

2012

Transvestism, Witchcraft, and the Early Modern Lilith

Katelyn Maire McCarthy
Lehigh University

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Transvestism, Witchcraft, and the Early Modern Lilith

by

Katelyn Marie McCarthy

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

April 26, 2012

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Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in English

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Katelyn Marie McCarthy

Date Approved

Barbara Traister
Thesis Director

Scott P. Gordon
Department Chair

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ABSTRACT

Early modern literary explorations of Eden facilitate an examination of gender roles, as the figures of Adam and Eve are emblematic of the original gendered hierarchy. Further, the early modern rise in female assertions of autonomy and independence caused much of its contemporary literature to address this social shift through putting this female behavior in conversation with Eden. Thus, the Judaic myth of Lilith as Adam's first and rebellious wife emerged as a significant influence within literature dealing with transgressive women. In the texts examined here, the female transvestite and the female accused of witchcraft—both threatening figures to the social patriarchy—are figured as representations of Lilith. Through this mythic invocation, these texts both identify an early modern male anxiety concerning the social influence of Lilith and suggest a possibility for the proto-feminist reclamation of this figure as an alternative originary figure for the early modern empowered woman.

Introduction

Early modern England produced a variety of literature engaging with the Edenic myth as described in the book of Genesis. This return to Eden allowed for an exploration of the story of human creation—a story which left an almost indelible mark on social understandings of human nature, and more specifically, gender relations. Eve’s actions in the Garden have continually been cited as the justification for the subordination of woman to her apparently more rational, independent, and capable male counterpart; the weak and sinful Eve has come to be understood as a representative of every woman. This kind of rhetoric was both employed by misogynistic early modern writers and refuted by others in an attempt to rescue Eve from her chains of infamy. However, this paper will argue that there is another kind of Edenic exploration occurring in the period specifically related to gender identity and performativity. This exploration is that of the Lilith myth—the myth of Adam’s first wife. This myth has its primary roots in Judaic tradition, but many have also located it more subtly in Arabic Literature and the Christian Bible. According to these traditions, Lilith and Adam were created simultaneously and as equals. However, when she refused to submit to his sexual dominance, she fled the garden and God created a subservient woman—Eve—in her stead. Lilith, then, can be understood as the first “first woman,” thereby disrupting the gender hierarchy and presenting an alternative originary female. Further, after fleeing the Garden of Eden, a now cursed Lilith becomes known as the “terrible mother,” as she is now, in her exile, the predator of unprotected newborn babies. This essay will suggest that the early modern period experienced a male anxiety about the influence of Lilith within society, both as the Edenic independently transgressive female and the post-Edenic demonic murderess. This anxiety stems from a discomfort with the manner in which gender norms were being challenged and blurred within the period, specifically through practices such

as cross-dressing, and more generally through an increase in the assertion of female autonomy both within and outside of marriage. This worry then fosters a revisiting of the mythic past, where the Lilith figure emblemizes an alternative to traditional femininity—an alternative which could compromise the integrity of the social order.

Background of Lilith in Eden

In order to understand the invocation of Lilith in the early modern texts that this paper will examine, it is necessary to be familiar with both the roots of the Edenic and Post-Edenic elements of this myth and the cultural availability of Lilith representations. In his article entitled “Adam’s Two Wives,” Jeffery M. Hoffeld highlights the manner in which the figure of Lilith enjoyed a surge of cultural and artistic representations during the middle/late Middle Ages—representations that would have then been available during the subsequent early modern period. Further, John K. Bonnell explores similar medieval and early modern representations in his article “The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and Mystery Play.” However, these two authors disagree about whether or not this “human-headed serpent” is truly a representation of Lilith. While Bonnell argues that these representations are not a manifestation of Lilith and instead a product of the mystery play convention, Hoffeld strongly believes that these Edenic images are, in fact, representations of Adam’s first wife. Ultimately, I believe that Hoffeld’s argument is more convincing; however Bonnell’s article is useful in its careful identification of the myriad of artistic representations of the enigmatic female-headed Edenic serpent.

Bonnell opens his article with criticism of the idea that “pictured and dramatic representations of the serpent in the Garden of Eden” as partially human represented a nod toward the mythical Lilith. He writes of Michelangelo’s representation of Eden in the Sistine Chapel (see figure 1):

Who has not noted with curiosity, in the picture of the temptation on that ceiling [of the Sistine Chapel], the strange serpent almost wholly woman?...Was there some old legend, now lost sight of, that might account for such a monster?... perhaps...one dismissed the matter as probably having something to do with Lilith and Lamia. (113)



Figure 1- Michelangelo's *The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden*

Here, he acknowledges the potential to align this female headed serpent with Lilith in order to dismantle that same possibility. He continues It is my purpose, however, to show:—that the representation of the serpent in Eden as having a *human* head (emphasis mine) was common to drama and iconography; that it is first noticeable in the thirteenth, or the early part of the

fourteenth century, being then a startling innovation in art; and that in all probability it was the mystery play which, to facilitate the dialogue between Eve and the serpent, first adopted it, from a literary source. (113)

My emphasis here is meant to draw the reader's attention to Bonnell's use of the word "human" rather than "female" or "woman's." This change (a change in that he initially referred to the serpent as having a body "almost wholly woman") is significant as it broadens the discussion of these artistic representations to one concerning a serpent that is half human, rather than



Figure 2-Adam and Eve from *Speculum humanae salvationis* (1479)

specifically half female. In his discussion of the relevant pieces of art, Bonnell often recognizes the feminine nature of this half-serpent; when describing a medieval woodcut included in an edition of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (see figure 2), he describes the serpent as having “a female head and breasts” (273). I have also included a second image (see figures 3, 4) from the 1468 edition of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* that depicts the “serpent” in the scene as a winged, taloned female creature with a serpent’s tail. These images are especially fascinating given that Lilith is often described as a winged creature, similar to a screech owl. (Hurwitz, 53). Bonnell also includes the following description of a sixteenth century tapestry: “The serpent in the temptation has four limbs, the hind legs, on which it stands... It has a woman’s head with long flowing hair, and human arms” (132). He describes the painting in the Sistine Chapel as portraying the “tempter” as “a woman to the hips,” notes that Raphael’s serpent (1511) “assumes the face and shoulders of a woman”

(see figure 5), and explains that a 1516 Roman painting depicts the Edenic scene including a serpent with “no shoulders—only the head, which is charmingly feminine, being human” (134). He continues to enumerate several sixteenth

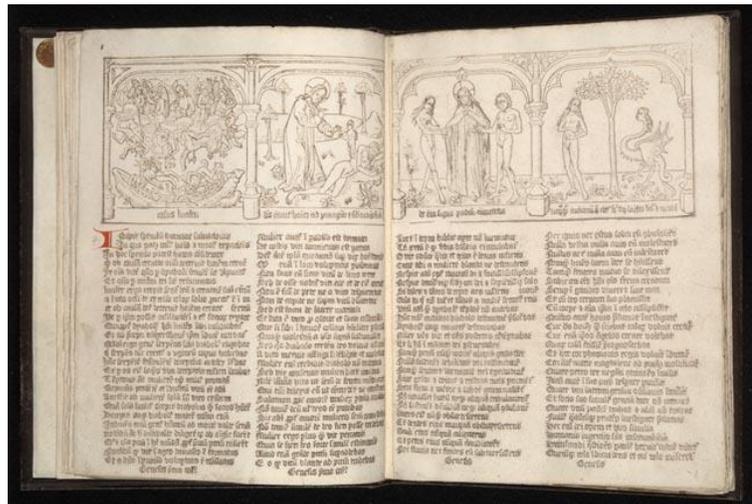


Figure 3-Adam, Eve, Serpent from *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (1468)

century representations of Eden with a female-headed serpent; however, when he concludes his argument, he returns to more general language: “I am convinced that the human-headed serpent of Christian art was derived, not from myth or tradition, but from a convention of the mystery play stage...” (148-149). I believe this lack of emphasis on the feminine nature of the serpent

and the inattention to added details such as talons and wings, weaken Bonnell’s argument as these are specific deviations from the biblical source and therefore, noteworthy. Further, his exclusion of any discussion of the other elements of the Lilith myth within Medieval and Early Modern society (such as

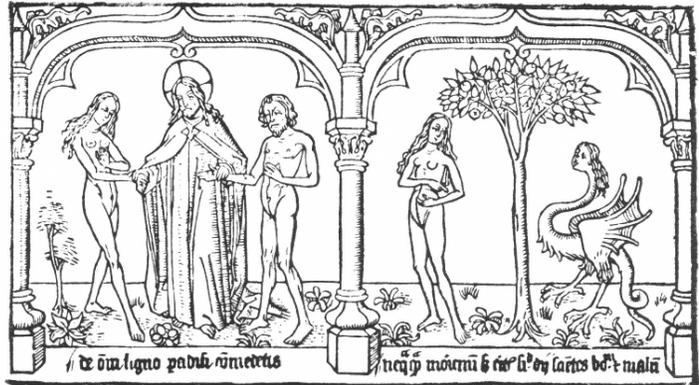


Figure 4- Enhanced Image of Figure 3

protective amulets) is also a bit of an oversight, as this suggests a cultural awareness of the myth that could very well influence artistic representations. However, Bonnell’s argument does helpfully identify several of the best known representations of the Edenic temptation scene, which emphasizes the cultural availability of what Hoffeld believes to be the Lilith myth.

