

VIOLENCE AND VIOLATION: THE RAPE IN YEATS'S "LEDA AND THE SWAN"

VIOLÊNCIA E VIOLAÇÃO: O ESTUPRO EM "LEDA E O CISNE", DE W. B. YEATS

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RESUMO: Naquele que é possivelmente seu soneto mais famoso, o poeta irlandês W. B. Yeats descreve a cena e as consequências do estupro da mortal Leda por Zeus na forma de cisne. A violência da aproximação e do estupro, assim como as imagens da Guerra de Tróia, desdobramento desse encontro fatídico, torna-se ainda mais chocante devido aos aspectos do poema, que parece por ora compadecer-se da vítima e ora admirar-se do deus, que estaria justificado em seus atos pela história a que deu origem. Propõe-se uma investigação de como a crítica lida com essa violência no poema de Yeats, buscando elucidar as complexidades da violência contra o corpo feminino.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: W. B. Yeats, "Leda e o Cisne", estupro, violência.

ABSTRACT: In that which is possibly his most famous sonnet, the Irish poet W. B. Yeats describes the scene and the consequences of the rape of Leda by Zeus, transformed into a swan. The violence of this approximation and the rape, as well as the images of the Trojan War, product of this fateful intercourse, becomes even more shocking due to some of the poem's features, which seems at times to commiserate with the victim and at others to condone with the god, who was thus justified for his acts by the history. This study aims at investigating how criticism has dealt with this act of violence in Yeats's poem, as a way of approaching the complexities of violence against the female body.

KEYWORDS: W. B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan", rape, violence.

W. B. Yeats always planned his publications carefully, and having had his sonnet "Leda and the Swan" rejected for publication by *The Irish Statesman*, he chose to drop what biographer Roy Foster aptly calls a "bombshell" (Foster 2003: 270) in the August 1924 edition of the avant-garde *To-Morrow* – then published in Dublin. The decision to publish in Irish as well as in American soil (the poem had appeared in *The Dial* of June 1924) and in a vehicle of wider circulation than the privately printed *The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems* (1924) reflects the poet's intention of making "Leda and the Swan" the centre of controversy from its inception. Even if the poem's high place in the English canon may gloss over some of its explosive sides, this very importance may prompt other kinds of responses, such as on technical mastery, which makes this one of the most frequently analysed poems in English poetry, and still controversial.

The poem's mix of sex, violence, myth, religion and history, and the metrical, syntactical and imagetic qualities of the sonnet have made "Leda and the Swan" an interesting case study for all sorts of critical stances. Leda's complicity in the rape and the answers to the three questions that constitute the second quatrain and last two lines are crucial in the discussions that make up the poem's long tradition of criticism. The

critical programmes chosen by each of the readers/critics of the poem in case studies that follow determine their interpretation of the poem in relation to said complicity and their interpretation of the questions, revealing that interpretation is sometimes made a priori, bearing no relation to the printed text to the point of misquotation.

The case studies include five main texts: Hoyt Trowbridge's "'Leda and the Swan': A Longinian Analysis'", published 1953; Harold Bloom's section "Leda and the Swan" in his book *Yeats*, published 1972; M. L. Rosenthal's passages on the poem in his book *Running to Paradise: Yeats's Poetic Art*, published 1994; Elizabeth B. Cullingford's article "Pornography and Canonicity: The Case of Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan,'" also published in 1994; and Janet Neigh's "Reading from the Drop: Poetics of Identification and Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan'", published in 2006. These particular texts have been chosen because of both the authors' prominence among Yeats scholars and because they are representative of widely differing critical stances, as will become evident from my analysis.

For ease of reference, I reproduce the sonnet in full:

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?

Trowbridge's analysis departs from another that had been previously published in the same journal (*Modern Philology*), employing a Longinian method to analyse Auden, but discarding most of Longinus doctrine as inadequate for a modern poet. Trowbridge sustains that Yeats is a poet to whom such deployment needs not be made except for small concessions. Trowbridge's analysis is then a largely classical one, focusing on the five springheads to sublimity: elevated thought and passion, and figures, diction, and composition. According to the author, "[t]his analysis is exhaustive, since it covers all the elements of literature as Longinus conceives it: the content expressed and the aspects of the expression" (Trowbridge 1953: 119). With production on focus, the audience is understood merely in terms of rhetoric and those upon whom the effects of

the arrangements by the author ought to be felt; it presupposes homogeneity of response.

