How do shifting depictions of Lilith, 'The First Eve', trace the contexts and hegemonic values of their times?

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Synopsis
During early research I came across an article describing Lilith as the first wife of Adam. This “First Eve” was an incongruously subversive female figure to be attributed to the Age of the Patriarchs, apparently created before Genesis and removed from the Bible for insidious chauvinistic or anti-Semitic reasons. However, I soon realised this perception was far from the truth. Lilith was a figure in Jewish mysticism but the notion of her as Adam’s wife was only widely known in the 1800s and had its basis in the first century CE. Genesis, I knew, was written centuries prior to that. However, an early Biblical verse dated to the 700s BCE, amazingly, did contain a reference to Lilith. The myth was much more convoluted than I had believed. I realised that the fable had shifted over time, and due to my modernist viewpoint believe that historical, literary and artistic interpretations alter according to context. Thus, I developed my thesis; “How do shifting depictions of Lilith, “The First Eve”, trace the contexts and hegemonic values of their times?” I had to filter through many contemporary depictions of Lilith (mainly readings venerating a figure that seemed to ‘retake’ Christianity for feminists, eclipsing women’s cardinal sinner; Eve) but eventually unearthed well-researched academic essays which identified Lilith’s origins as a Babylonian Goddess. After isolating the major alterations in the legend, I identified the causes of the change. This necessitated extensive research into the context of each of the major deviations in the Lilith-myth, allowing me to make the links between the alterations and the event. In summation, my research essay investigates the fluctuating figure of Lilith and the reasons for those modifications, studying how the context and values of an era mould contemporaneous art and literature and the interpretations of the historians who study it.

Essay
As art and literature reflect the preoccupations of their era, so does the figure of Lilith, present in history and mythology for over 4000 years. Mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh, inscribed on ancient amulets, shaped in Sumerian clay, even present in the Bible, Lilith can be traced back to the earliest literary and spiritual human endeavours. Each manifestation is different, a result of the ideology and context of the times. The earliest depiction of Lilith is as an all-powerful goddess of destruction, but soon she becomes a demon, overpowered by male heroes. Thus, she traces shifts in gender-dominance and hints at the origins of the change. Later, she is reduced to a ghost by empirical political posturing, next; a symbol of Judaic colonies and cultural integration. In the Middle Ages, she is a defiant rejection of Christian mores; whilst in the Romantic era she reflects the blossoming feminist movements in positive and negative lights. The transformations of the Lilith-myth correspond with its fluctuating context and thus reflect the values and ideals of the times. Furthermore, the historians who attempt to trace and justify her metamorphosis are influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by their own era and agendas. Accordingly, Jungian historians discuss her dual nature as seductive anima and “terrible mother”, whilst historic-religious texts explore her spiritual and physical contexts. Furthermore, feminist historians revel in her empowering aspects, whilst attributing her shifts in character to patriarchy. Therefore, shifting depictions of Lilith in art, literature and history are indicators of her context and interpreters, and consequently betray the hegemonic values of the times.

Originally a goddess drawn from matriarchal belief systems, Lilith’s first transformation occurred in the 20th century BCE, a result of the era’s developing patriarchy and turbulent politics. Dated to 1950 BCE,
the "Burney Relief" is the first pictorial depiction of Lilith. The female figure is clearly a goddess, as she holds a "ring and staff...the well-known attributes of the gods". The two owls flanking her, symbols of darkness, affirm her role as divinity of the night. Lilith's dual nature is already apparent, as, despite her nakedness and animal features, both indicating her role as a fertility goddess, Babylonian amulets from the same period plead for her to leave pregnant women alone, with spells and invocations attempting to placate her infant-killing tendencies. According to analytical historians such as Siegmund Hurwitz, the "terrible mother goddess", with the ability to take and give life, is a common feature amongst early religions, alluding to primal dependence upon natural abundance and the harshness of life. Thus, Lilith's depiction in the 'Burney Relief' can be attributed to the lingering influences of Palaeolithic matriarchy, evidenced by female 'Venus figurines', thought to be an early form of goddess-fertility worship which came about due to the complete reliance upon fecundity, and the view of women, with their mysterious ability to bear children, as central to prolificacy.