Hoffeld begins his article with a discussion of a particular medieval “hexagonal boxwood statue base” that depicts both Eve, eating the forbidden fruit, and what he believes to



Figure 5- Raphael's *Adam and Eve* in the Camera della Segnatura of the Vatican

be Lilith as the female-headed serpent who is tempting her. Hoffeld writes, “[Eve’s] companion...peering at her though human eyes, has no limbs, the vertebrae of a reptile, and the uncanny undulations of a serpent. That this half-human creature is the first wife of Adam—Lilith—so frequently represented in the Middle Ages, is what I hope to demonstrate” (430). From this point, Hoffeld springboards into a discussion of the ubiquity of this kind of medieval artistry, tying it to a medieval impulse to

examine the Bible critically:

It is an unfortunate misconception of some modern observers that both the clergy and laity of the Middle ages had an unsearching and rarely critical approach to the Bible. On the contrary, most of what remains to us of the theological writings of the Middle Ages are attempts to comment upon or interpret the Bible: attempts to lift the veil of often ambiguous language in order to reveal the hidden meanings of the authors. (430)

These medieval theological writings concerning the first wife of Adam serve as the foundation for Hoffeld's analysis of the many medieval artistic representations of Lilith in the form of paintings, sculptures, statues and amulets. He then speaks to the manner in which this interest in the Lilith figure transcended the middle ages:

The legend of Lilith was not merely the preoccupation of scholarly Jewish mystics, but was widely disseminated by Christian writers in the form of Latin commentaries on the Bible... These inspired innumerable representations of her, from the Middle Ages on, as the temptress serpent. There is also evidence of her popularity among the masses, in the form of amulets, or charms to protect the bearer from witchcraft or mischief. Several amulets designed to ward off the evil Lilith appear in the printed edition (Amsterdam, 1701) of an eleventh century Kabbalistic writing, the *Book of Raziel*. (434)

Here, it becomes clear that the popularity the Lilith myth enjoyed in the medieval period ensured that subsequent ages would have access to these representations, thereby facilitating the continued production and reproduction of elements of this myth. It is this conclusion which serves as a foundation for this paper's argument concerning the early modern invocation of Lilith in relation to contemporary female cross-dressing and accusations of witchcraft.

One of the most significant medieval texts that treated the myth of Lilith as "the first Eve" was *The Alphabet of ben Sira* (written between 700-1000), a Judaic text that includes

various proverbs and fables. Siegmund Hurwitz deals with this text in his book entitled *Lilith: The First Eve*. This book serves as a comprehensive academic exploration of the different pieces of the Lilith legend, locating the Lilith figure in Judaic, Christian, and Arabic texts. Hurwitz includes a translation of *The Alphabet of ben Sira's* description of Lilith's creation in the Garden of Eden and her subsequent flight from the Garden. This text illuminates the dual nature of Lilith: sexually independent (and therefore deviant) woman/succubus and child killing demon. The first piece of this dual identity can be located in the first part of the *ben Sira* passage:

When the Almighty—may His name be praised—created the first, solitary man, He said: It is not good for man to be alone. And he fashioned for man a woman from the earth, like him (Adam), and called her Lilith. Soon, they began to quarrel with each other. She said to him: I will not lie underneath, and he said: I will not lie underneath, but above, for you are meant to lie underneath and I to lie above. She said to him: We are both equal, because we are both (created) from the earth. But they didn't listen to each other. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced God's avowed name and flew into the air... (120)

According to this legend, after Lilith fled the Garden, God then created Eve from Adam's rib, ensuring that she would be subservient to him, unlike the insubordinate Lilith. Hurwitz writes, "...Eve, appears as a completely subordinate being, who obviously complies with Adam's wishes without hesitation. She has no problems regarding the position she is supposed to assume" (179). Herein lies the most essential distinction between Eve and Lilith; while Lilith understands herself to be equal to Adam based on their mutual creation from the earth, Eve submits to Adam due to the inherently subservient role that her creation from Adam's rib implies. Hurwitz references the potential social implications that scholars have identified in this comparison, explaining that "Lenherr-Baumgartner sees in Lilith and Eve, first and foremost,

two differing female types which confront each other. She holds that Adam's demand for the upper position is evolutionarily understandable as a certain male fear of an equal female." (182). While Lilith's transgression stems from her specific objection to sexual domination, her actions signal a deeper willingness to strive for autonomy and independence, which then opens the door for associating Lilith with a variety of subversive feminine behaviors (such as seventeenth century cross-dressing).

The second element in Lilith's dual nature is touched upon in the closing of the *ben Sira* passage concerning Eden. After Lilith flees the Garden, God states, "If she decides to return, it is good, but if not, then she must take it upon herself to ensure that one hundred of her children die each day" (120) When Lilith refuses to return,

They [three angels] said to her: We must drown you in the sea. She said to them: Leave me! I was created for no other purpose than to harm children... When they heard what she said, they pressed her even more. She said: I swear by the name of the living God that I, when I see you or your image on an amulet, will have no power over that particular child. And she took it upon herself to ensure that, every day, a hundred of her children died. 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. (120-121)

Here, the reader is introduced both to the source of Lilith's coding as child-killing demon and to the root of the medieval and early modern practices of using amulets to defend against her attacks. The Edenic Lilith becomes emblematic of a sexualized, independent, and transgressive female, while post-Edenic Lilith is a magically violent predator of pregnant mothers and newborn children. This paper will suggest that the fear of this post-Edenic element helped to fuel early modern anxieties concerning the practice of witchcraft.

Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's early seventeenth century play *The Roaring Girl* tells the story of Moll Cutpurse, a notorious cross-dressing female who is reviled by some and desired by others. Further, the pamphlets *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir* are explicitly concerned with the growing number of women who cross-dressed: *Hic Mulier*, a rebuke, and *Haec Vir*, a defense. This literary concern about female tranvestism reflects a larger trend in early modern society which was explicitly condemned by King James I. Valerie Traub speaks to this trend in her book entitled *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*. She speaks about the "status of clothing as a signifier of identity," stating

During this period of unprecedented geographical exploration, warfare, and colonization, many women took advantage of the rise in social status that a change in clothing could bring about. Under the cover of male dress, women's migration to urban centers, service as a soldier or shipmate, and immigration to the New World afforded them new opportunities for social advancement. (48)

Traub highlights the kind of freedom and mobility that crossing-dressing afforded women, allowing them to move into certain male-dominated spheres from which they were barred as females. Margaret Hunt discusses this idea further in her review of two books entitled *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* and *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Cross-dressed in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness*. She writes

Both books suggest that this 'tradition' offered a real opportunity for some women to escape the strictures of the female role. They provide convincing evidence of a surprisingly large number of women who sought, by dressing as men, to obtain greater mobility, better job opportunities and higher pay, a more adventuresome life, greater

freedom from direct domination by men, and in some cases greater sexual freedom (notably freedom from sexual harassment and the freedom to love other women) than they would have been able to hope for in living as women. (11)

This escape from male domination is especially important in the case of Moll Cutpurse; her character uses cross-dressing both to express her rejection of her prescribed feminine social role and to morally reprimand those men who have attempted to wrong her sexually. Her transgression achieved through transvestism elicits confusion, disdain, and anxiety on the part of many of the men that she encounters; this anxiety is externalized through comparing Moll to Lilith, thereby disassociating her from Eve (and therefore all other women) in an attempt to contain her subversiveness in an aberrant category, while also ironically confirming a belief in the potential influence of the first “first woman” on the feminine identity.