In his analysis, Trowbridge seeks to justify Yeats's sonnet as an appropriate form of art for the kind of transport described by Longinus. If Yeats is to be taken as vehicle for the sublime, the subject of rape has to be rendered appropriate and the diction has to make it palatable. Whilst conceding to the sexuality of the event, Trowbridge proposes the poet "excludes the more brutal and less credible details" (Trowbridge 1953: 121). Feelings of fear and pity for the helpless girl are the ones excited by the first part of the sonnet. As an important figure, he mentions questioning as a process cited by Longinus, opposing the dialogue-like effect to the one intended by Yeats:

In this passage, the interrogative form of statement expresses not the rush of thought, as in the passages quoted by Longinus, but rather a bewildered helplessness, an anguished pity for the unfortunate girl. The importance of the figure, in heightening the emotional effect, can be roughly measured by translating the questions into the declarative form: "Those terrified vague fingers cannot push the feathered glory. ... Body, laid in that white rush, feels the strange heart beating. ..." This is still powerful, because what is said is powerful, but the removal of the figure diminishes its force. (Trowbridge 1953: 124)

For Trowbridge, the first two questions are rhetorical questions, in its purest sense. The answer to the first is "no", the girl is helpless in her plight against the god, and again "no", her body cannot but feel the god's strange heart in the proximity she is forced onto.

Trowbridge makes a distinction between these two questions and the last. He says it cannot be translated into the declarative and is an "oracular" question, "forcing the mind to think and the heart to feel, but baffling inquiry" (Trowbridge 1953: 125). He relates this effect to that of the Grecian Urn in John Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn", and sees Yeats's questions more apt to express the unfathomable side of certain truths than Keats's statement. Thus, the answer for Trowbridge can neither be "yes" nor "no" because giving a definite answer would be above our possibilities of understanding.

The question of complicity is never mentioned in the article. First, because he identifies feelings of fear and pity in the quartet: perceiving complicity would diminish pity. Secondly, because he sees in the events that follow a tragedy over which the mortal girl has no control. Making her complicitous would deny what he sees as her situation: "the helplessness in the face of superhuman power and of strangeness and wild beauty of the attacker" (Trowbridge, 1953: 121).

Trowbridge's reading of "Leda" is conditioned by his Longinian analysis because of its presupposition of the author's high thoughts and emotions and the need for transport to the sublime. Even the terror in the poem is subordinated to the feeling of awe, and pure violence is left out. In order to see the higher emotions and thoughts in the poem, Leda cannot be complicit to the act, or else she will have some level of control that does not fit the scheme of divine intervention and tragedy. Her helplessness determines the first question and second questions (she cannot push, she cannot help but feel), and the answer to the last is an unfathomable truth, because if the answer had been

"yes," Leda would have gained power and been less helpless, if "no", commerce of man with god bears no fruit for man except the brutality and disregard of gods. By this, the sense of awe and the sublime would lose most of their meaning. These possibilities are conveniently left out of Trowbridge's analysis.

Harold Bloom's book-length study on Yeats seeks to trace a genealogy of influence on the poet's works. Bloom draws mainly from Romantic poets other than Blake, whose influence Yeats openly acknowledges. In the section "Leda and the Swan," Bloom presents what he considers the overpraise of the poem based on the comparison between Yeats, Wordsworth and Shelley, to the benefit of Yeats. Bloom proceeds in analysing how Shelley is frequently cited as someone whose path Yeats chose not to follow and that this choice is frequently congratulated; Bloom disagrees and introduces a passage from *Prometheus Unbound* in which a mortal victim does not put on power or knowledge because Jupiter himself has none to impart, and who thwarts God's design "merely by being human" (Bloom, 1972: 365). Bloom feels Yeats lacks Shelley's scepticism about divine power and knowledge, and that despite being rhetorically powerful, the poem loses strength by naïveté of vision.

