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LILITH AND SALOME: JUDAIC AND CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS BECOMING “FEMME FATALE” IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND IN THE 19th CENTURY

Abstract. The article explores the stories of Lilith and Salome in relation to the construction of the “femme fatale” image in the Middle Ages (for Lilith) and in the 19th century (for Salome). Myths, history and artistic representations of both women are studied in order to reveal the similarities in treatment of Lilith and Salome in Christianity and Judaism.

Keywords: Lilith, Salome, Femme Fatale, Christianity, Judaism, Feminism.

Introduction

Lilith and Salome are highly illustrious characters from Judaic and Christian literature, although initially they were barely touched in the religious and mythological texts. However, both women have gradually become prominent examples of the “femme fatale” stock character despite the fact that they did not appear as seductive females in the texts where they were first mentioned. It seems that the process of stipulation around these characters started long ago and reached the pick in the Middle Ages (for Lilith) and in the 19th century (for Salome), when the misogyny was notoriously widespread.

The characters of Lilith and Salome do not come from the same religious or folklore sources, although they both still metaphorically reside within Judaic and Christian mythologies which are partially interconnected. Lilith as a legendary figure appears to be older than Salome who is mentioned in the New Testament and may be considered a historical character. The historical path of Salome is considerably more straightforward and clear compared to one of Lilith whose legend comes from Judaic, Mesopotamian (Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian) and Greco-Roman mythology. However, despite all the differences, Lilith and Salome seem to be similar to each other in relation to the stipulation

around them. Both women gained a reputation of seductive “femme fatale”, although initially Lilith was meant to be a nocturnal animal, while Salome was a little girl whispered by her mother during her alleged involvement in the death of John the Baptist; moreover, both women were only mentioned in a few lines of text, but these lines resulted in centuries of construction of notorious images of Lilith and Salome. Furthermore, Lilith and Salome inspired generations of artists and writers who were depicting these females as vicious demonesses, and both women gained excessive attention at a certain period of time – the Middle Ages and the 19th century. The article seeks to explore the construction of the “femme fatale” image in relation to Lilith and Salome and to search for similarities in the treatment of these characters in the Medieval Times (Lilith) and in the 19th century (Salome).

Femme Fatale Archetype

The “femme fatale” character has been highly popular in literature and arts since ancient times. A wide range of seductive females who bear danger to men come from myths, folklore, Bible, and classical history. “Femme fatale” is a woman who is extremely attractive, and it is the beauty and lust of this woman which are lethal for men. This woman seduces the

man, lulls his caution, and eventually brings him to death. The ancient examples of "femme fatale" include Lilith, Salome, Medea, Delilah, Inanna and etc. Some scholars even consider Eve as adherent to this archetype, although there is a debate regarding this matter. For example, Coleman [1] "challenges the feminist, Old Testament and systematic theologian to reconsider their interpretation of Genesis 3, especially, the woman's role as a femme fatale". Contemporary "femme fatale" figures are, for instance, the character of Brigid O'Shaughnessy from the movie "The Maltese Falcon" (1941) played by Mary Astor; Catwoman from the Batman comic books; Amanda Knox, a woman wrongfully accused of a murder, who gained considerable attention being labeled as "femme fatale"; etc.

The myth of "femme fatale" is important in relation to its potential to assist in interpreting the nature of misogyny and patriarchy. As Franz Meier (in Böker, Corballis and Hibbard, [2]) states, "Lilith, Medeas, Salomes and Sphinxes populated not only canvasses, books and theaters, but also the male imagination and even the so-called reality of the *demi monde*" [2, p. 118]. While myths and stereotypes may seem harmless at first glance, they play a significant role in the construction and reproduction of reality. Roland Barthes [3, p. 113] claimed that the task of the myth is to turn history into nature. Along the same lines, the employment of the image of "femme fatale" considerably contributed to the misogyny in different periods of history. Women presented as "femme fatale" (in books, paintings, films and etc.) were used as reminders that female attractiveness is dangerous and harmful, while women themselves are naturally vicious. The stories of Lilith and Salome are the examples of this "myth manipulation".

