

SWANSONG
By Emily Taplin Boyd

Synopsis: The Spartan queen, Leda, considers the subject of her famed union with Jove.

Run Time: approximately 10 minutes

NOTE: Leda may be played by a female-identifying actor of any skin-tone. On the sole occasion when it has been necessary to mention to her skin color, options have been provided to accommodate actresses of various shades. If these do not suit your Leda, I invite her to create her own phrase for the relevant half-line, so long as it is suitably metrical.

SWANSONG

*We hear the soft pops and crackles of flames. A woman appears, holding a white feather.
Behind her, a city burns.*

LEDA:

She gets it, that old cow: Io I mean.
Those ceaseless stings, after the deed is done,
Perpetual, exhausting, constant, keen -
Hers though perhaps more literal than some.

Jove has his palate, so the poets write –
I've never fathomed it myself, but then
As surely as the Moon crosses the night,
There's no accounting for the taste of men.

Io was always bovine. Her mouth wide,
Her liquid eyes so deep a man could drown.
True, a bit vapid – but still touched with pride:
Perhaps that's why he chose to tear her down.

But still that gadfly – that was a bit gauche
Juno in all her savage, mindful wrath
Got her revenge, and Io, her reproach.
After my rape I walked a different path.

Perhaps you've heard of me? Leda's my name:
Sex with a swan my most notorious act
With bestiality I've been defamed
But now, at last, I can reveal the facts.

I was the noble queen of Sparta, so
Accustomed to the boring gaze of men –
Boring, it bores you; boring, it bores you thro'
Tyndareus my husband chief among them.

Tyndareus' days were filled with war
And law; and law and war; and war and law.
A hunt or two, a bowl of wine, a whore,
A leg of lamb, served bloody-red and raw.

And when he needed me then I'd appear
Beside his throne, bedecked, adorned, set dressing
A prop to help create the atmosphere.
Always imposing, and always impressing.

That's how he wanted it, Tyndareus.
That's how he had it – me. Had me, I mean.
Later he'd come by night: I'd acquiesce -
There's pleasure to be had in being seen.

And when he didn't need me I had time,
Time to myself to use at my own whim:
I'd hear a poet sing or most sublime,
I'd take a stroll down to the stream to swim.

Or so it was back then. Well, on that day –
A heavy day, humid, hot and close –
My women following, I make my way
Down to the riverbank for some repose.

The afternoon grows hotter, the sun rises
It peaks, it pounds, it pulses- it oppresses.
And in a move which rouses no surprises
I rise, remove the fasteners from my dresses

And let them fall, exposing my bare skin.
Freckled and specked from the sun's sweet, bright kisses [Tawny and tan/Bronzy and browned]
And glistening with a gloss of perspiration,
I dip my toes into the water's blisses.

It laps about my calves, my knees, my thighs,
Then gently splashes at my darkest places.
Deeper I push; I feel the water rise
And I'm submerged 'til just under my face is

The licking, tickling tide of the cool flow.
It feels magnificent. I dive deep under
And stroke back to the surface with a crow,
My soul replete, my heart bursting with wonder.

Stopped in a spot of shade close to the shore
I watch the lazy water sliding by
When suddenly I spy, in an uproar,
A flock of honking geese take to the sky.

A towering swan had landed in their midst.
His breast so broad, his plumes so white and clean,
To gape and gawk my eyes could not resist:
This creature's equal I had never seen.

He glided up to me and met my gaze,

As I stood wet and naked in the river
In his black eyes I saw raw power blaze.
I felt my breath catch; my stomach quiver.

He beckoned me to leave my laughing maids.
And how could I decline? That gaze, persuasive,
Entreated me out from the shallows' shades
But as I followed, he turned coy – evasive!

He bowed to me and swiftly swam away
And so began the swan his swirling rite.
I curtsyed him. We made a coy sashay,
I aped his graceful motions with delight.

It was a lark, a laugh, it was delicious
To waterdance with him in his bright glory
He swoops his neck, the water swirls and swishes,
It is a game! A masque exploratory!

An elegant amphibious pavane!
The way he held himself, the way he danced -
He seemed more man than beast, more swain than swan
And slowly swimming, I became entranced.

His arching bow, his graceful wings, his beak –
He dips and ducks and tucks his languid neck
Under the waves – the gesture seems so meek,
I mimick him. He steals a stealthy peck!

As I tread water, gleeful, giddy, gay
He grabs me by the nape with his bright beak –
Suddenly, swiftly joy turns to dismay
I have no time to speak, no time to shriek.

He climbs on top of me, pushing me down,
My face beneath the waves, I could not breathe
One second more, and I would surely drown
But then the air! A brief reprieve.

I don't think that he cared about too much
Besides sating his lust; but I do think
That judging from the power in his touch
If he had meant to drown me in the drink

I would be dead. He wanted me alive,
So up he held my head; it was his pleasure

To clench me close, to feel me vainly strive,
And as I foundered take me at his leisure.