Bloom criticises Yeats's constant revisions, and produces an early unpublished draft which leads him to rephrase the last question into "did she have a vision as she was being victimised?". Making reference to Blake's *Milton*, Bloom gathers the answer is "yes," and the theme of "Leda" "the provisional redemption of experience through vision" (Bloom, 1972: 366). He makes no reference to any of the other questions; however, his mention of power and Godhead suggests that the disparity between mortal and god would make resistance futile. Complicity is never discussed and cannot be guessed at because if indeed the girl did gain knowledge from the intercourse, it is possible that she would seek it as one who seeks a vision and endures an ordeal. This is a possibility that has been suggested by some (Bernard Levine in *The Dissolving Image* is one), and yet is not really hinted at in Bloom's text.

It is Bloom's self-confessed programme to reveal where Yeats is overpraised, and this is particularly striking in the later part of the book, which deals with poems produced after *Responsibilities* (1914), which traditionally marks a change of style in Yeats's poetry – if not towards making himself a Modernist definitely towards making more modern poetry (Faherty 2005: 64). It has been a practice in Yeats studies to praise this change, the tighter diction, more straightforward sentences, less-embroidered images, in detriment of earlier romantic poetry, with clearer influence of Shelley and the pre-Raphaelites. This is precisely what Bloom is alluding to, and seems to have blinded him to the nuances of the poem. Failing to mention the possibility of the girl's complicity, he is victim of the very same naïveté he accuses Yeats of, only on the human level: if Levine's hypothesis is indeed valid (and it is supported by other female-beast couplings in Yeatsian drama), the mortal girl's aspiration to divine knowledge levels up mortals and gods. Whereas he praises Shelley for levelling gods and mortals in ignorance, Yeats on the other hand levels them up in knowledge – or at least in its pursuit. Leda's Faustian bargain is a possibility he leaves unexplored in his dismissal of the poem and his praise of its musical qualities only.

The late M. L. Rosenthal was a prominent Yeatsian scholar who created some interesting links between the poet's and other modernists' works. In *Running to Paradise*, Rosenthal develops a diachronic study of Yeats's oeuvre, encompassing all its

genres of production. A chapter is devoted to *The Tower* (1928), where "Leda" was collected and circulated in a trade edition volume of poetry. The passage dealing with the poem is rather short, which is understandable considering the amount of poems, plays, prose, and autobiography analysed by Rosenthal; however, it reveals one of the established views of the poem, and a view Elizabeth Cullingford and other feminist critics attack.

Rosenthal describes "Leda" as Yeats's effort to "see into" female sensibility and sexuality. According to him, the ravishment is presented "without the infliction of pain or any sense of humiliation or pain after the girl's first 'terrified' resistance" (Rosenthal 1994: 254). The evidences for this are the loosening thighs, the caresses, the feathered glory and two hearts beating together (even if only one is mentioned). Rosenthal mentions male curiosity about female sexual experience as source of the reversal, and guesses that the shudder in the loins is a shared one. Genre is mentioned when the critic says that despite the subject, the language is "far from a police-blotter report of criminal rape" (Rosenthal 1994: 254). "Rapist" comes between quotation marks, and he is qualified as a god – "the most powerful of the Greek gods." This sexual encounter is an apocalyptic event between female and god, paralleled to Christ's conception, both referred by Yeats as annunciations. Thus, the critic introduces the problem of knowledge and the final question, remarking on the movement from the personal, intense intimacy of Leda's sexuality, to the less personal and passionately poetic rhetoric of the puzzle of human history, but leaving the question unanswered. The use of "puzzle" seems to indicate that, like Trowbridge, Rosenthal views this as an oracular question that Yeats wants to leave unanswered; his remark that this kind of movement is characteristic of the whole volume *The Tower* reinforces this idea.

Rosenthal's approach to Yeats's oeuvre, diving it into volumes of published poetry, is also traditional in Yeats studies. There are similarities between the volumes, in theme and in technique, that justify this choice. Nevertheless, one risks overgeneralising, as seems to be the case with "Leda". *The Tower* does have some poems dealing with female sensibility and sexuality (though not as much as the following volume, *The Winding Stair*), but we can hardly gather anything from Leda's point of view, least of all her sensibilities. The speaker is an external observer who can empathetically and sympathetically put him or herself in the girl's position, but of feelings and even actions performed by the girl we can gather very little: she staggers, she is caught, she may or may not be able to push (but does not). Rosenthal does not account for the use of "brute blood" which does bring some of the violence back, and most importantly, the "indifferent beak" letting the girl drop.