The Roaring-Girl's Moll Cutpurse as Lilith

Moll Cutpurse's cross-dressing and casual movement between the genders incites anxiety on the part of several of the play's male characters. Sir Alexander, who is concerned about his son Sebastian's professed (yet unbeknownst to him, feigned) interest in Moll as a potential wife, is the play's most vocal opponent of Moll's transvestism. His opposition takes the form of a comparison between Moll and Lilith—a woman whose faulty creation figures her as a dangerous and unnatural threat to man. Sir Alexander initially introduces the character of Moll, thereby laying the foundation for the reader's understanding of her character. He describes her as

‘A creature...nature hath brought forth to mock the sex of woman.’ It is a thing one knows not how to name; her birth began ere she was all made. ‘Tis woman more than man, and man more than woman, and—which to none can hap—the sun gives her two shadows to one shape. (1.2.128-133)

This description is significant in that it invokes the language of creation (Eden) when describing Moll's nature—a nature specifically identified by her transvestism. Moreover, Sir Alexander does not begin with a critique Moll's *actions*, but of her essential *nature*, returning to that originary moment in order to identify her flaws as an essential creative mistake. This idea is directly connected to the figure of Lilith; Raphael Patai, a Jewish ethnographer, writes about this in his article entitled "Lilith," he speaks to the occurrence of a similar "creative mistake:"

...God again turned to the earth to obtain raw material, but this time, instead of using clean earth which was the substance of Adam's body, HE—for reasons unknown—took filth and impure sediments from the earth, and out of these He formed a female. (300)

Here, it becomes clear that in some retellings of the myth, Lilith is understood to be created from the earth, as was Adam, but of unclean material, thereby accounting for her insubordination and ultimate association with the demonic. Therefore, Sir Alexander's condemnation of Moll based on her flawed creation specifically connects her to Lilith. This is compounded by the manner in which Sir Alexander displays a discomfort *specifically* with Moll's ambiguous gender identity. Her creation prevented her from fully aligning with the prescribed role of the female, and therefore, Sir Alexander has coded her as a "mockery" unable to be truly categorized. By bringing his critique back to nature's creation, Sir Alexander allows his speech to be understood through an Edenic lens. He problematizes Moll's character based on her apparently defective creation and her inability to conform to gender norms, and thereby betrays an anxiety about Moll as a kind of Lilith figure. He later follows up on this initial description and states "This wench we speak of strays so from her kind, nature repents she made her" (2.1.215). In ben Sira's text, God explicitly repents Lilith's creation and atones through the amended creation of Eve.

Therefore, this description of Moll as one who “strays” from femininity in a way that evokes nature’s regret figures her as a representation of an early modern Lilith.

Another element of the Lilith myth that Sir Alexander invokes in his condemnation of Moll is the conception of Lilith as a dangerous seductress. Patai speaks to this piece of the legend, explaining “When a fool approaches [Lilith], she grabs him, kisses him, and pours him wine of dregs and vipers gall. As soon as he drinks it, he goes astray after her” (302). Here, Lilith seduces male victims through a combination of sexual advances and magical potions. Harry M. Geduld, a scholar at Indiana University, further speaks to this characterization of Lilith in his article entitled “The Lineage of Lilith.” He writes, “The Lilith of the *Talmud* is a succubus...She was believed to be a demon with the power of assuming the shape of a woman in order to consort sexually with men” (59). The shape-shifting ability of Lilith is highlighted here (tying her to Moll), as well as her coding as demonic. This kind of language is explicitly mimicked in *The Roaring Girl* in relation to the male understanding of Moll. Sebastian, Sir Alexander’s son, is feigning interest in Moll in order to irritate his father. In responding to the resounding condemnation that he receives upon declaring his “love” for the roaring girl, Sebastian states “I am deaf to you all. I’m so bewitched, so bound to my desires, Tears, prayers threats, nothing can quench out those fires that burn within me” (1.2.174-177). Sebastian first invokes the language of Moll’s seductive “bewitching,” tying her to the Lilith “succubus.” Sir Alexander follows his son’s proclamation stating “‘Tis a mermaid has tolled my son to shipwreck” (2.1.215-216). This speech participates in the “succubus” trope while also drawing subtle connections to the physicality of Lilith, who is often portrayed as a serpent-like creature with a human-female head. Further, the comparison to Lilith becomes solidified when Sir Alexander address his son, asking “Who has bewitched thee, son? What devil or drug hath wrought upon the weakness of thy blood

and betrayed all her hopes to ruinous folly?” (2.2.122-124). Here, Sir Alexander explicitly compares Moll to a “devil” whose “drug” has led Sebastian to “ruinous folly.” This relates to Lilith’s role as demonic seductress. Sir Alexander demonstrates his anxiety about Moll’s subversive transvestism by associating her with the ultimate insubordinate woman. Moll’s transvestism codes her as a threat to male domination, just as Lilith disrupted the gender hierarchy in Eden. Sir Alexander’s response to Moll reflects the existence of an early modern anxiety concerning the triumph of the social influence of Lilith, the first “first” woman, over the social influence of the submissive Eve—a triumph which manifested specifically in the form of female cross-dressing.

While Sir Alexander expresses his concern about Moll’s transgressive transvestism by comparing her to Lilith, Moll also explicitly aligns herself with certain characteristics of the Lilith figure. There is an important distinction to be understood here: Sir Alexander’s construction of Moll and Moll’s understanding of herself reflect two very different identities—though both identities are explicitly tied to Lilith. Sir Alexander casts Moll as a threatening seductress whose goal is the destruction of unsuspecting men. Hurwitz speaks to this male preoccupation in relation to Lilith: He writes, “I would like to remind my readers at this point that the Midrash of ben Sira was written by an unknown man and for men. That is why, in my opinion, the problem is primarily one of the male psyche...” (182). This observation is significant, as it draws attention to the manner in which the worries of the “male psyche” inherently informed the development of the Lilith myth. These worries are then replicated in *The Roaring Girl* as a “certain male fear of an equal female” (noted by Lenherr-Baumgartner above). When Moll is given the opportunity to speak for herself and define her own identity, she, too,

claims certain traits of Lilith, but in a way that celebrates her transvestism as an empowered and honest challenge to the social patriarchy.

One of the first encounters that the reader has with Moll is when she has an altercation with “a fellow” concerning his previous treatment of her. The conversation is as follows:

Moll: You remember, slave, how you abused me t’other night in a tavern?

Fellow: Not I, by this light.

Moll: No, but by candlelight you did. You have tricks to save your oaths, reservations, have you? And I have reserved somewhat for you. [*She strikes him.*] As you like that, call for more. You know the sign again. (2.1.236-242)

There are many remarkable elements of this interaction. First, Moll boldly addresses the fellow as “slave,” immediately making him (and the audience) aware that her aim is to assert her own dominance. Further, it becomes clear that, during their previous encounter in “a tavern,” Moll had been dressed as a woman, and she is now dressed as a man. Therefore, her cross-dressing signifies her adoption of a dominant (read, transgressive) role in relation to the fellow. She then proceeds to reprimand the fellow for previously making unsolicited sexual advances toward her. She completes this reprimand with shocking physicality—she “strikes” him. Not only does she verbally trouble the gender hierarchy (she calls him “slave”), but she physically blurs gender lines as well through assuming the dominant bodily position. In her article entitled “Cross-Dressing, the Theater, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England.,” Jean E. Howard, an early modern scholar at Columbia, speaks about the manner in which Moll uses her transvestism to make a social statement. She writes, “...Moll adopts male dress deliberately and publically; and she uses it to signal her freedom from the traditional positions assigned a woman in her culture” (39). This is evident in her altercation with the fellow—her crossing-dressing allows her to assume masculine-coded characteristics in order to assert her freedom from sexual norms (i.e. the submissive female). Moreover, after the fellow leaves, a man named Laxton congratulates Moll on her victory while also assuring her that he “was prepared for him” had she

not been able to defend against a potential “counterbuff.” Moll responds indignantly: “Why do you speak this, then? Do you think I cannot ride a stone horse unless one lead him by th’snaffle?” (2.1.254-255). She clearly is establishing her role as an independent woman who does not require the help of men, this time specifically in regard to her assertion of her sexual autonomy. All of this directly reflects the behavior of Lilith. According to Hurwitz,

The power struggle between Adam and Lilith is a reflection of the age-old struggle between the sexes, between the husband’s domineering patriarchal attitude and the wife’s demands for independence and equality. (180)

Lilith’s “demands for equality and independence” are enacted through the cross-dressing Moll Cutpurse’s explicit refusal to be treated as a submissive sexual object and her subsequent indignation at Laxton’s suggestion of her physical inferiority.