However, in a Sumerian version of "The Epic of Gilgamesh", from c.1950-1700 BCE, Lilith is irreverently portrayed as a demon, as she makes a home in the goddess Inanna's tree, and is frightened away by the male hero, Gilgamesh; "the demon Lilith...petrified by fear tore down her house and fled." This indicates that her context, and thus, role in society, has changed.

Prior to 2000 BCE, Mesopotamia consisted of over thirty autonomous city-states, each ruled by a patron divinity and centred around their temple. However, martial influences soon eclipsed religion and wars occurred. The states were conquered, united, and dissolved numerous times before the prosperous Babylonian empire took power circa 2000 BCE. This rise of military power and expansionism heralded the diminishing of the influence of the mother goddess, as, through irrigation methods and trade, the Babylonians grew to have greater influence over their environment, and fertility became something to be mastered, not blindly worshipped. Religion gradually became a matter of state, with 18th century sovereigns such as Hammurabi claiming the gods endorsed their reign. Thus, the "Epic", written during the rise of the Babylonian Empire, reflects the reshaping of residual 'mother goddess' figures, as they were regulated to demons and eclipsed by powerful male gods and heroes, illustrated by Lilith's shift from goddess to demon.

Fig. 1 Venus of Hohle Fels, c. 35,000 BCE, Germany. Earliest undisputed Venus figurine. Accessed at: http://www.livescience.com

Fig. 2 The "Burney Relief", c. 1950 BCE, Sumerian. Accessed at: http://analogicalplanet.com/Pages/ContentPages/Sidebars/BurneyRelief.html

The Mesopotamian expansionism and turmoil of the 8th century BCE resulted in Lilith's inclusion in the Tanakh and incorporation into Kabbalistic belief systems as a demonic seductress. The Biblical prophet Isaiah, credited with the verse which describes her, (writing in the mid 700s BCE) was a citizen of the splintered
realm of Israel, following the death of the Hebrew King Solomon. Isaiah was alive when the Assyrian empire conquered the northern half of the once-glorious 'Promised Land', and his writings reflect the tensions of the era, where the wise-men, himself included, of the remaining half of Israel, Judah, actively discouraged assimilation with the oncroaching idolatrous Assyrian religion and culture, sure that it would incur God's wrath. Expressing his hostility and resentment towards the invading Mesopotamian Empire; Isaiah predicted the fall of Edom, an ally of Assyria, for her cruelty towards the Hebrews. Lilith is depicted as a demonic ghost inhabiting the wasteland; "and thorns shall come up in her palaces...and it shall be a habitation for jackals, and a court for owls.... Lilith shall also rest there, and find for herself a place of rest." Thus, the Sumerian Goddess, a symbol of Babylonian culture, is reduced to an apparition amongst the ruins of a rival nation, reflective of the antagonism between the Hebrew and Mesopotamian states. Conversely, Jewish settlements, isolated from the political rivalries of the homeland, embraced aspects of Babylonian culture and religion, and consequently a new facet of Lilith evolved; the Succubus. The Babylonian Empire had prospered, and with "the creation of a strong centralised monarchy... came male domination and female subordination". Chauvinistic attitudes are duly reflected in the remains of Jewish settlements within Babylonia, with the Nippur Incantation Bowls, dated to the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, containing spells banishing "the evil Lilith who leads the hearts of men astray." This reflects the blossoming patriarchy within Babylonia, as her goddesses, once all-powerful symbols of fertility, became whores or demons, with their sexuality depicted as unnatural and dangerous to men. Feminist historian Marilyn French asserts; "Hebrew history shows the same progression we have seen elsewhere: powerful women give way to sexual women." Therefore, the political rivalries between Assyria and Judah resulted in the ghostly Biblical depiction of Lilith, whilst patriarchy and Babylonian demonology contributed to her newly cemented aspect as a succubus.