For Rosenthal, the union of bird and human is consensual, as are other such couplings, even another allusion to Leda in *The Player Queen*. This knowledge of other texts by Yeats may have misguided his interpretation and made him stop short of other possibilities. His diachronic analysis of Yeats's work was seminal and marked the way the poet was to be studied by many in the following decades, but fails in its interpretation of the sonnet as a self-standing piece.

Elizabeth B. Cullingford is a Yeatsian scholar who is also a known feminist critic. Her work on Irish cultural history has a strong focus on gender representation and specifically on the images of mothers and the female body. In "Pornography and Canonicity: The Case of Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan'", Cullingford introduces the

cultural setting from which the poem sprang and the forces Yeats was seeking to oppose. From a historicist point of view, the critic explains why Ireland in the 1920s was an extremely conservative place and why obsession with sexuality, particularly female sexuality, led to the establishment of a Committee on Evil Literature in 1926. Similarly to Foster's categorisation of the poem as a bombshell, she says that Yeats's choice of site of publication was intended to "flout censorship" and that "its transgressive intent is readily apparent" (Cullingford 1994: par. 4). The author further alludes to the genesis of the poem and Yeats's original intention of representing the Irish situation in an allegory. Citing Yeats's famous allegation that "as I wrote, a bird and a lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it" (Foster 2003: 243), Cullingford reinforces: "All politics did not evaporate in the alchemy of the creative process, however: class politics were overshadowed though not entirely effaced by the politics of sexuality" (Cullingford 1994: par. 5). The critic uses a chemical/mystical metaphor to explain the process of creation, indicating how original authorial intention can still be traced in the final product.

Cullingford stresses rape as the subject of the poem throughout. Rape is an important subject for feminists and gender theorists because it encompasses both sexuality and domination in gender relations – or, as exposed by Eve K. Sedgwick, sometimes to the exclusion of sexuality (Sedgwick 1998: 703). Cullingford, rather anachronistically, expounds that the outrage created by the publication of the poem was not because of concern about women, but that

[a]t issue was not the right of women to control and represent their own sexuality, but the male writer's freedom to use rape as a subject in a legitimate journal. ... no one at the time seriously questioned whether this liberalism justified [Yeats's] graphic description of the body of a woman attacked and violently raped by an animal. (Cullingford 1994: par. 10)

The stress on violence, rape, graphic description, attack, and bestiality, here is very distinct from any of the other critical readings of the poem. Even if Trowbridge highlighted the girl's helplessness, it was more because she was a mortal and he was a god than because of the violence itself. The animal is never so grotesquely pointed out as an animal, and is really only named in the title; most critics refer to it as "he" and "the god", sometimes even Zeus and Jove. For Cullingford, it is important to show the bestiality to carry forward her argument for the pornography of the poem, one of the most important points she makes.

The argument for the pornography takes place on the "reader" axis of the diagram. Cullingford argues that "Leda and the Swan"'s status as "high" art spares it from harsher judgements by imbuing it with the privileges of a canonical position. She produces a catalogue of pornography in "Leda": "Subordination, dehumanization, pain, rape, being reduced to body parts and penetrated by an animal: 'Leda' has it all" (Cullingford 1994: par. 14). The voyeuristic pleasure is also shared by the narrator, who stands outside the scene. The aim of such a representation would be to offer the (male) reader a visual spectacle "in which the woman becomes an object for his scrutiny and pleasure" (par. 15).

Still working on the poem's genesis, Cullingford describes the Hellenistic bas-relief, one of the visual sources for the poem, and the editor Faure's comment about it. Comparing that to Yeats's different versions of the poem, the critic concedes that Yeats changed Faure's decadent perception that Leda welcomed Zeus's assault to a more violent rape, even if the violence of the assault becomes seductive, "a deceptive promise of gentleness" (Cullingford 1994: par. 25) embedded in "her thighs caressed." The author indicates that "'Leda and the Swan' begins as a real rape, but Yeats's language hints at the possibility of consent in media res" (Cullingford 1994: par. 26). This testing occurs precisely in the questions. For her, the interrogative mode is a way of testing the possibility of female resistance, similar to the way the prosecution would present a case. The empathic move is a way of trying to gain access to Leda's consciousness. The conclusion, however, is that there is a dissociation between will and body, and that the "loosening thighs" would be prompted by a physical response the girl could not control.