Lilith

Lilith appears to be an ambiguous character whose legendary background varies from her being a night owl to her being the first wife of Adam. While the latter version of Lilith's biography seems to be more well-known than the former, it is important

to note that "Lilith" was indeed initially an appellation for a nocturnal animal or a night demoness. It is the history of "Lilith" transforming from an owl or a spirit to the Adam's wife who was banished for disobedience which is interesting in relation to construction of the image of "femme fatale".

Ancient Mesopotamian and Jewish literature possesses certain references to Lilith, although the texts do not provide enough information to infer what "Lilith" was. While considering the etymology of the romanized word "Lilith", it appears that the translations from Akkadian (*lili* and *lilitu* mean "spirits", while *lilu* means "evening"), Sumerian (*lili* means "demoness") and Hebrew (*lilit* means "night demoness" or "witch") constituted the initial basis upon which the myths surrounding Lilith started to emerge. In Mesopotamian mythology "Lilith" was taking different forms, although most of them adhere to the image of a night bird/nocturnal spirit. Moreover, Lilith is mentioned in plural, suggesting certain creatures, not a single woman. Babylonian mythology contains the earliest mentioning of "Lilith", and the legend behind this character is concerned with a night creature who bears danger to pregnant women and young men. In turn, in the Hebrew Bible (in Isaiah 34) she is mentioned once, in singular form but without capital letter, suggesting her becoming a common noun. Apparently, Jewish audience was familiar with the Mesopotamian myths regarding Lilith. In one of the oldest Hebrew manuscript, "Dead Sea Scrolls", Lilith is mentioned among different vicious creatures. She appears in a singular form with a capital letter, thus gradually becoming a particular mythological woman. In the Babylonian Talmud Lilith got more references. The authors of the Talmud seemed to come to a consensus regarding Lilith: she appears as a compilation of Mesopotamian and Judaic myths, being a nocturnal she-demon with wings and long hair, bearing grave danger to men and pregnant women. It becomes evident that the initial translations of Lilith as spirit/evening/night/demoness/witch have complemented each other and contributed to the

production of an image of a she-demon who hunts at nights, deceive men, and kill children.

Although the image of Lilith was already dark and dangerous, it is in the Middle Ages when the character gained excessive attention and became a “femme fatale”. This period of history was characterized with a substantial level of misogyny. Although there were some interludes, for example, a period of “courtly love” in the High Middle Ages, when a woman was treated as a divine gift (although a still misogynistic period), the Middle Ages in relation to both Christian and Judaic traditions were characterized by a highly suspicious attitude towards women. Early Middle Ages, or the Dark Ages, were marked by extensive Christianization of Europe. The people were taking the religious texts literally and performing their religious duties with obedience. Moreover, in some European societies the Second Coming of Jesus was expected to happen in the year 1000. The atmosphere of fear, religious fanaticism, and relative novelty of traditions contributed to the rising misogyny. The religious texts were composed by men, and there were comparatively more vicious female figures there than good ones. Following the Eve’s fall into sin, women were presented as naturally irrational and disobedient creatures who are needed to be controlled and suppressed. This was a flourishing field for the myth of Lilith to gain popularity and new readings.

The Alphabet of Sirach, written in the Early Middle Ages, became a catalyzer for the creation of the Lilith’s reading as “femme fatale”. A pseudepigraphical text that contained folklore proverbs appears to be the first to introduce Lilith as Adam’s first wife. From this point Lilith became known as “femme fatale”. It seems that a man was needed to be added in the story of Lilith for the myth of her being “femme fatale” to flourish. Before, she was something like a collective image of vicious demonesses. She was mystical and mythical, but not religious or biblical figure. However, with the introduction of the storyline of her being in a relationship with Adam made her a “real” character and a “real femme fatale”. From now on, Lilith

