

## Motherhood and/as the Death-Drive in *The Lost Daughter* and the Myth of Leda

In Maggie Gyllenhal's dazzling psychological drama movie *The Lost Daughter* (2021), adapted from Elena Ferrante's 2006 novel of the same name, a middle-aged Comparative Literature professor called Leda goes on vacation in Greece, where she has a series of intense encounters with a young mother and daughter, Nina and Elena. Leda remembers her own daughters when they were young, and in a series of flashbacks we see her despair then, juxtaposed with her awkward communications with her adult daughters in the present. We learn that the younger Leda abandoned her daughters and husband for three years and considers herself "an unnatural mother." The movie is a harrowing dissection of mother-daughter relationships, and "the notion that motherhood plunders the self" (Jeannette Catsoulis, *NYT* review).

The names Leda and Elena allude to the ancient Greek and Roman myth of the Leda, the swan, and her daughter Helen. The movie makes the relationship between the modern and the mythical characters more explicit than the book, with repeated references to W. B. Yeats' poem *Leda and the Swan*. Ferrante has said that she drew primarily on the version of the myth told in the third book of Apollodorus' *Library* (2016, 205–6), but she and Gyllenhaal draw more widely on the myth of Leda and its modern reception (including Linda Crook's medal *Leda and the Hatpin*, 1999), both for plot and symbolism.

This paper will argue that (1) *The Lost Daughter* supplements the ancient sources to provide a missing perspective on Leda as a mother. It enlarges on aspects the ancient myth: Leda's abandoning Helen through suicide (Euripides' *Helen*, 133–42); its bearing on insults, revulsion, dirt, and birth (Fulgentius, *Mythologies* 2.13); Leda as mother and not mother (she "adopted" the egg laid by Nemesis) and the idea that daughters' lives repeat those of their

mothers (Leda and Helen are both raped, and become absent mothers). (2) In turn, the ancient material thickens the movie's preoccupation with the destructiveness of maternal-daughter relationships. The striking absence of Leda from many textual sources, and especially their silence on her life after the rape, can be imputed, in a sense, to the domineering role of her daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra. It is as though, far from being accidental, a lack or lacuna in the archive of the ancient sources were a reflection of reproduction as disavowed parental self-annihilation, an issue that is central to theorizations of the death drive (in Freud, Derrida, Edelman, but also in feminist writers) (4) Ferrante's *frantumaglia*, a jumble of fragments inside that dissolves the boundaries between life and death, creating a textual atmosphere of *lifedeath*, the term that Derrida uses to synthesize the Freudian co-implication of life and death instincts (2020). Through Leda's death, *The Lost Daughter* accommodates very different yet tightly co-implicated interpretations of the death drive—a pessimistic one (Leda is finally obliterated by her roles as mother and daughter) and a liberatory one (Leda is finally released by her own mother and daughters, and gains a new lease on life). The latter scenario can be connected with what, in a Kleinian framework, Lisa Baraitser (2020) has called the "maternal death drive," that is, a "non-teleological, crystalline form of developmental time based on the principle of life in death." Re-reading classical and post-classical Ledas through Elena Ferrante novel's and its filmic version can allow us to connect ancient mythology with the contemporary debate on the theoretical utility of the death drive for feminism.

#### Bibliography

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