Cullingford also distinguishes between the first two and the last question. For her, Yeats resists the temptation "to assume that being raped by a god must be a glamorous experience worth any amount of inconvenience" (1994: par. 36). The critic says that the rhetorical question has the interrogative form but the force of a declarative – but she fails to specify if negative or affirmative. Nonetheless, the penultimate line matters less in the argument than the last, whose prominent place, according to the critic, formally emphasises the importance of the beast's indifference to the girl.

An important Yeatsian scholar, Cullingford values Yeats's work. In *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* the critic identifies Yeats's drive towards the personal as a typically feminist concern, and in "At the Feet of the Goddess" she recognises modern feminist occultism in Yeats's mystical practices. Her defence of Yeats, however, is not uncritical, as can be gathered from the article. The poem is pornographic because it reduces Leda to body parts (nape, thighs, breast), subordinates her (the swan is "above" her), and has her penetrated by an animal. In poetry, however, reduction to body parts is synecdoche, and that is a valid expedient; rather than objectifying for humiliation, this is a figure of arrangement, of invention. Cullingford answers her own questions: the story of Leda and the swan exists on the fringes of high art as a slightly pornographic account of a sexual intercourse between animal and woman. By changing it and making it a rape, by exposing a kind of sexual behaviour that had been banned from Irish press and raising controversy, Yeats was being liberal even if complicit with oppression.

As a feminist, Cullingford could not ignore the sexist undertones in the poem. The synecdoches introduce sensuality that is incompatible with violent rape. Her work on the historical and legal treatment of rape make the suggestions of complicity found in the poem a thorny issue, given that finding evidence of consent was expedient in such rape cases. Negotiating between her feminist agenda and her admiration of Yeats's craftsmanship, the critic finds an uneasy balance that nonetheless reveals much about the poem and its strategies.

The last and most recent case-study, is a self-entitled "feminist postcolonial reading strategy." Janet Neigh's "Reading from the Drop: Poetics of Identification and Yeats's Leda and the Swan" is clearly identified with the "reader" axis of Keesey's diagram, even by calling itself a reading rather than an interpretation, or an analysis or even a method, like Trowbridge.

Neigh's main argument is one of identification, as the exchanges motivated by

desire between writer and reader. Her focus is on the political aspects of reading and on resistance, and this is done through the identification with the figure of Leda:

In other words, when I take Yeats's sonnet personally, and pursue my identifications with the text, which as Cixous suggests one cannot help but do when reading, I identify with Leda and her experience of sexist victimization. Rather than dismissing this as a subjective response to the poem not relevant to an analysis, I allow this response to propel my interpretation to explore how Leda might symbolize the female-identified reader trying to establish agency from a text that in its representation of rape undermines her agency as a woman. (Neigh 2006: 145)

The postcolonial turn is discussed later, but the idea of resistance and the inception of the "female-identified" reader are already suggested. Neigh sees the politics in the poem as "ambivalent" due to its "open-ended conclusion" (Neigh 2006: 146). The comparison is between Leda and the symbolic rape of Ireland by the British colonisers, and gender asymmetry as a form of domination inherent to Western civilisation makes for the poem's anti-colonial subtext, and the "broken wall, the burning roof and tower" the end of civilisation, monument, structure, and the phallus. The staggering girl, however afraid, still manages to stay on her feet, indicating resistance to the aggressor.

Neigh also sees complicity on Leda's part, but gives it a different interpretation than that given by also feminist Cullingford, by identifying with the swan. She identifies an act of invitation from the "narrator", who call forward identification with either the girl or the swan, both called "actors in the poem" (Neigh 2006: 150).

In her identification process, Neigh ascribes Leda's loosening thighs to contradictory reactions that show fragmentation. She compares this to the reader, who wants to resist the sonnet but finds it pleasurable and compelling. The fragmentation is comparable to the one described by Cullingford, where the mind refuses but the body gives in, something which has long been used as evidence for woman's naturally lustful nature.

