

Women, Power Knowledge in W.B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan"

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Abstract

Yeats's well-known poem "Leda and the Swan" seems to be reinforcing the traditional gender-myth (gender-stereotype) of aggressive male/passive female. However, in generating Leda's daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra, Zeus is transferring a considerable degree of power to Leda. Through a deconstructive reading, this paper argues that the mythological Leda in Yeats's text has within her womb a potentially violent, disruptive, and deconstructive force.

Keywords: women, power, knowledge, "Leda and the Swan," W.B. Yeats

1. Introduction

For centuries, Ireland's traditional bards glorified women through idealized woman-figures that misrecognized and misrepresented actual women. Patriarchal domination has infiltrated all aspects of life in the guise of a pure, elevated, artistic outlook, so that unsuspecting readers often fail to notice it. For example, the binary operation of masculine hegemony and female subordination underlying Irish cultural nationalism emerges repeatedly in Yeats's poems, such as "No Second Troy" and "A Prayer for My Daughter." Yeats's time-honored poem "Leda and the Swan" helps explain this negligence, or blindness to oneself, that is somehow characteristic of the most heavily patriarchal writing. "Leda and the Swan" appears to recount the erotic story of Zeus and Leda in Greek mythology. In the story, Zeus transforms himself into a swan, descends to earth, and rapes Leda, a beautiful woman who is imprisoned in a cellar by her own father. Some critics propose that the poem discusses the probable welding of knowledge into power through the body (Howes 120). In addition, by referring to Yeats's own commentary, many academics focus their interpretation on Yeats's apprehension in relation to the coming of discord and anarchy in 20th-century Ireland (Bloom 257; Brown 296-97; Jeffares, 221-22; O'Neill 162). In his allegorical reading, Declan Kiberd discusses Yeats's complex feelings about England's relation to Ireland (314-15). Through a deconstructive reading, this paper argues that although

"Leda and the Swan" is so overloaded with sexually hierarchical oppositions that it is often considered another potent testimony to the disempowerment of women which is typical of Yeats's poetry, a significant subversive potential for women to fight up against patriarchy in the poem can be discerned.

2. Powerful Men vs. Fragile Women

As a representative of cultural nationalist, Yeats was committed to promoting traditional Irish culture. However, like many of his counterparts working for the generally male-dominated Gaelic League, Yeats seldom paid attention to women's contribution in the nation-building business. As David Lloyd points out in his critical collection, *Anomalous States*, politics and aesthetics are two important topics mutually entangled in Yeats's poetry (60). In the meantime, women's concerns were mostly dismissed. In his well-known poem "Easter 1916," Yeats recounts his acquaintances, praising those humdrum lives which are transformed by the fight for freedom from a "casual comedy" (181) to a "terrible beauty" (181). Inspired by the Easter Rising in 1916, which triggered much commotion and sympathy, many Irish people became much more involved in fighting with the British army. However, from another perspective, Yeats's over-emphasis on the contribution of the male revolutionaries strongly consolidates the inequilibrium between valiant nationalists and silent women. Linda McDowell's critique testifies to this disproportion between men and women. As she argues, while men's sacrifice in wars and their bravery are well chronicled in Irish history, women in Ireland are often attached to the idealization of virtuous housewives (22). Conspicuously, Yeats's "Easter 1916" demonstrates how male warriors exclude submissive woman servants from matters of great importance. Additionally, in an analysis of Irish literature and art, Catherine Nash maintains that "while the idea of woman remained the embodiment of the national spirit and the allegorical figure for the land of Ireland, this land now became the domain of the overly masculine" (47). In other words, in Ireland, the nation tends to be managed by males, whereas the land is associated with females. However, the feminization of the land does not mean a real respect for women. It is more often a strategy used by chauvinists to elicit the Irish people's sympathy and prompt them to sacrifice for their motherland.

Women's subordination and their exclusion from politically correct nation-building business are also manifest in Yeats's "No Second Troy." In this poem, Maud Gonne's active involvement in politics is criticized. According to the poet speaker, Maud Gonne has "taught to ignorant men most violent ways" (91). In Homer's epic *The Iliad*, Troy is a cursed land marked by conflicts and devastation. It is full of conflicts because the place is torn between the nobility of man and the veracity of humanity. In addition, devastation is rampant because finally Troy ends up with ruins. In the ancient myth, the devastating wars are caused less by Achilles or Agamemnon than by the sexually demonized Helen. Therefore, as an object of beauty, Helen is the reason why Troy is demonized. By contrast, male such as swift-footed Achilles and wise Odysseus are depicted as heroes. They are sketched in this way in order to

arouse readers' pity and admiration. In Yeats's "No Second Troy," Maud Gonne is analogous to Helen of Troy, the very embodiment of beauty and annihilation. Maud Gonne is so passionately immersed in the political liberation of Ireland that Yeats expressed his anxiety over her indulgence in politics. Anxious about her involvement in political activities, Yeats questions, "Why, what could she have, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?" (91). Yeats's reaction here is far from surprising because it echoes the logic underlying nationalism. In other words, whereas men lead in political campaigns, women are expected to take good care of domestic affairs. According to McDowell, the rhetoric of nationalism is a "profoundly gendered one in which women take their familiar and familial place as the guardian of the family, keeping home and hearth together in time of hardship" (22-23).