The most explicit way in which Moll figures herself as Lilith is in her speech about the objectionable nature of marriage. For Lilith, marriage is objectionable due to the inherent prescribed sexual roles, i.e. female submission and male dominance. Hurwitz expands upon the *Alphabet of ben Sira*’s account of Lilith’s rejection of these roles, stating

Right from the start, there is a violent power struggle between the two partners... It was sparked off by disagreements over the position of the two partners during their martial relations. Lilith refused to take the ‘lower position,’ whereas Adam insisted on the upper position for himself, basing his claim on the biblical saying, ‘thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.’ Against this, Lilith based her own claim with the verse from the Bible which said that they were both made from the earth at the same time. Accordingly, she considered herself as having the same rights as her husband, to be

able to act autonomously and be independent of him—which is why she refused to accept his wish to ‘lie on top.’ (179)

Lilith refuses to be dominated sexually by her husband based on her conception of their essential equality. She understands marital/sexual submission to represent total submission of self, which she is unwilling to concede. Rather than surrender her own will, Lilith instead flees from Adam in order to enjoy sexual and personal autonomy outside of Eden.

Moll expresses a strikingly similar critique of sexual politics when Sebastian suggests that he is interested in marrying her. Moll responds

Sir, I am so poor to requite you, you must look for nothing but thanks of me. I have no humor to marry. I love to lie o’both sides o’th’bed myself; and again, o’th’other side a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey; therefore I’ll ne’er go about it...I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman. Marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i’th’place. (2.2.36-45)

Moll’s assertion that she “love[s] to lie o’both sides o’th’bed myself” directly evokes Lilith’s rejection of the gendered sexual positions. She partially rejects marriage due to her refusal to adhere to sexual norms. Further, Moll explains that a wife “ought to be obedient” and that she is “too headstrong to obey” any potential husband. Here, Moll speaks to what is expected of a wife, and thereby implicitly comments on Eve’s behavior as “first” wife. She explains that she is not able to perform this traditional feminine obedience due to her aversion to being commanded. She then follows this personal reflection with a powerful critique concerning the effects of traditional marriage on the female. Through the use of rather violent imagery (“chopping and changing”), Moll suggests that marriage (and its sexual politics) forces the female to give up her autonomy in

favor of adopting her husband as her “head” and commander. Instead, Moll rejects this kind of marital sacrifice of self in favor of cross-dressing: Howard writes,

The issue is control. Refusing a male head, Moll asserts a freedom extraordinary for a woman. Dressed as a woman she enters the merchants’ shops; dressed as a man she fights with Laxton at Gray’s Inn Fields; and at end of the play she moves easily among the rogues and ‘canters’ of the London world. (39)

Therefore, Moll’s character chooses “cross-dressing” rather than “marriage,” strengthening the link between the early modern female transvestite and Lilith. The language that Moll uses to describe her rejection of marriage/sexual domination mirrors that of the Lilith myth, further demonstrating *The Roaring Girl*’s engagement with this legend in relationship to the early modern transgressive female.

The Roaring Girl deepens this Moll/Lilith comparison through its engagement with the element of the Lilith myth that relates to her post-Edenic association with demons. Patai explicates this element of the myth:

When Lilith saw that Adam was determined to overpower her, she uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air, and flew away to the Red Sea, a place of ill repute, full of lascivious demons. There, Lilith engaged in unbridled promiscuity, and bore a demonic brood of more than one hundred a day. (296)

Lilith replaces Eden with the demonic and “ill-reputed” Red Sea; she keeps company and even copulates with demons. Moll’s relationship to the social “underworld” of thieves—a relationship facilitated by her cross-dressing—can be seen as a reflection of this aspect of the Lilith myth.

When Moll intervenes to stop a throng of thieves from robbing a group of her acquaintances, Sir Thomas inquires how she is known to these disreputable people:

Sir Thomas: And why do the foul mouths of the world call thee Moll Cutpurse? A name, methinks, damned and odious.

Moll: ...I must confess, in younger days, when I was apt to stray, I have sat amongst such adders, seen their stings...I know they have orders, offices, circuits, and circles, unto which they are bound, to raise their own damnation in. (5.1.295-314)

Here, Moll admits to consorting with thieves in a manner which mirrors Lilith's keeping company with demons. Moll even codes these thieves as demonic, referring to them as "adders" and referring to the "damnation" that characterizes their environment. However, Moll's character makes an important departure from the myth of Lilith: she uses her knowledge and experience related to thievery in order to protect the honest members of society from the thieves' mischief. Therefore, while Moll's cross-dressing allows her to create a presence among thieves that parallels Lilith's place among demons, Moll is ultimately a positive social force, rather than an insidious one.

On this point, *The Roaring Girl's* appropriation of the Lilith myth carefully avoids attributing to Moll's character those "negative" traits that Sir Alexander initially projects onto her. That is, while Moll-as-Lilith troubles the patriarchy through the subversion of degrading gender/sexual roles, she is not figured as promiscuous and devious. Howard addresses this, suggesting that the play's "insist[ence] on Moll Frith's chastity" could serve as an "interruption of that discourse about women which equates a mannish independence with promiscuity." (39) In fact, when Laxton attempts to seduce Moll, assuming that she would be a willing participant, she responds vehemently, stating

How many of our sex by such as thou have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name that never deserved loosely or did trip in the path of whoredom beyond cup and lip...To think me whorish?—a name which I'd tear out from the high German's throat, if it lay ledger there to dispatch privy slanders against me! In thee I defy all men, their worst hates and their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts with which they entangle the

poor spirits of fools..Tell [men] 'twere base to yield where I have conquered. I scorn to prostitute myself to a man, I that can prostitute a man to me, And so I greet thee. (3.1.81-113)

Here, Moll does important work in terms of fortifying her role as Lilith while simultaneously denying those traits that could compromise her image as a positive transgressive woman. Sir Alexander believes Moll to be a promiscuous seductress invested in the demise of men, but this reflects his own nervousness about the transvestite woman as an embodiment of Lilith rather than the true reality of Moll's character. Moll expressly denies any accusations of promiscuity, not out of "prudishness," but due to the fact that "twere base to yield where [she] has conquered." Therefore, her sexual autonomy and independence allow her to "scorn to prostitute [her]self to a man"—i.e. reject sexual domination in Lilith-like fashion. Therefore, *The Roaring Girl* appropriates the Lilith myth in a way that advocates for the troubling of the patriarchy and the subversion of gender roles. While the play identifies a male anxiety about the social phenomenon of cross-dressing as a manifestation of Lilith, Moll's character rejects the elements of the myth that could potentially undermine her subversive message and instead embodies only those characteristics that truly challenge the integrity of the patriarchy.

Hic Mulier as Condemnation of the Transvestite Lilith

Hic Mulier, or the "mannish-woman," is a pamphlet published in 1620 condemning the trend of female cross-dressing in early modern England. The anonymous narrator begins with an explicit invocation of Eden: "For since the days of Adam, women were never so masculine: Masculine in their genders and whole generations, from the Mother to the youngest daughter; even from the head to the foot..." (123). This immediately locates the pamphlet's argument within Eden, thereby grounding its discussion of transgressive femininity in the gender roles

determined by the “first man” (Adam) and the “first woman” (Eve). The narrator then makes a point to address those women who are, in fact, performing their gender roles correctly:

You, oh you women, you good women, you that are in the fullness of perfection, you that are the crown’s of nature’s work, the complements of men’s excellences, and the Seminaries of propagation; you that maintain the world, support mankind, and give life to society....Oh do not look to find your names in this Declamation, but with all honor and reverence I speak to you. (125)

Here, the narrator describes the “ideal” woman, fulfilling her role as was intended by her nature. This woman is man’s “complement” rather than his equal; she is made for “propagation” and to “support mankind.” All of these traits are specifically embodied in the figure of Eve, thus locating in her identity the ideal of properly performed femininity.

The narrator then moves into the crux of the argument concerning the unacceptable early modern transvestite female. The pamphlet reads,

Come, then, you Masculine women, for you are my Subject, you that have made Admiration an Ass and fooled him with a deformity never before dreamed of; that have made yourselves stranger things than ever Noah’s ark unloaded or Nile engendered; whom to name, he that named all things might study an age to give you a right attribute....tis of you I entreat and of your monstrous deformity. You that have made your bodies like antic Boscadge or Crotesco work, and not half man/half woman, half fish/half flesh, half beast/half Monster, but all Odious, all Devil. (125)

The narrator addresses “Masculine women” and strongly condemns their cross-dressing as a misuse and misrepresentation of their bodies. Their cross-dressing is labeled as a “monstrous deformity” that is more odious than “half man/half woman, half fish/half flesh, half beast/half

Monster.” After grounding the initial praise of certain women in a celebration of the femininity of Eve, the narrator invites the reader to then relate these “masculine women” to Eve’s Edenic antithesis—Lilith. Further, the inclusion of the references to “half fish/half flesh” (etc.) call to mind the physicality of Lilith in the same way that Sir Alexander’s comparison of Moll to a mermaid does. Therefore, by locating the pamphlet’s discussion in Edenic gender theory as well as subtly referencing elements of the Lilith myth, the narrator demonstrates the condemnation of female cross-dressing to be directly related to its being coded as Lilith-like behavior.