According to the critic, the function of the questions is to force

the reader to consider what other kinds of civilizations might be possible. More specifically, Yeats questions what power Leda might gain from the swan before she is dropped to the ground after the rape. His decision to conclude the sonnet with a question invites his readers ... to imagine how Leda might recover agency and to develop strategies of resistance to colonialism and sexism. His final question makes his readers ask where, how, and whether Leda will find power. (Neigh 2006: 147)

The critic very tactfully leaves the real question (whether) to the very end. Yeats does not ask where, how or even what power. Her development indicates very clearly that she believes that there is an answer to the question and it must be a resounding "yes".

As regards the other questions, Neigh sees the interrogative mode as Yeats's signalling of a need to question the need for such violence. No specific answer to the questions is given, but the critic's explanation on the girl's complicity would suggest that the answer is either "yes", she could push if she really wanted to, or "no", she could not push because the swan-god is irresistible. The answer to the second question is more complex and relates to the idea of hybridity – a concept dear to postcolonial theory. Neigh conceptualises hybridity in terms of being unable to distinguish between self and other. Thus, the body cannot but feel the strange heart beating because girl and swan are one.

Many of Neigh's choices, such as identifying with the rapist, seem rather unfeminist, but are justified as they serve to her larger postmodern programme of rupturing with the binary oppositions and to her postcolonial programme of resistance. This is the reason the answer to the last question has to be "yes"; otherwise Leda is just yet another abused colonial subject. Neigh may not mean the kind of knowledge Yeats seems to have intended (that of the future of her progeny and of Troy, Greece, and the Western Civilisation), but some knowledge she did not previously possess. It is necessary for the girl to gain something from the encounter – if possible something the god does not know himself.

Her desire for this fusing leads to several confusions in the text. First she mentions the swan's "indistinguishable gender." This questioning of the swan's biological sex is out of place, only a necessary step to a forceful conclusion that

the poem's force causes me to lose touch with absolute or binary gender categories. ... The "feathered glory", a name for the swan and perhaps even a symbol of the phallus, gets lost in a scene of hybridity and merging of opposites, suggesting that difference, rather than sameness, is the hidden underpinning of identity. The image of "breast upon breast" suggests the possibility of an erasure of the masculine all together. (Neigh 2006: 159)

In the desire to "erase the masculine all together", Neigh has erased the very masculine possessive pronoun "his," both from this quotation and from the entire poem, quoted fully in her article. Where Yeats's text reads "He holds her helpless breast upon his breast," Neigh's reads "He holds her helpless breast upon breast" (Neigh 2006: 148). The misquotation does indeed lead to greater ambiguity, but it is not Yeats's text.

The apparent paradox of Neigh's feminism in accepting Leda's complicity is relieved by the postcolonial programme. According to her, "Leda's lack of clear resistance to the swan's rape illustrates the impossibility of resistance without complicity" (Neigh 2006: 153). This complicity, in a postcolonial reading of Yeats, is what accounts for and justifies his writing in English, the language of the oppressor.

"Leda" is one of the poems in which Yeats most artfully develops the technique of the (some say rhetorical) question. In his later work, such as "Among School Children," other such questions resonate even longer. Choosing to view how critics dealt with these questions revealed that the answers sometimes precede the questions, and may even silence them. Trowbridge's analysis asked for high feelings of pity, awe, and a sense of tragedy that could not allow for complicity on the girl's part, thus

rendering the first questions purely rhetorical. The need for a sense of the unattainable divine had to make the last question unanswerable. Evidence to the girl's complicity was ignored. Bloom also ignored this evidence because he focused on Yeats's naïveté in believing the god could impart some kind of knowledge. Rosenthal, however, swung to the opposite direction, to the point of framing "rapist" between quotation marks: the girl was definitely willing. Not only does he ignore evidence to the contrary, but gives no motivation, by not answering the last question (did she gain knowledge? Did she gain anything?). Cullingford's answers to the questions are almost as contradictory as Yeats's presentation of them: No, she could not push, but that doesn't mean she wasn't complicit either. She couldn't push on two levels: she did not have the power and her body willed it. In her feminist programme, Cullingford aptly identifies this current of male eroticism in the poem, something Neigh, with a different, postcolonial, programme, identifies with a need for resistance. The different answers point not only to the continuing power of "Leda and the Swan" but to how critical assumptions determine readings and may obliterate the text.

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