bastard that did this" that still "flies free" (2001, p. 20, line 42). Leda is weird, for she behaves strangely after her rape. Again, we get to see Leda's perspective of things and her version of the traumatic story in this rendering of the myth. The speaker, who lives next door to sad Leda, remarks:

> Leda swore she could hear a swan. I ask you. A swan.
>
> They're supposed to be mute. But she insisted the noise came across as white sound. (p. 19, lines 1-3)

After the rape, Leda has apparently become mentally ill. It seems that she suffers auditory hallucinations; she assumes that she hears the sound of swans. In addition to hallucinations, Leda also has "a nervous tic triggered by / sparrows that twitched in her garden" (lines 4-5). It also seems that sparrows make Leda a nervous wreck; however, the sounds of swans, which she describes as white sounds, tranquilize her:

> … When she got jittery, she tuned into white sound, more calming than a tranquilizer …. (lines 7-9)

In addition, Leda sees that swans have got "poise" (line 11), in contrast with sparrows. As a result, she walks to the park to watch the swans and hear their white sounds and hence get relaxed. In the first part of the poem, the speaker juxtaposes the effects which the swans have on Leda with the effects which the sparrows have on her. The speaker has helped Leda on one occasion when one of the sparrows "bashed against Leda's pane. / There were feathers and beads unstrung on glass" (lines 12-13). Since Leda is nervous of sparrows, she has moved away, and the speaker has volunteered and "put the kettle on / and cleaned it [the window pane] up" (lines 15-16). Meanwhile, she has been meditating upon the white sounds of swans which have made her calm for weeks until a sparrow has flown in.

In the second part, Leda is even in a worse state; the speaker calls her "Crazy Leda" (line 23) and "Poor Leda. A bundle of nerves" (line 31). The speaker states that when Leda is a bag of nerves, she runs aimlessly about the house: "she flew from room to room, chasing something" (line 30), and "When she crashed into walls, they had to restrain her" (line 32). Moreover, Leda still hears the sound of swans and sits in the dark by the lake; she is obviously full of conflicting emotions. The speaker says that Leda has been found in her bedroom "smothering bruises in an eiderdown quilt / and pillows stuffed with real curled feathers" (lines 26-27). Obviously, Leda has had these bruises after having been raped by a swan. However, she apparently hides bread in order to feed swans and cygnets, and that is why she has asked the speaker "for slices of bread / which she crammed in her locker" (lines 28-29). The speaker describes the encounter between Leda and the swan in these words:

> I don't breathe a word of Leda's version:
>
> how a cygnet approached, not in fury but as an emissary. She stroked angel wings, and drawn by the flame that tipped the bill, she entered the jet eye and was transformed.
>
> Whatever happened, it was all hushed up.
>
> She's stabilised now. Soon, there'll be twins. (lines 33-39)

The swan used deception to win Leda, approaching gently and confidently and using his divine nature to seduce her. Consequently, the speaker pictures Leda "weaning two scrawny fledglings" (line 40), and thus Leda might be expecting two baby cygnets. The speaker ends by lamenting Leda's loneliness after the rape because eventually Leda will be abandoned by the swan. This direct language used to condemn the rape is different from the ambivalent one used by male poems whereby Leda is made complicit in her rape and the swan is glorious.

The fact that Leda takes a stand against the sparrows in favor of the swans, and the fact that she grants the swan permission to rape her indicate that she is in a mental state which makes her completely controlled by the swan. The last line of this poem is a clear indication of Leda's victimhood. In a sense, the swan makes use of Leda to achieve his own ends, abandoning her and leaving her mentally

unstable, sexually objectified in order that the swan satisfies his sexual desires.

Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr (2011) cite Fredrickson and Roberts' definition of sexual objectification as objectifying women sexually and treating them as passive objects, drawing upon Bartky's assertion that sexual objectification takes place when the "woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire" (p. 8). Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr also refer to the mental illnesses and serious psychological problems which sexual objectification may lead to like depression, stating that women may internalize sexual objectification and hence objectify themselves as well. Moreover, they assert that rape is an extreme form of sexual objectification and victimization. In other words, women are objectified in order to be desired and violated. Leda is sexually objectified and treated as a passive object by the swan and, in consequence, she suffers from psychological problems. Moreover, Leda ends up victimizing herself by giving the swan her consent to rape her, and thus she internalizes this victimization.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present article has examined the representation of Leda's victimization in selected feminist poems by four poetesses: Van Duyn's "Leda," Clifton's Trilogy "Leda 1," "Leda 2," and "Leda 3," Kossman's "Leda," and Bentley's "Living Next to Leda." The myth of Leda and the swan is prevalent in paintings as well as literature, and there are various depictions of this myth. Generally speaking, mythologies, paintings, and some poems written by male writers stress the essentially positive outcomes which the sexual encounter between Leda and the swan yields in that this encounter has resulted in the birth of Helen and the empowerment of Leda. Many writers have romanticized this myth and ambivalently wavered between depicting the violence of the swan and the complicit reaction of Leda. Nonetheless, the selected poems by the four poetesses we discuss mount a stand against this encounter; in the poems under discussion this encounter is merely a violent rape, involving violence and sexual desire on the swan's part as well as fear and degradation on Leda's part. The fact that rape involves violent acts done by men to intimidate women is emphasized by feminists like Brownmiller. So, drawing on feminists' views on rape and Brownmiller's assertion that rape is but a violent crime, it has been argued that Leda, as depicted in the selected poems, has fallen victim to rape and violence and is therefore adversely affected in those feminist renderings of the popular Geek myth.

After the rape, Leda is degraded as shown in Mona Jane Van Duyn's "Leda;" she does not become stronger, more knowledgeable, or immortal after the rape. Rather, Leda is abandoned by the swan, and she gets involved in an ordinary life. In addition, after the rape, as Lucille Clifton's poems show, Leda experiences abandonment, loneliness, and loss. In Clifton's poems, the swan is depicted as strong and shining whereas Leda is portrayed as helpless and lonesome. Leda's fear and helplessness are best shown in Nina Kossman's "Leda." The idea that rape is intimidating for women has been highlighted by feminists, so arguably Leda is in fear due to the swan's violence. In addition, her fear and helplessness are intermingled, as Zeus takes command of Leda, her memory, and the birds that do not dare to help her. Feminists strongly argue that these dreadful crimes of violence and rape perpetrated against women cause many psychological problems for the women who get raped. Therefore, in Barbara Bentley's "Living Next to Leda" Leda is depicted as insane. Significantly, this madness appeals to partial patriarchal conceptions of hysterical women and rational men. Zeus has made use of Leda to satisfy his sexual desires and has left her mentally unstable, so it has been argued that Zeus sexually objectifies Leda, treating her as a passive object. In fact, Leda eventually victimizes herself too and internalizes sexual objectification. Being raped by a male deity shows that Leda is not only oppressed in a patriarchal society, but a victim of rape as well. In such feminist re-tellings of the myth, a direct approach is used to condemn rape rather than romanticize it or portray it ambivalently since for feminists there "is nothing in the experience that empowers Leda, because Leda is a victim (Hughes, 2016, para. 13).

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