As the narrator moves through the argument, it becomes clear that the censure of female transvestites rests quite heavily on the desire to uphold Edenic gender norms. The narrator continually returns to Eden in an anxious attempt to condemn Lilith’s behavior, thereby affording future women only one “first woman” to follow. Hurwitz suggests that this kind of impulse is tied not simply to a disgust regarding the “monstrosity” of the female transvestite’s form, but instead to a deeper worry about the subversive implications of her behavior. He writes, “The wife’s demand for equality and autonomy must have appeared highly threatening to the male consciousness moulded by the spiritually-patriarchal canons of that age” (183). Therefore, the narrator of *Hic Mulier* attempts to neutralize this “threat” through coding these “demand[s] for equality and autonomy” as a grotesque betrayal of nature, thus coding Lilith as an undesirable model of femininity. The narrator rhetorically asks “Are these [cross-dressers] and none else guilty of this high Treason to God and nature?” and then supplements this with a reminder of what God and nature originally intended:

Remember how your Maker made for our first Parents coats—not one coat, but a coat for the man and a coat for the woman, coats of several forms, and for several uses—the man’s coat

fit for his labor, the woman's fit for her modesty. And will you lose the model left by this great Workmaster of Heaven? (128-129)

Here, the narrator explicitly rejects the notion of an "equal" creation of man and woman—the kind of creation that Lilith and Adam experienced. Instead, the pamphlet privileges the creation of Eve as the intended model for all future women. This privileging is chiefly related to male anxiety about the presence of the subversive Lilith; by celebrating Eve, the narrator also celebrates female submission and the integrity of the patriarchy. Hurwitz writes of the difference between the two "first" women: "In contrast [to Lilith] Eve, appears as a completely subordinate being, who obviously complies with Adam's wishes without hesitation. She has no problems regarding the position she is supposed to assume" (179). It is clear that this kind of submissive femininity is much less threatening than the behavior of transvestite women. The narrator of *Hic Mulier* elaborates on the appropriate role that women should perform:

So you discover unto men all things that are fit for them to understand from you (as bashfulness in your cheeks, chastity in your eyes, wisdom in your words, sweetness in your conversation, and severe modesty in the whole structure or frame of your universal composition). (130)

Each of these articulated feminine traits is diametrically opposed to those traits which Lilith embodies. For the narrator, Lilith is not an option for early modern women to emulate. The pamphlet again returns to the Edenic moment that separated Adam from Eve when it asks the transvestite women to "remember that God in your first creation did not form you of slime and earth like man, but of a more pure and refined metal, a substance much more worthy" (130). Recall that Lilith based her claim for equality with Adam specifically on the fact that they were both created from the same dirt of the earth. Here, the narrator of *Hic Mulier* is barring these

transvestite women from identifying with this creation story and instead is presenting them with the apparently only valid female creation: Eve's creation from Adam's rib. The particular way in which Eve was created ensured her submission to Adam (in comparison to Lilith's equality and subsequent insubordination). *Hic Mulier* serves to illuminate a strong early modern male fear that the trend of female transvestism was emblematic of a shift from feminine allegiance to Eve to an allegiance to Lilith—a shift that could result in the destabilization of male supremacy.

Haec Vir as Defense of Lilith

Haec Vir, or “womanly-man”, is an anonymous pamphlet published in response to *Hic Mulier*'s attacks on the practices of transvestite women. This pamphlet takes the form of a discussion between Hic Mulier (who has been harshly condemned for her cross-dressing) and Haec Vir, a womanly man who also denounces Hic Mulier's behavior. The pamphlet serves as a defense of transvestism—a defense that relies on the reclamation and celebration of Lilith as the first “first” woman. While *Hic Mulier* endeavors to deny early modern women the ability to identify with Lilith, *Haec Vir* makes it clear that the character of Hic Mulier considers her Edenic ancestor to unquestionably be Lilith.

Within the course of the discussion, Hic Mulier responds to three accusations laid against her by Haec Vir. She begins: “First, you say I am base, in being a Slave to Novelty. What slavery can there be in freedom of election, or what baseness to crown my delights with those pleasures which are most suitable to mine affections?” (138). Here, she refutes Haec Vir's claim that she is allowing herself to be controlled by “novelty.” She explains that her transvestism, rather than being a symptom of being controlled, is rather an expression of her “freedom of election.” She boldly defends her inherent right to make autonomous decisions without external approval from an outside force (a distinctly Lilith-like trait). Further, Hic Mulier follows this speech with her

support for general female independence, rhetorically asking, “And will you have poor woman such a fixed Star that she shall not so much as move or twinkle in her own sphere? That were true slavery indeed and a baseness beyond [sic] the chains of worst servitude” (139). Here, Hic Mulier grounds her argument in the assumption that women are naturally inclined toward independence—an inclination which was observed in the figure of Lilith but was explicitly avoided in Eve’s subsequent creation.

Hic Mulier’s second rebuttal solidifies her allegiance to Lilith and rejection of Eve as “first woman.” She states

Next, you condemn me of Unnaturalness in forsaking my creation and contemning custom. How do I forsake my creation, that do all the rights and offices due to my Creation? I was created free, born free, and live free; what lets me then so to spin out my time that I may die free? To alter my creation were to walk on my hands with my heels upward, to feed myself with my feet, or to forsake the sweet sound of sweet words for the hissing noise of the Serpent. But I walk with a face erect, with a body clothed, with a mind busied, and with a heart full of reasonable and devout cogitations... (140)

This passage most explicitly connects Hic Mulier to Lilith in its references to the creation of woman. The creation to which Hic Mulier refers *must* be that of Lilith, for she states that she was “created, free, born free, and live[s] free”—a statement which cannot be accurately made about Eve, a woman created to obey her husband and “head,” Adam. Therefore, Hic Mulier is making a deliberate reference to Lilith in order to reject *Hic Mulier*’s identification of Eve as the only available originary female. Hic Mulier asserts her physical and mental autonomy and independence—an independence that necessarily is indebted to Lilith.

The third argument that *Hic Mulier* refutes concerns the expectations of femininity in relation to transvestism. She responds to *Haec Vir*:

But you say we are barbarous and shameless and cast off all softness to run wild through a wilderness of opinions... We are as freeborn as men, have as free election and as free spirits; we are compounded of like parts and may with like liberty make benefit of our Creations (141)

Again, *Hic Mulier* refuses to align herself with the created Eve; instead, she insists on her equality with man based on the fact that they are “compounded with like parts and may with like liberty make benefit of [their] Creations.” This almost exactly replicates the argument that Lilith presents to Adam in the Garden of Eden in order to convince him of their equality. *Hic Mulier* must be referring to Lilith, for she could not discuss the identical creation of man and woman and be speaking of Eve, who was specifically created in a manner different from Adam so as to ensure submission. Further, *Hic Mulier* follows this defense of her freedom stating, “If this be barbarous, let me leave the City and live with creatures of like simplicity” (141). This threat recalls Lilith’s flight from Eden when Adam refused to grant her equality and sexual autonomy. Ultimately, *Hic Mulier* rejects the earlier pamphlet’s attempt to connect every woman to Eve, and instead celebrates female transvestism as an expression of the freedom afforded to all women by the first “first” woman, Lilith.

Haec Vir responds to *Hic Mulier*’s defense by articulating the same male anxiety about the presence of Lilith that is present throughout the previous two texts dealt with in this essay. He argues that

It would have been better had ‘the first inventor of your disguise perished with all her complements about her,’ for her invention has caused infinite scandal and sin. To delight in

sin is to yield to baseness, and to yield to baseness, is foolish and barbarous. Thus, until Hic Mulier returns to traditional dress, she is base, unnatural, shameful, and foolish. (142)

Here, Haec Vir raises a concern about an original woman responsible for the proliferation of crossdressing. In a pamphlet heavily concerned with Edenic creation, this kind of originary preoccupation necessarily returns the reader to Lilith, who in some ways, is the original “cross-dresser” in that she was the first woman to challenge the notions of appropriate gender performativity. *Haec Vir*, then, both further articulates the early modern male worry relating to the influence of Lilith as related to female transvestism and reclaims Lilith as the justification for women’s independence, autonomy, and subversion of the gender hierarchy.