At least the swinish swan concluded quickly.
The damage done the bright bird fell to preening
His long white plumes; away he glided slickly.
And what (perhaps) of all was most demeaning

My girls had gawked in awe as it occurred –
Awkward, ungraceful and humiliating –
Shocked into silence, they spoke not a word
Through all the sudden and unwelcome mating.

One brought my dress, draped it across my back
The bird circled the river one last time,
Then spread his wings and with a deafening crack
Of lightning, he was gone, leaving behind

One brilliant plume. While I slipped on a sandal
A whisper started up among the girls
And I saw I would not escape the scandal
As Rumor pranced her dance of leaps and whirls.

Of course we knew when the swan disappeared
It must have been almighty Jupiter.
It didn't change the way the people leered –
It only made me feel much stupider.

“Rape or seduction? Who can really know?”
The hist'ry books all seem to disagree
And in the room, the poets come and go
Talking of lust and bestiality.

Arachne had the gumption to depict it
For what it was - that is, a flat-out rape
(Just one of many by bright Jove inflicted) -
And for her pains, Athena changed her shape.

Then came the painters of the Renaissance
Rubens, Corregio and Leonardo
They all depict with pleasant nonchalance
My thighs caress his sides in pleasure's throes.

But Yeats – he got it right – to some degree.
He wrote me helpless: vague and terrified.
Afraid I was, that's no hyperbole

But nothing's vague once No's been specified.

That night Tyndareus came to address
Some talk he'd heard – and raging like a bear
Lectured me with his fists on faithfulness
Then took me as a stallion takes his mare.

I lay there, empty after he had gone,
All night, unfeeling and quite at a loss
Until, confronted by red-fingered Dawn,
I met the morning in its newest gloss.

I had my maidens take me to the baths
But couldn't bring myself to touch the water.
The hours, the days, the weeks all slowly passed,
And soon I knew inside me grew a daughter

Or son, or more than one, I couldn't tell
And didn't really care. Each day I'd try
To love the babes that made my belly swell,
But speaking truth, I wished that they would die.

Alone I strived for months to reconcile
The meaning of this life that grew within.
I spoke to priests and wisemen of my trial
And starry-eyed, they talked of gods and sin.

My privacy, my poetry were lost:
Tyndareus wouldn't let me from his sight.
And Jove exacted yet a dearer cost:
The water, once my bliss, was now my blight.

Soon I grew massive: bulging, bloated, bigger –
My husband, he was pleased but apprehensive
He'd joke, "By Jove! You're carrying a litter!"
My mood was darker: brooding, tense and pensive.

What to expect I did not know. A clutch
Of cygnets, fluffy birds, all downy grey?
Or babes with beaks and wings and webs and such?
I dreaded that there might be such display,

Such daily exhibition of my shame,
Constant reminder of those groping webs,
His beak upon my neck making me tame.
My nervousness would come in flows and ebbs –

I'd feel humiliation's constant stings
(A gadfly of my own, like that dumb cow),
If my new babes came out as birdlike *things*.
But thankfully they were not so endowed.

I birthed four babes, the poets all concur:
A pair of mortals from my husband-king;
And two half-gods, from the Swan Jupiter.
But which two babes were which, well, that's the thing.

Apollodorus, chronicler of myths
Recounted how one each, one girl, one boy
Tyndareus, my king, could claim as his:
Castor and Clytemnestra were his joy.

And to the great god Jove were born two bastards
Out of my womb, the soldier Pollux and
The face that launched a thousand – well – disasters:
Helen I mean, who levelled Troy to sand.

Not so! Apollodorus told it wrong.
Out of me squirmed two boys, the Gemini
Born to the mortal king, red-faced and strong:
Castor and Pollux, the Tyndaridae.

And then out came a strange abomination
It hurt to birth it much more than a child
A round memento of humiliation:
It was an egg. Tyndareus thought it vile.

This was my gift from Jove: inside were placed
Two babes, girl-children, nestled chest to chest,
Their tiny arms folded in an embrace.
The first was fierce (In truth I liked her best).

I called her Clytemnestra. And the other,
Whose beauty far outshone an earthly child,
Her I called Helen. When they saw their mother,
They cooed and gurgled. And I was beguiled.

I saw that I could shape them to my aim,
And in my arms I knew I held the keys,
The means to exact payment for my shame,
To bring both men and gods down to their knees.

I looked into the eyes of my sweet daughters
And saw a vision to incite my pride:
One child would plot a Mycenean slaughter
And one beget a Trojan genocide.

I handed off the boys to their wet nurse:
The girls I gathered close and gave them drink.
The poets think they're clever with their verse
When artful phrases they set down in ink.

"The child of war is rape," is what they roar.
No. The child of rape is war.

*The ruins in the background come into focus. Burning behind her is Troy. She releases
the feather to the winds. Blackout.*