The concept of female docility is also portrayed in Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter," in which the poet speaker reiterates his ideas of female beauty and urbanity. According to Yeats, although both Helen and Aphrodite are beautiful in appearance, they are far from his standard of perfect women because both of them lack good qualities such as gentleness and culture. "May she become a flourishing hidden tree / That all her thoughts may like the linnet be, / And have no business but dispensing round / Their magnanimities of sounds" (189). As is evident in these lines, the image of ideal women for Yeats is closely associated with natural beauties such as trees, flowers, and birds. Nonetheless, a cultured woman should not run wild in the wilderness, and nor should she argue with others. As the poet goes on to explain, "Nor but in merriment begin a chase, / Nor but in merriment a quarrel. / O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place" (189). This allusion to the chase of Apollo and Daphne exemplifies certain chauvinism. The laurel is often regarded as the symbol of honor after Apollo fails to win Daphne's heart. However, simultaneously it is limited to being an eternal fixation because of Apollo's love. Although the laurel appears beautiful and romantic, it is doomed to stay put with little chance of movement or change. The poem ends with a few lines which are in tune with an emphasis on female subjection to traditions and decorum. In the meantime, while custom, culture, and tenderness are accentuated, personal opinions, intellectual cultivation, and political participation are completely left far behind the poet speaker's concern when referring to his ideal womanhood.

As discussed above, Yeats's "Easter 1916," "No second Troy," and "A Prayer for My Daughter" manifest a hierarchical operation of masculine hegemony and female subordination which is common in his poetry. Apparently, Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" presents a very similar scenario of male dominance, though a closer reading of the poem may reveal a very different picture. As the poet re-tells the myth in the first two stanzas,

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in her 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? (214)

The primary binary opposition falls on the protagonists: bolt-hurling Zeus, the lord of the sky, and, in contrast, Leda, wife of Tyndareus of Sparta. Intimidated by the unexpected approach of Zeus with his powerful wings, Leda is plunged into panic. Helpless and hopeless, the "staggering girl" (214) is "caught in his bill" (214), utterly subject to the manipulation of the "dark webs" (214). The heart/body opposition in the second stanza reinforces the man/woman, intellect/nature, reason/passion hierarchies that are embedded in the poem. "And how can body, laid in that white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?" (214). It is perplexing that the raping male oppressor should be crowned with "feathered glory" (214), while the raped girl degenerates into a voluptuous body, lying low on the grass. Reluctant yet irresistible, Leda succumbs to this gorgeous thundering power step by step with her "loosening thighs" (214), a paradox prevalent in the chauvinistic justification of sexual violence. This male violence toward women is often justified in the nationalist discourse. Under the circumstances of warfare, rape is justified as an instrument. In her research on African women, Amina Mama denounces female maltreatment in patriarchal societies, asserting that acts of rape, disfigurement, and illegal detainment are notoriously overlooked in the construction of national identity (252-68). Moreover, according to Cynthia Enloe, in the operation of nationalist movements, people often feminize the nation so as to protect her. The intruding enemies are consequently imagined to be other men, men who would contaminate the nation (239). With this logic in mind, these male nationalists consider their female counterparts so fragile that they are desperately in need of male protection and fertilization. When reading Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" from this angle, it is understandable that Leda becomes not so much a mythological medium through which power and knowledge might coalesce into one as a feeble, raped colonial woman.

The enigmatic lines near the end, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" (215) turn out to be the narrator's meditation on the relationship between the defiled Leda ("the staggering girl" or essentially weak Mother Ireland) and almighty Zeus ("the brute blood of the air," or the British army as an extension of the royal family). From this perspective, the concluding lines can be interpreted in the following: Were the Irish people forcibly imbued with British rationality while being raped by the overwhelming British military power before the exhausted British army relinquished its dominion over Ireland? In other words, the patriarchal logic of man over woman which is hidden in these lines is somehow blind to its own hegemony.