In light of Hic Mulier’s passionate defense of her cross-dressing and independence, *Haec Vir* ends rather enigmatically with a suggestion that both Hic Mulier and Haec Vir should return to traditional, “gender appropriate” dress. This begins with Hic Mulier seemingly criticizing Haec Vir’s rejection of “masculine” dress:

Now since according to your own Inference, even by the Laws of Nature, by the rules of Religion, and the Customs of all civil Nations, it is necessary there be a distinct and special difference between Man and woman, both in their habit and behaviors, what could we poor weak women do less (being far too weak by force to fetch back those spoils you have unjustly taken from us), than to gather up those garments you have proudly cast away and therewith to clothe bothe our bodies and our minds? (144)

Here, Hic Mulier draws attention to the fact that Haec Vir strongly believes in the importance of gender boundaries while also deviating from his own ascribed role by adopting “feminine” dress. Hic Mulier then rhetorically asks “What could we poor weak women do” other than adopt masculine dress in order to uphold the gendered boundaries violated by Haec Vir? I would argue

that her tone is an ironic one as she speaks flippantly of “poor weak women” after carefully articulating her belief in female strength and independence. She mocks Haec Vir’s view of women by sarcastically insisting that her transvestism is a true performance of her “weak” femininity in response to the transgressions of “feminine” men. Ultimately, Hic Mulier’s rhetorical question satirically comments on Haec Vir’s misguided insistence on the importance of gender differentiation and his flawed definition of women as “weak.”

Hic Mulier continues in this vein when she “demands” Haec Vir to return to a more traditionally masculine dress:

Cast then from you our ornaments and put on your own armor; be men in shape, men in show, men in words, men in actions, men in counsel, men in example. Then will we love and serve you; then will we hear and obey you; then will we like rich Jewels hang at your ears to take our Instructions, like true friends follow you through all dangers, and like careful leeches pour oil into your wounds... Then shall we be all your most excellent thoughts can desire and having nothing in us less than impudence and deformity. (145)

Again, I would argue that Hic Mulier’s tone here is ironic; she seems to be inviting Haec Vir to explore what it truly means to be a man in “words, actions, counsel, and example” in the way that he previously asked her to define her feminine identity. Further, her assertion that women will “hear and obey” men and will “like rich Jewels hang at [men’s] ears to take [their] instructions” again has a facetious tone. Hic Mulier adopts the rhetoric of misogyny in order to comment on the male assumption the women will naturally submit to a true “man.” She is calling attention to Haec Vir’s misplaced emphasis on clothing; that is, by sarcastically suggesting that a return to male dress by Haec Vir would effectively eliminate the feminine independence that she

has so strongly advocated, Hic Mulier is highlighting the fact that women are not defined by what they wear (or by what men wear) but by their independence and equality.

If Hic Mulier is making her suggestion ironically, Haec Vir does not recognize this. He responds:

We will here change our attires as we have changed our minds, and with our attires, our names. I will no more be Haec Vir, bur Hic Vir; nor you Hic Mulier, but Haec Mulier.

From henceforth deformity shall pack to Hell, and if any time he hide himself upon the earth, yet it shall be with contempt and disgrace. (145)

Haec Vir concludes the pamphlet with this assertion, and Hic Mulier does not give a response. This ambiguous ending leaves room for speculation concerning Hic Mulier's (lack of) response to Haec Vir's speech. If, as I have proposed, Hic Mulier is being ironic in her condemnation of Haec Vir, Hic Mulier's silence invites the reader to look critically at Haec Vir's final misunderstanding and use this as a lens through which to understand the struggle of the female transvestite. At the very least, the absence of Hic Mulier's voice at the end of the pamphlet leaves open the possibility for her to refuse to return to traditional dress. While this ending is certainly puzzling, it does not necessarily undermine Hic Mulier's previous fierce defense of transvestism and female independence.

Lilith and Witchcraft: The Background

While the Edenic Lilith is represented by the early modern female transvestite, the post-Edenic Lilith—the violent and murderous child killer—can be located within the fears that drove the prosecution of women as witches. Theodora A. Jankowski's work helps to ground the analysis of early modern witchcraft within the framework of the particular gender dynamics of the time period. She writes

Women, at all levels of society, were subject to the power of this patriarchal system as either daughters or wives. The mere fact of being a woman, rather more than belonging to a specific class, determined what life was like for female members of society... Women of the late medieval and early modern periods can really only be examined in terms of their relationship to the marriage paradigm... The married woman was, after all, totally under a man's control.... If marriage was the norm, women who were not married—for whatever reason—"challenged" the norm and were consequently seen as threatening. (24-25)

She reinforces this point later, stating "All 'ungoverned women,' not just widows, were a threat to the social order" (35). This both directly relates back to the earlier part of this essay dealing with the response to transvestism and serves as the foundation for a discussion of early modern witch-hunting.

The anxiety about transgressive women evading their proscribed gender roles was quite severe, as demonstrated by practices such as the "scold's bridle" and the "skimmington."

Jankowski writes that

Various punishments were meted out to wives who violated the social restrictions placed upon their tongues... Beating was allowed—even expected if the wife was intransigent—though the husband also had the option of leading his wife through town in a 'scold's bridle, an instrument with an iron framework to enclose the head and a metal gag or bit which restrained the tongue.' (38)

Husbands were enabled and encouraged to literally muzzle their wives to prevent independent female action, especially unbridled speech. Further, the practice of the "skimmington" demonstrates how society would intervene if a husband was unable to properly silence and control his wife:

A skimmington humiliated *the couple*, implying that the husband deserved social censure for allowing his wife to exercise a position of power or control within the family.

Skimmingtons...were held for unruly wives who scolded, beat their husbands, or were unfaithful...In the skimmington, a man dressed as a woman (representing the husband to be corrected) was ridden through town on a cowlestaff to the accompaniment of music while being beaten by another townsman (representing the unruly wife) with a skimmington ladle.

(39)

The skimmington served as a visceral social reminder of the “proper” gender roles within society and the humiliating consequences of the blurring of these distinctions. The specific worry concerning the transgressive female ultimately underwrites the prosecution of women as witches. James Keller writes, “The witch beliefs of a society are a manifestation of its collective values. In the seventeenth century, the traditional role of the wife was being challenged” (38). Therefore, the social anxiety about non-conforming women is transformed into a movement to condemn “witches.” Jankowski explains that women who were punished as scolds were often also prosecuted as witches (42). She elaborates on this point, explaining

The impetus toward exerting patriarchal control over all women lies behind the prosecution of women for witchcraft. The vast majority of those accused and prosecuted for witchcraft were women, usually those who were, for whatever reason, not under the direct control of a man. Thus, legislation and accusations against witches represented a means by which women who did not ‘belong’ to a man—and were thus perceived as being in some way anomalous—could be either put under direct social control or punished for their audacity in violating patriarchal social conventions. (42)

While this fear of an ungoverned and independent woman ties back to a worry about the influence of the Edenic-Lilith within early modern society, the specific nature of the “crimes” of witchcraft is also an evocation of the post-Edenic Lilith as an ungoverned and child-killing female demon. Jankowski explains that “The witch supposedly made a compact with ‘The Devil’ to enable her to escape severe poverty. She was tempted, therefore, to steal or kill her children so that there was more food to go around” (42). Further, Brian P. Levack suggests a more general and more sinister conception of the relationship between infanticide and witchcraft:

The practice of cannibalistic infanticide, which most societies consider to be the ultimate moral offence, has been a part of virtually all such nightmares...represents the late medieval and early modern European version of this standard or universal nightmare.

(36)

This connection between infanticide and the accusation of witchcraft forges a link between an anxiety about Lilith’s social influence and the behavior of early modern women. Jankowski notes that “Prosecution of cases of infanticide, like prosecution of cases of witchcraft, grew out of poverty and suspicion,” and that a woman who was found guilty of such a crime was often coded as sexually promiscuous and uncontrolled (44). Therefore, it seems that both general laws regarding the prosecution of witchcraft and more specific concerns regarding infanticide stemmed from a fear of female autonomy—sexual and otherwise. The post-Edenic, independent, murderous Lilith, therefore, represented the realization of such fears.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the manner in which the fear of witches permeated every level of early modern society. Levack writes

In order for intensive witch-hunting to have succeeded, however, it was necessary for the lower classes to have some understanding of the diabolical nature of the crime. ...They

believed in strigae, the ladies of the night and metamorphosis, and some of them believed in incubi and succubi, but they had not fused these disparate ideas in the way that theologians and inquisitors had, with all their frightening implications. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that many of the learned notions of witchcraft and certainly the attendant fear of a widespread Satanic conspiracy did penetrate the lower levels of European society. There are enough unforced confessions, for example, to show that many of the fantasies developed by the theologians and inquisitors had percolated down to the lower classes. (52)

Therefore, while the lower classes may not have had a sophisticated knowledge of the nature of witchcraft, they certainly had access to the language and images surrounding the witch-hunt.