was considered a part of the Genesis/Creation narrative, a character from the creation myth. Apparently, Lilith gained such popularity because of the importance of the story she was put in by the authors of the Alphabet of Sirach. Being the wife of the *first man* and thus *the first woman*, Lilith became an important part of the story of Adam and Eve. The motives of placing her in the Genesis/Creation narrative remain unclear, however, there are recent attempts to understand the reasons why Lilith was presented as Eve’s predecessor. For example, Kosior [4] claims that the Alphabet was written with an intention to “promote positive image of Eve”. Eve was widely perceived as almost the first “femme fatale”; her role in the Original Sin was obviously leading and negative. However, there were considerable ambiguities related to her image. Kosior provides examples of questions that could have been asked by a religious text’s reader: 1) Is Eve identical to the first woman? 2) Was Eve and the Serpent the same figure from the beginning?. Such questions could have needed answers, and the introduction of Lilith as a vicious predecessor of Eve helped to upgrade Eve’s tarnished reputation. Lilith was a perfect scapegoat who could be blamed for “crimes” even more inconceivable than Eve’s ones. Eve was surrounded by ambiguity, but Lilith became literate representation of female natural vices. Her image complied with the medieval attitudes towards women as being greedy, disobedient, uncontrollable, sexually perverse and irrational.

The myth of Lilith (composed from different sources, including the Alphabet) as being the first wife of Adam can be summarized as follows: Lilith was Adam’s first wife, but she disagreed to be inferior to him; she wanted equality due to the fact that she and Adam were made from the same clay and at the same moment, but it was not what a woman could have asked for; she was banished from the Garden of Eden (or she left it in her own will) for being disobedient and became a demoness whose children are destined to die and who hurts other mothers’ children, but only those who do not have a special

amulet which protects a child from Lilith. There are a plethora of other medieval myths regarding Lilith, for example her being connected to the King of the Demons – Asmodeus, and thus being the Queen of the Demons (Schwartz [5]). However, all of these myths are similar in a way that Lilith is presented as a coherent vicious “femme fatale” character. While initially Lilith was more of a collective image of nocturnal demonesses, in the Middle Ages she appears as a solid mythological/religious figure and an embodiment of “femme fatale” archetype.

Lilith inspired a significant number of writers, poets and painters. The ginger “femme fatale” can be found in both Western and Judaic literature and art. One of the most famous depictions of Lilith is the painting “Lady Lilith” by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1866–1868, 1872–1873). Lilith’s image continued to be popular in the Renaissance, in the Romantic Period, and even in the contemporary era. For example, in the famous book series “The Chronicles of Narnia” it is said that the White Witch is a descendant of Lilith. Today, Lilith is considered to be a Jewish feminist symbol, an empowered woman who did not want to be submissive in relation to Adam. However, this was not always the case: for centuries, Lilith was perceived as a vicious “femme fatale”, a creature of evil who bears grave danger to men.

This is how Lilith appears in “Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy” (Greenberg translation [6]):

Faust:

Lilith? Who is that?

Mephistopheles:

Adam’s wife, his first. Beware of her.

Her beauty’s one boast is her dangerous hair.

When Lilith winds it tight around young men

She doesn’t soon let go of them again.

...

The Pretty Witch (*Lilith*):

Ever since the days of Eden

Apples have been man’s desire.

How overjoyed I am to think, sir,

Apples grow, too, in my garden.

Salome

Salome is a biblical character, she was a daughter of Herodias and a step-daughter of Herod Antipas. She is mentioned in the New Testament, in particular in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. The narratives of Matthew and Mark are relatively similar. To summarize the storyline of Salome, she was dancing at Herod’s birthday feast, and she pleased him so that he promised her to fulfill one wish of hers. She asked her mother for a piece of advice, and Herodias recommended her to demand the head of John the Baptist. Salome did what Herodias told her, and Herod killed John the Baptist despite being sorry (both Matthew and Mark highlight that Herod did not want the death of John).

Salome is also mentioned in Josephus’s “Jewish Antiquities”. However, Josephus did not report Salome’s dance or her involvement in the murder of John the Baptist. And this is where the uncertainty regarding Salome’s story comes from. As Neginsky [7] asks, why did Josephus keep silence regarding such an important detail of John’s death, if he (*Josephus*) was relatively straightforward in criticizing rulers and praising John? Was he unaware of Salome’s notorious dance, or is the whole Salome’s storyline simply fictional? Furthermore, there is a following historical detail: early Roman feasts were split into two parts – one for the eating, another for philosophical discussion, entertainment, or religious rituals. The second part of the evening was not appropriate for women and children to attend (Corley (1989) in Neginsky [7]). That is why the question arises – how could Salome and her mother take part in the festivities. Moreover, how could Salome perform a dance? As Psichari [8] claims, a princess as Salome could not possibly dance in front of men in the evening. Given these two arguments, the story of Salome seems to be more mythological than historical. A folklore tale, an astonishing detail that helped the authors of the Gospels to attract the attention of the readers. However, despite being possibly wrongfully portrayed in a couple of lines in the Gospels,

Salome gained a reputation of “femme fatale”. How did it happen?