Following the trend of 1st Century CE midrashim, Lilith was cast as 'The First Eve', a notion expanded upon in Jewish folklore and later in the satirical text, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira". Following the Roman’s 70 CE destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Rabbinical Judaism evolved, as Rabbis compiled and studied holy texts, attempting to understand the nature of their God in the face of the diaspora. It was at this point that a rabbi speculated on the existence of the First Eve, wondering why God had not simply created both man and woman from the dust. This notion was incorporated into Jewish folklore and elaborated. Many variants of the myth developed, but followed a similar pattern. Lilith was created from the dust alongside Adam, and therefore refused to be subservient. Following a disagreement with him, she ran away and fornicated with demons. Three angels flew out to bring her back to Eden, but she refused to return. As they had killed her offspring, she swore to kill newborns, but promised to be repelled by the sight of the angel's names. This is evidenced by the development of the Jewish amuletic tradition, where amulets inscribed with the names of the three angels meant to repel Lilith were hung on nursery walls, along with the command "lilith-abî" (Lilith-begone), now thought to be the origins of the English 'hullaby'. The influence of early Babylonian demonology is still apparent as the myth unites the two aspects of Lilith as a baby killer and demonic seductress. The anonymous "Alphabet of Ben Sira", written in the 8th-10th centuries CE, is a satirical text, the first literary evidence of Jewish folklore concerning Lilith. "The Alphabet’s" content is incompatible with perceptions of the Middle Ages as an era of fervent Christianity, as it blasphemously details Jewish mysticism, recounting the Lilith myth and Biblical epics alongside explicit sexual references. It is pornographic and irreverent to such an extent that some historians have deemed it anti-Semitic. However, it was accepted by the Jewish community at the time, with historians such as Norman Bronznick stating; "The Alphabet may be one of the earliest literary parodies in Hebrew literature, a kind of academic burlesque -- perhaps even entertainment for rabbinic scholars themselves". Moreover, the Alphabet has its basis in Jewish folklore, as it references and explains earlier amuletic tradition; "... That is why we write her name on an amulet for small children. And when she (Lilith) sees it, she remembers her promise and the child is saved". When viewed in context, it has been suggested that the text’s purpose is to avoid the persecution of Jews for witchcraft, justifying the amuletic tradition with 'biblical' origins. However, the "irreverent treatment of acknowledged sancta" would have likely been inflammatory in the tense Judeo-Christian relations of the era. The references to Talmudic proverbs and Jewish folktales suggest that "the Alphabet" was a risqué collection of Jewish fairy-tales, perhaps a subversive reaction to Christian hyper-morality. Thus, Lilith is seen to mirror the preoccupations of her time, as she shifts from...
Babylonian demon, to theological supposition, to fairy-tale villain, to a symbolic rejection of Christian values. The reformism of the 19th century and influence of the Romantic period resulted in Lilith's metamorphosis to tragic heroine with her demonic tendencies virtually eradicated. Romanticism emerged as a reaction against the restraints of the traditional church and horrors of the French Revolution, celebrating expressionism and individualism. Lilith's persona was altered significantly in her first significant literary reference in 600 years; Goethe's 1808 rendition of "Faust, Part 1". The Romantic values of aestheticism clearly shaped her character, as "Lilith's sensuality and excessive beauty became prominent". Moreover, social influences are evident within the work, as Lilith, whom Goethe names; "pretty witch" is portrayed as a 'femme fatale', a stereotype which gained prominence in the 19th century due to early feminist movements. Despite censoring her child-killing tendencies, Goethe's references to Lilith in her capacity as Adam's first wife indicate her origins in Jewish mysticism, demonstrating the Romantic rebellion from the anti-Semitic values of the age. "Faust" is likely to have inspired Dante Gabriel Rossetti's mid-1800s artworks, which ingrained Lilith in popular culture and transformed perceptions of her.