Macbeth: Lilith, the Three Witches, and Lady Macbeth

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* strongly engages with the theme of early modern witchcraft, exploring the manner in which gender/power dynamics are affected by the influence of witches within society. Lady Macbeth's character registers the early modern fear of the controlling and ungoverned wife, aligning her with demons and showing her as a driving force behind the play's ultimate tragedy. Further, the language and actions of the three witches and of Lady Macbeth reflect certain aspects of Lilith, most specifically that of the "terrible mother" and child-killing monster.

The play's central three witches help create a portrait of the early modern imagined vision of female witches. These three witches are clearly not under the control of a male figure; in fact, Hecate, a powerful female spirit, is their leader. They also open the play with enigmatic speeches concerning the fate of the play's characters, thereby immediately figuring the witches as both integral to the plot and as fearsome and mysterious agents of chaos. They reach out to

Macbeth (and therefore indirectly to Lady Macbeth) and initiate his (and his wife's) secret and bloody quest for the throne. Macbeth returns to these "secret, black, and midnight hags" in order to seek advice about how to proceed in his endeavors (4.1.49). While Macbeth's language most importantly helps to make clear the social conception of the dangerous influence of those identified as witches (suspicious, "ungoverned" women), it also begins to recall the Lilith myth. According to Hurwitz, Lilith is often referred to as a "hag" and is known as the demon of the night (96). However, the language that most explicitly aligns these witches with the tradition of Lilith comes during the description of a magical potion. In the beginning of Act IV, the witches create a potion of sinister ingredients. One of these ingredients is the "Finger of birth-strangled babe, Ditch-deliver'd by a drab" (4.1.30-31). This is significant when analyzed alongside Hurwitz's discussion of Lilith as "terrible mother":

As the terrible, devouring mother, she tries to harm pregnant women and to steal their newborn children. She is always poised to kill the child so that she can drink its blood and suck the marrow from its bones. This aspect of Lilith is already conveyed in earlier texts, in which she is called the 'strangler'. (32)

Hurwitz's description of Lilith here seems to be directly reflected in the witches' speech within *Macbeth*. While only two short lines, their inclusion is noteworthy in their relationship to the Lilith myth. A "birth-strangled babe" taken for the purposes of witchcraft may refer to Lilith, the demonic "strangler" of newborn children. Further, this particular child was "ditch-deliver'd by a drab," a "drab" being "a harlot, prostitute, or strumpet" (OED). This is significant in relation to the maternal practice of protecting their unborn children from Lilith's murderous grasp through the use of amulets and other preventative measures. These protective measures would not have

been taken by a mother who was presumably unmarried and attempting to conceal her pregnancy by giving birth in a ditch. Jankowski speaks to this phenomenon:

The birth of an illegitimate child to a woman so poor that she could barely support herself was punishment enough, without adding to the additional punishment of being hauled into court and charged with producing a bastard. Thus the woman usually concealed the pregnancy as long as she could in order to avoid a court appearance and to go on begging and working to support herself. (44)

If a woman was attempting to conceal her pregnancy, she certainly would not have been wearing an amulet to protect herself and her unborn child from Lilith. There is also the possibility that the mother herself strangled the baby. Therefore, *Macbeth's* witches' specific choice to steal (and potentially murder) the newborn child of an unprotected, unattached women giving birth in a "ditch" helps to align these witches with the tradition of Lilith.

While the three witches serve as the most explicit reference to witchcraft within *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's character strongly exemplifies the early modern anxiety about the overly-powerful wife and her connection to witchcraft. When she reads a letter from Macbeth detailing the witches' prophecy that he will become Thane of Cawdor, Lady Macbeth responds aloud:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be what thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature is too full o' th' milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way...Hie thee hither that I may pour my spirits in thine ear and chastise with the valour of my tongue all that impedes thee from the golden round, which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem to have thee crowned withal. (1.5.15-32)

Here, Lady Macbeth asserts her desire for Macbeth to fulfill the witches' prediction, but she worries that he will not be ruthless enough to realize this goal. She describes him as being "too

full o' th' milk of human kindness," which interestingly feminizes him. Further, she commits herself to the cause and explains that she will "pour [her] spirits in [Macbeth's] ear and chastise with the valour of [her] tongue." Her use of the word "spirits" begins to connect her to the realm of witchcraft, and her promise to "chastise" her now feminized husband most likely would have raised concerns within its early modern audience (recall the practice of the skimmington).

Further, Lady Macbeth follows this initial speech with one of the best known soliloquies in the play:

Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood. Stop up th' access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between the effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers... (1.5.47-55)

Here, Lady Macbeth explicitly asks for the intervention of "spirits" and "murd'ring ministers" in order to assure the success of her and her husband's endeavors. This recalls the early modern worry about women/witches making "pacts" with the devil or demons, thereby further aligning Lady Macbeth with witchcraft. Further, this soliloquy begins to lay the foundation for associating Lilith with the behavior of Lady Macbeth. After feminizing her husband through referencing his "milk o' th' human kindness," she then references her own "woman's breasts" and asks that her "milk" be taken for "gall." This language, as well as her desire to be "unsexed," effectively confuses the gender hierarchy within this marital dynamic and draws initial attention to Lady Macbeth's role as mother, and specifically "terrible mother," a reflection of Lilith.

As Lady Macbeth predicts, her husband does attempt to abandon their plans to realize the witches' prediction through deceit and murder. He tells his wife, "We will proceed no further in

this business,” to which Lady Macbeth responds with anger and indignation (1.7.34). She then compares his commitment to killing the King to her own commitment to killing her child:

I have given suck, and know how tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me. I would, while it was smiling in my face, have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this. (1.7.61-66)

Again, we are given an image related to Lady Macbeth’s maternity; here, she is depicted as both lovingly feeding her child and brutally murdering him. This evokes the myth of Lilith, as Hurwitz explains that Lilith “contains the aspect both of the nurturing, caring mother and of the terrible, devouring mother” (32). The image that Lady Macbeth puts forth is exactly this—both a nurturing mother and a murderous one—one who has known “tender” maternal love, but is also willing to “dash [her child’s] brains out” to fulfill a commitment. Her “milk” has truly turned to “gall” as she had originally asked of the “murd’ring minister,” and her connection to Lilith becomes clearer. Ultimately, the three witches and Lady Macbeth represent the contemporary fear of ungoverned women (whether unmarried or simply dominant within marriage) who practice witchcraft, a representation influenced at least partially by the post-Edenic Lilith.

Middleton’s *The Witch* and Lilith

Thomas Middleton’s play *The Witch*, said to have influenced later revisions of *Macbeth*, focuses heavily on the nature of witchcraft and its influence within early modern society. Hecate, the female leader of the group of witches within the play, is portrayed as a demonic and murderous succubus who is accessible to those humans who wish to utilize magic for their own ends. Her character recalls the Lilith myth in several ways, the first being her sexually predatory and seductive nature. As previously discussed, Lilith-as-succubus is an integral element within the myth. Hecate emblemizes Lilith-as-succubus when she comments to another witch: “When

hundred leagues in air we feast and sing, dance, kiss and coll, use everything. What young man can we wish to pleasure us but we enjoy him in an incubus?" 1.2.28-31 (the footnote suggests that "succubus," the female form of "incubus" would be more appropriately used here). Further, when Hecate and her accompanying witches enter the human world as succubi, they do so as winged creatures in the night. Hecate's disapproving son Firestone speaks to this as he describes the witches' activities: "They're all going a-birding tonight. They talk of fowls i'th' air that fly by day; I am sure they'll be foul sluts there tonight" (3.3.15-17). Further, Hecate often specifically references screech owls when discussing her nighttime sexual endeavors—references that directly evoke Lilith. She tells the witch Stadlin, "You are fortunate still; the very screech owl lights upon your shoulder," and later assures the Duchess that she will grant her request to murder Alchimades using similar language:

Leave all to me and my five sisters, daughter; It shall be conveyed in at howlet-time.

Take you no care; my spirits know their moments. Raven or screech-owl never fly by th' door but they call in—I thank 'em—and they lost not by't. I give 'em barley, soaked in infants' blood. (3.2.9-10; 5.2.37-41).

Hurwitz speaks to this element of the Lilith myth, writing

It is continually suggested that the name Lilith is connected with the Hebrew word *laila*, i.e. night. This derivation recommends itself all the more, since Lilith is, indeed, regarded as the goddess or demon of the night. Even the Rabbis seem to have assumed such a connection, because on the one hand, they depicted Lilith as a seductive woman, and on the other, as a kind of winged nightmare being or owl-like creature. (53)

Lilith as seductive "winged nightmare being" who associates with screech owls and birds of the night certainly seems to be represented within Middleton's Hecate. Further, the last line of

Hecate's speech which references "infants' blood" draws in another piece of the myth—that of child-killing.

