

Sariah Gonzalez

My libretto was inspired by the Greek mythological story of *Leda and the Swan*, which is about the god, Zeus and a young woman named, Leda. Zeus, in the form of a swan, rapes the helpless Leda; as a result of this violent act, Leda gives birth to Helen of Troy. I chose to recreate this narrative in my libretto because it allowed for the exploration of many themes that were discussed in class this semester. The text of my libretto explores the themes of sexual violence, the exploitation of women, and social class.

The theme of sexual violence is introduced in the very first scene of my libretto. I felt compelled to incorporate this theme into my work because sexual violence is a prevalent issue in contemporary culture. In the first act, Leda's body is hypersexualized by the Greek god, Zeus. Because he is a powerful being, Zeus feels entitled to enjoy Leda's body. Leda is raped by her husband on the same night of the swan's attack because he feels she owes him for lying with another. The attitudes of Zeus and Tyndareus are reflective of ideas that are still enforced today. Ultimately, these attitudes are condemned by the end of the opera because Leda's rape is linked with causing the destructive trojan war.

Moreover, there are several instances of human exploitation displayed in the libretto. The first female character to be objectified is Leda. She is treated as a means to appease the carnal desires of men. Leda's daughter, Helen is the next victim of exploitation. In the ceremony where Tyndareus is to choose Helen's husband, Helen is treated as a commodity to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Similar to Lucia in Donizetti's, *Lucia Di Lammermoor*, Helen is fated to marry a man who she does not love. Both Lucia and Helen attempt to fight against their male oppressors, but are silenced and defeated.

Not to mention, Helen is exploited once again by Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Aphrodite, like Tyndareus regard Helen as an object that can be bartered. Aphrodite promises Helen to a man, without Helen's knowledge. This act against Helen is dehumanizing. Not to mention, another group of people who are exploited and dehumanized in the my text are the slaves that suitors offer in exchange for Helen's hand in marriage.

Although not explored in great depth, my text does touch on the theme of social class. The relationship between Helen and her maid, Aglea was inspired by that of Susanna and Countess Almaviva in Mozart's, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Susanna and the Countess' relationship was interesting because it was atypical of women and men of different social classes to develop a meaningful friendship. However, the Countess' ability to look past social class introduced class fluidity to the opera. My intentions were to criticize the separation between people of different socioeconomic standings with the inclusion of class fluidity in my libretto.

Overall, my libretto attempts to challenge many operatic conventions. For instance, each role in my opera libretto is intended to be performed by a woman. The characters Zeus, Tyndareus, Paris, and Menelaus will be sung by contraltos. The roles of Leda and Aglea will be performed by sopranos. Finally, the role of Helen is intended to be sung by a coloratura soprano. The purpose of having a completely female cast is to challenge the gender binary and to promote gender fluidity; this is accomplished because there would be several woman who would play the "breeches role". In addition to denouncing the social construct of gender, an all female cast would add a homoerotic charge to the opera, further challenging the conventions of opera.

Moreover, the plot of my libretto and character of Helen resist operatic conventions as well. Although Helen's characterization does align with that of the typical "siren", she is not

juxtaposed with the “songbird”. Bizet’s, Carmen was juxtaposed with Micaela in order to further condemn her licentious behavior. The reason I omitted the songbird archetype in my text is I did not want Helen’s actions, behaviors, and music to be compared to the behaviors of the patriarch's ideal woman. Furthermore, in most of the operas that were analyzed in class, the archetype of the rebellious female who threatens the power of a man is put to death. However, in my libretto, the siren is triumphant in the end; it is her oppressor who is condemned.