From a historical point of view, Salome was a little girl at the time of the alleged performance of the dance. She should have been around 12 years. However, this age did not save her from becoming a “femme fatale”. Her story did not get widespread attention during Middle Ages (as Lilith’s legend), but the interest in Salome started to emerge approximately in the Early Modern Period. Prominent Renaissance painters depicted her either during the dance (Fra Filippo Lippi, 15th century) or with the head of John the Baptist (Titian, 1515; Charles Mellin, 16–17th centuries). These early images of Salome present her as a girl (who she was) and not yet a woman. In Lippi’s painting she has a sad, pensive face; Titian’s Salome looks innocent and young (despite having John’s head in her hands); Mellin depicts her as a more mature lady, but she is still a girl, not a woman. These images comply more with the archetype of “fille fatale” rather than “femme fatale”. The former term means an underage “femme fatale” – a girl who leads men to death. This sexualization of “fille fatale” make the archetype resemble the “nymphet” (Nabokov’s *Lolita*, for example). If interpreting Salome’s alleged behavior at the feast through the lens of her being a nymphet, she is probably dancing out of her frankness; she is not shy, she is open and vivid; she knows that people (and especially men) like looking at her and she allows them to watch her dance; she is not seducing intentionally, she is just naturally attractive; she looks more like a young woman rather than a girl, and she is not yet aware of all of her power over men. This is probably what Early Modern artists were implying while depicting Salome – she is a “fille fatale”, a girl who is not as cold and calculating as “femme fatale”. She remains innocent even after asking for John’s the Baptist murder. She has a potential to become “femme fatale”, but for now she is just a girl.

In the 19th century Salome’s myth changes the trajectory. She gradually becomes an intentionally

seductive “femme fatale” instead of an innocent nymphet. As Kaye and Denisoff [9] state, “nineteenth-century painters generally downplayed nymphet-Salomes in favor of predatory femmes fatales”, although there were exceptions. There seems to be a scholarly consensus that Salome became “femme fatale” as a part of an unspoken campaign against women. The 19th century was characterized by a significant success of the feminist movement. Women began to acquire more rights, they started to work in order to have their own money. Female sexuality could not be restrained any longer; despite all the attempts to control women’s bodies even nowadays (for example, abortion legislations), it is obvious that the feminist movement of the 19th did something irrevocable in terms of revolving against patriarchy. Such a societal shift resulted in aggression towards women and fear of female sexuality. The “femme fatale” stock image flourished during that period, and Salome’s legend became a part of this construction of a generation of “femme fatale”.

A girl covered in heavy clothes and with hair updo (pulled back or hidden under a headwear) is transformed into a seductive woman with less and less fabric on her body in each new painting. Her breasts and legs can be seen, and she has loose hair. She dances with lust and passion, and she is aware of her own beauty and allure. Henri Regnault’s “Salome” (1870) is only partially covered in translucent fabric; her dress is slipping off her shoulder; her hair is loose. She smiles with satisfaction; she is playful and vivid, she is not yet cold and calculating. In Moreau’s illustration (1876) Salome is has a translucent robe that covers only intimate parts of her body. She confidently and with no regret points to John’s the Baptist head with her hand. The year 1896 is a “fatal” year for Salome as “femme fatale”. Oscar Wilde depicts her in a tragedy “Salome” as a fully fledged “femme fatale” – a calculating and vicious woman who tries to seduce John the Baptist, but after his rejection of her flirtations she bewitches Herod with her dance of the seven veils and asks for John’s head.