The "revolutionary energy... at the core of Romanticism", resulted in the expression of new ideas and concepts, and provided a vehicle for the movements of the time. Thus, numerous historians view Rossetti as a feminist who, in his renowned painting "Lady Lilith" depicted a Lilith who "gazes unsmiling at her own reflection in a mirror... engaged and satisfied with herself, not with any male voyeur", reflecting the values of the emerging feminist movement. Conversely, feminists such as Marilyn French interpret the painting and its Romantic notion of "fear of and desire for 'woman'" as another variant of the femme fatale, and as such a chauvinist depiction of the feminist movement as;

women (are) forced into subordination... men sense the anger beneath women's compliance and develop an image of woman as irresistibly beautiful and seductive, but also malicious, reflecting women's hatred of their condition... and men's fear of the oppressed.

Therefore, the Romantic preoccupation with reformism resulted in its entanglement in contemporaneous issues and suffragette ideals, the controversial themes prompting diverse feminist readings. Moreover, the aesthetic principles of Romanticism resulted in the eradication of Lilith's darker aspects, and the emphasis of her role as the tragic heroine, the 'First Eve'.

Contemporary depictions of Lilith as empowered and subversive reflect modern feminist values. Following Rossetti's remastering of the legend, Lilith became a feminist figurehead. Buffy Childerhose paraphrases a subversive version of the myth, stating:

God obliged by making Lilith... At first (Adam) was pleased, but then she opened her mouth... showing that she had a mind of her own... she would not be subservient to him. Adam flew into a tantrum, so Lilith took off to calmer territory.

The musician Sarah McLachlan founded a women's-only music festival, naming it "Lilith Fair", whilst the empowering Jewish women's magazine, "Lilith" also utilises the archetype. Lilith's role as the 'First Eve' enables feminists to 'rewrite' perceptions of women in the Bible and history, gifting them with assertive and powerful characteristics. Therefore, contemporary portrayals of Lilith reflect feminist ideals, and an attempt to find a place for powerful women in religious dogma and history.
The diverse portrayals of Lilith throughout history reflect the preoccupations and politics of their era. From Babylonian goddess, spirit of destruction, Biblical ghost, succubus, child thief, demonic ex-wife to feminist symbol, Lilith has undergone a multitude of transformations inspired by her context. As Marilyn French states; “People seem to invent gods appropriate to their time”28, and thus, Lilith has been manipulated by kings, prophets, artists and historians since 2000 BCE to best represent the values they wish to uphold. “Every generation writes history in a new way, and puts upon it a new construction”29, thus, each discipline, from psychology to feminist discourse, adds greater understanding of the topic, providing new perspectives and a more comprehensive view of history as a whole. To an extent this conclusion supports a postmodernist view of the past; that it is essentially a narrative, as interpretations of Lilith are shown to mould and be moulded by contemporaneous analysis, and as such, present a fictitious version of her true history, rendering it mere legend. However, this essay has also identified the causes of these alterations, and by tracing the evolutions of Lilith, and accepting her historical status as a ‘myth’ and thus subject to the politics of her era, has conversely attained historical knowledge. Consequently, awareness of the flaws of history has resulted in a deeper understanding of “what actually happened”30. Therefore, the myths and interpretations of Lilith are shaped by the hegemonic values of her context, and consequently provide a greater understanding of antiquity.

Endnotes
2. See Figure 2
5. See Figure 1, “Venus of Hohle Fels”-carved circa. 35,000 BC
7. ibid
8. Hebrew Bible
9. Mystical Judaism
10. Isa: 34:13 ( King James Bible)
11. (Ed.) Guisepi, R. Civilisation of the Hebrews Along the Banks of Rivers, World History: (http://history-world.org/Hebrews.htm)
14. A commentary on a Biblical text
17. Hurwitz, op. cit., p. 121
18. Stern & Minsky, ibid
22. See Figure 3 for painting.
24. ibid
27. Scerba, op. cit.
28. French, ibid.

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