3. Gender Myths

In "Leda and the Swan," the most interesting question Yeats asks does not come until the last stanza, where the connection between power and knowledge is

questioned. The interrelation of power and knowledge has been interpreted by Michel Foucault in his theory of discourse. Foucault argues that “the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations” is “a permanent political task in all social relations” (*The Subject of Power* 223). He maintains that power is never something possessed only by an individual or a political institute. Instead, power is always involved in a network of power-relations that are governed by language. According to Foucault, power, which is infinite, is so diffuse and nebulous that it permeates almost all aspects of human life. In addition, it is so closely related to knowledge that one cannot exist without the other. Regarding the genuine attributes of power, Foucault argues,

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general policies” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Rabinow 72-73)

For Foucault, truth and knowledge are trapped within the web of power, and vice versa. To make possible the realization of truth, someone or something has to be silenced or oppressed under the sway of overpowering discourse. Foucault’s theory on power and knowledge helps shed light on our interpretation of the final stanza in Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan.” At the instantaneous moment of sexual intercourse, Leda is undoubtedly endowed with Zeus’s power as embodied in the act of love-making, whereas she is also robbed of the knowledge to know the forthcoming destruction which is caused by this affair. The question mark at the end indicates that the poet speaker casts doubt on whether she is capable of integrating his knowledge with his power. As a matter of fact, Irish women in Yeats’s own time were neither powerful nor knowledgeable. Leda’s power transmitted from Zeus’s is very likely to fail because the given power is destitute of some necessary props (e.g. mighty episteme, in Foucault’s terms) to perpetuate and consolidate the operation of power. So fragile is Leda’s grip of knowledge that nothing, not even the fleeting sexual power from “the brute blood of the air” (215) can make her envision “the broken wall” (214) and “the burning room and tower” (214). Such a split between power and knowledge on the part of Leda substantiates again the female disempowerment in twentieth-century Irish culture.

Leda seems to be reinforcing the traditional gender-myth (gender-stereotype) of the woman made powerful—made into the mythical Mother Ireland or (as Helen of Troy) Mother Greece—by the male god, or by men. In generating Leda’s daughter, Helen (with that “shudder in the loins”) (214), and thus Troy’s “broken wall” (214)—Leda’s other daughter will be Clytemnestra, who kills her husband, Agamemnon, upon

his return from Troy to Greece—Zeus is giving Leda great (potential or future) power. Therefore, Yeats asks, “Did she put on his knowledge with his power?” (215). Yet again, we can just read this as the brutal act of a man (or male god who represents manhood and male aggression) raping a defenseless woman. As a consequence, Yeats wittingly or unwittingly mis-represents the woman, by seeming at first to portray her as a traditionally passive and feminine victim of rape now suddenly made powerful, made masculine and heroic. However, this traditional gender myth is itself subverted here, laid bare for what it is, just a myth.

If a deconstructive reading sees the apparently emphasized term as the author’s blind spot, here we have a fairly complex deconstructive model. At first look, we have the priority of the male term in traditional patriarchal oppositions, such as man/woman and aggression/passivity. But then we suddenly see the blind spot in the patriarchal stance and give the lower term priority: Leda puts on Zeus’s knowledge with his power. Some French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous, argue that this sort of inversion merely reverses the hierarchy, thereby maintaining a male, logocentric, patriarchal logic. Therefore, in the third stage, when we lay bare the fact that the priority-to-the-lower-term was itself a kind of fantasy, an illusion or myth, and thus switch back again, on the one hand the patriarchy is reaffirmed. However, on the other hand, this final move back to the higher term also deconstructs the logic of the hierarchy itself and leaves an open space for the possibility of a woman’s identity as difference, as something located outside the phallogocentric, hierarchical logic. This deconstructive reading unveils the complex male/female hierarchical duality of the poem, the duality of male (divine) rapist and female (human) victim. It unravels an unintentional male mis-representation of the female as powerful when, after all, her power can only be a mythical one, the sort of fantastic (as opposed to real, political) power that men project onto woman. In this sense, Leda (or women as a whole) is not as vulnerable and disempowered as some scholars assert (Cullingford 159; McKenna 431-32).

In a nutshell, whereas the traditional myth gives priority to men in male-dominated oppositions such as man/woman, aggression/passivity, intellect/nature, reason/passion, heart/body, immortality/mortality, heaven/earth, glory/lowliness, creation/destruction, and birth/death, there are various ways in which the “lower” term can also take priority, thus rendering the hierarchical order indeterminate and pointing to a position for women which is outside all such hierarchies, a position of absolute difference. This helps illustrate why, unlike most feminists who criticize Yeats’s aestheticizing of Leda’s rape, Kiberd regards Yeats as “identifying with the put-down woman” (312). In identifying with Leda, Yeats realigns his sexual politics with the construction of national identity by articulating his patriotism through a female other (Neigh 154). In this sense, the potential power of creativity and destruction granted to Leda highlights Yeats’s strong attachment to Ireland, the mythically feminized land that had been disempowered sexually, culturally, and politically for many centuries.

4. Conclusions

In the wake of tenacious patriarchal traditions, many Irish writers in the twentieth century, including Yeats, tended to depict impotent women. However, this deconstructive reading of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" showcases how the myth of women and the patriarchal logic may subvert themselves. Although the constraints imposed upon women are severe, they are not absolutely helpless in the face of patriarchal hegemony. As Foucault proposes, the exertion of power is necessarily accompanied by a counter-force that moves against the dominant force of coercion (*Power/Knowledge* 56). With this subversion or loosening of man/woman sexual relations, the possibility of women's liberation, which used to be an unfulfilled dream, is heralded ahead of its times.

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