The ending of the story is traditional for the "femme fatale" stock image: Salome is killed by Herod's people for her role in the murder of John. Herod is presented as innocent and grieving – he did not want to kill John, but he *had* to obey Salome's will. This is an important detail – as Neginsky [7] claims in her in-depth analysis of Salome's story, Herod's attitude towards John was not that univocal. He could have respected John for his charisma and preachments, but he also could have been jealous of John's leadership skills and could have been afraid of John starting an insurrection among people. So, he could have been satisfied with the murder of John, he could have even been involved. However, in Wilde's "Salome" he is unambiguously innocent, while Salome and Herodias are both vicious and calculating "femme fatale". Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's play are also representative: Salome and Herodias are depicted as attractive conspirators, possibly plotting against John the Baptist. Constantine Cavafy produced a poetic representation of Salome in the same year as Wilde presented his tragedy. In Cavafy's piece Salome is trapped in the the same storyline as in Wilde's play: she is a "femme fatale" who was rejected by John. She is mad at him and therefore she decides to kill him. Cavafy writes that John "was indifferent to the charms of love", metaphorically making Salome a witch who tries to cast a spell on John by being seductive and attractive. However, John (as a male protagonist) resists her witchery, and the displeased temptress decides to lead him to death.

In the painting by Franz von Stuck (1906) Salome gets the image that is probably most often assigned to her – she is half naked, her breasts are perfectly seen, and she is in a seductive dance pose, full of lust and joy. In the dark background the head of John can be seen, suggesting that Salome continues to dance with passion and happiness even after John dies. While in Wilde's play Salome (despite being a "femme fatale") is kissing John's lips after he dies, suggesting that she is just an unhappy woman who became mad after being rejected by her love interest

(a popular trope that interprets "femme fatale" as a lonely dissatisfied woman who takes revenge on men out of her frustration), Stuck's Salome is the culmination of her being a cold, calculating and heartless seductress who is not actually interested in John. She is just amusing herself by dancing and taking part in the murder of John. Gaston Bussière continues this tradition of depicting Salome naked. In his painting she only has a small piece of golden cloth that wraps her hips and a rich headdress. She is dancing with a happy smile on her face. The characters of Salome in subsequent plays and ballets mostly draw from these images of Salome, seducing and half-naked.

Obviously, these depictions of Salome are distant from her early images and from Salome's "real" story itself. From a historical point of view, Salome as a princess could not perform "a dance of seven veils" being half naked and among men. Moreover, Herod Antipas was not unambiguously innocent character in the story of Salome. However, the 19th century brought the image of Salome as a true "femme fatale" – passionate but cold, seducing, calculating and vicious. Only the end of the 20th century signified a new turn in Salome's character interpretations. Critical studies reveal that she could not perform a dance being naked, or that she could not simply attend a second half of the Herod's feast. Moreover, her willingness to kill John is doubtful – even in the Gospels it is stated that she was whispered by her mother. Also, she was just a girl and could not possibly be a woman, especially "fatal woman". However, despite these arguments, Salome, who was only briefly mentioned in the Gospels, became an illustrious representation "femme fatale".

Conclusion

In the Middle Ages men used such legends as the one of Lilith in order to preventively restrain women by spreading the information regarding their lust and irrationality. Clerics, philosophers and politicians succeeded in this activity, and the society fell into misogynist trap for a long period of time. One of the culminations of this misogyny is probably the

witch hunt and the phenomenon of burning redhead women due to their hair color. How strongly could have Lilith's legend impacted these processes given that Lilith is thought to have long ginger hair?

In 19th century, by contrast, women were already empowered in some way, and the fear of female sexuality and subsequent misogyny contributed to the revival of the "femme fatale" stigma on a whole new level. This archetype in art, film and literature was used in order to demonstrate the consequences of female emancipation that had already started to happen. It was not a preventive strike as in the Middle Ages, it was a post-traumatic cry for help after women's empowerment process was launched.

Both Lilith and Salome became "femme fatale" despite being only briefly mentioned in the texts. Initially, both their stories were relatively distant from "femme fatale" discourse. Lilith was a nocturnal animal, Salome was a little girl. However, both characters became a part of unspoken campaigns against women. Their stories and legends were used as symbols of female lust, vices and irrationality. Lilith and Salome went a long way of image transformation; they became the embodiments of evil in the Middle Ages and in the 19th century, respectively. However, both women's reputations were vindicated in the 20th century by numerous feminist scholars who were critically reinterpreting Lilith's and Salome's stories.

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