Hecate as child killer is emphasized within the play, an emphasis which strengthens her connection to Lilith. The above reference to the regular use of infant's blood suggests that she often kills young children, and she explicitly references the use of a child's body in magical ritual: "Here, take this unbaptised brat, boil it well, preserve the fat" (1.2.18-21). Similar to the reference in *Macbeth* to the "ditch deliver'd babe," this reference emphasizes the child's lack of protection from demons ("unbaptised"), which therefore leaves the child subject to child-stealing spirits—Lilith in particular. James Keller explains that this association between witches and Lilith-like child-stealing/killing is prevalent within the early modern period. He writes:

...the most frequently cited charge against the domestic sorceress was interference with the birth process. She was suspected of 'preventing conceptions or...causing miscarriages, childbirth fatalities, or 'monstrous' (deformed)...Moreover, allegations of abortion and infanticide were frequently leveled against such women...and the abandonment of maternal responsibilities often preceded a charge of witchcraft. (40)

This specific fear demonstrates how the Lilith myth strongly informs the early modern image of the witch. Keller follows the above discussion with a comment on the reasons for the projection of this image onto contemporary women:

Embodying the rebellion against male authority, the witch thus represented the empowering of the otherwise helpless female who usually had no recourse to the law or to physical violence when confronting abusive males (Comensoli, 49)... In other cases, those accused of witchcraft were simply aggressive women who refused to be dominated... This hysteria [witch-hunting] was the consequence of increasing

misogynistic sentiments and a growing concern that wives were both ‘devious and dangerous’ (Coubert, 75), and that traditional gender roles were being undermined. (41)

Here, Keller suggests that those women who trouble patriarchal structures specifically through rebelling against their ascribed gender and marital roles are subsequently labeled as witches. Further, the fact that these women, in their rebellion against “male authority,” are associated with traits such as child-killing demonstrates the social anxiety concerning the influence of Lilith—the first rebel against her feminine role—within early modern society. In Middleton’s play, Hecate, in her characterization as a succubus and a child-killer, becomes a representative of Lilith.

The figure of Lilith poses a threat to patriarchal society in that she offers women a different portrait of femininity—a portrait characterized by independence and autonomy. This alternative gives women a model for transgressive social behavior—a possibility that creates social anxiety. Keller speaks to this anxiety specifically in relation to Middleton’s portrayal of what I have identified as Hecate-as-Lilith:

Clearly, Middleton’s witches are intentional portrayals of women who have abandoned respect for social restrictions and whose liberation poses a threat to the social order... The witches become the standard whereby the depravity of other women in the drama is defined. (43)

That is, the actions of Middleton’s women are understood in relation to their similarity to Hecate and her witches, and thus, Lilith. For example, notable elements of Francisca’s character are lust (i.e. her sexual affair with Aberzanes) and a rejection of her maternal role when she abandons her newborn child. Due to the extra-marital nature of her relationship with Aberzanes, Francisca laments her pregnancy rather than embraces it: “But ‘twas my luck, at the first hour, forsooth, to

prove too fruitful” (2.1.39-40). Keller comments on Francisca’s rejection of her maternity in drawing attention to

Francisco’s [sic] revelation that she may resort to infanticide to resolve her crisis: ‘A yard of lawn will serve for a christening cloth; I’ve used for everything as my case stands’ (II, i). Here the ‘yard of lawn’ may be that in which she buries her child. (47-48)

This comment both strengthens Francisca’s connection to Hecate-as-Lilith and piques the audience’s concern about the future of the child—a concern that has likely already been prompted by Hecate’s mention of the use of an “unbaptised brat.” This anxiety is picked up again when Francisca delivers her illegitimate child in secret. After the delivery, a rather enigmatic interaction occurs between Aberzanes (the child’s father) and an “old woman” whom we never meet again. Aberzanes says “So, so away with him! I love to get ‘em, but not to keep em” and hands the child to this unidentified old woman. In a play that is dealing with witchcraft (and specifically, witchcraft influenced by Lilith), this would most likely have created a concern on the part of its early modern audience. Levack explains that “The most common stereotype of the witch, that of an old woman, had a firm foundation in the prosecutions of the early modern period” (128). Therefore, it is quite likely that the audience would have associated this “old woman” with witchcraft; further, her receipt of an “unprotected” newborn from a mother who had been attempting to conceal her maternity (like the example in *Macbeth*) also specifically aligns her with Lilith. Levack further explains that “Underlying the depiction of the old, sexually voracious hag was a deep male fear of the sexually experienced, sexually independent woman” (130). This fear connects this enigmatic “old woman” to Francisca herself, who is condemned by her extra-marital sexual experience and independence. Ultimately, Francisca’s subplot

capitalizes on the fear of transgressive influence of Lilith in early modern society through explicitly associating unconventional female sexuality with infanticide and witchcraft.

The Duchess is another character whose transgressions are specifically related to those of Hecate and the witches, thereby further demonstrating a worry about the social influence of Lilith. Keller comments, “Like the witches, the Duchess is prone to lying, and her actions are motivated by revenge and lasciviousness. After the Duke forces her to drink from her father’s skull, she vows to kill him, abandoning her role as the obedient wife and seeking to subvert patriarchal authority” (45). However, Keller’s observation here points to something important about the women in the play that are associated with the traits of Hecate/Lilith. While the Duchess is portrayed as “motivated by revenge and lasciviousness,” this vengefulness is a response to a heinous act on the part of her husband. Therefore, her Lilith-like behavior stems from the need to respond to the oppressive practices of men. Similarly, Francisca’s pregnancy and subsequent abandonment of her newborn are also a strong reflection of the behavior of Aberzanes. While Francisca recognizes that she would be socially ruined if her extra-marital pregnancy were to be discovered, Aberzanes faces no such social censure. Thus, he is unapologetic in his willingness to impregnate unmarried women and assume no responsibility for mother or child. He expresses that he “love[s] to get ‘em but not to keep ‘em” and follows this assertion with a speech about the merits of engaging in such behavior: “ ‘Tis good ease to a man; you can swell up a maid and rid her for ten pound; there’s the purse back again, whate’er becomes of your money or your maid” (2.3.13-15). Here, Aberzanes exhibits a callous disregard for the consequences of his own lascivious actions. Therefore, Francisca’s abandonment of her maternal duties becomes strongly connected to misogynistic exploitation. Both the Duchess and Francisca, then, display threatening characteristics exhibited by Hecate-as-Lilith in an attempt to

mitigate the abuses of men. Ultimately, Middleton's play invokes the early modern fear of ungoverned women while also leaving room to understand the social influence of Lilith as an empowered female response to oppression.

Conclusion

While early modern England may not have experienced a true social saturation of female transvestism, *The Roaring Girl*, *Hic Mulier*, and *Haec Vir* certainly demonstrate both a social fascination with those women who cross-dressed and a male preoccupation with what this kind of behavior could mean for the patriarchy. Moll Cutpurse's casual adoption of male dress incites anxiety that is clearly linked to a masculine worry about her subversive power. *Hic Mulier* presents as a moral/religious reprimand of "manly women," though it eventually betrays itself to be a thinly veiled attempt to prevent transgressive women from stepping out of their submissive roles. *Haec Vir* serves as a true celebration of female transvestism, strongly advocating for the enactment of feminine free choice within society. Each of these three texts suggests links between the subversive power of cross-dressing and the autonomy of Lilith, thus returning to the Edenic moment and the language of a gendered "nature" and "creative purpose." Notably, early modern writers were willing to engage with this kind of biblical counter-narrative in their exploration of contemporary dynamic gender roles. While *Hic Mulier* invokes this myth out of a desire to condemn and contain "Lilith-like" behavior as unnatural and aberrant, the empowered figures of Moll and Hic Mulier (as presented in *Haec Vir*) revive this figure as an alternative to Eve and her traditional representation of the first and essentially subordinate feminine.

Both *Macbeth* and *The Witch* are products of a society whose discomfort with the role of the independent and "ungoverned" woman led to full scale witch-hunts. For those concerned with preserving the "appropriate" role of the female, invoking the post-Edenic elements of the

Lilith myth was an effective way to demonstrate the negative consequences of allowing women to assert themselves, free from male restraint. Further, it provided a lens through which society could frame ‘infanticide’ (or infant mortality) as a crime related to witchcraft, rather than a symptom of poor health conditions and the oppression of women. Lilith provided the character traits and language with which the sexually empowered and independent female could be attacked. *Macbeth* invokes pieces of the Lilith myth in its description of the murderous witches and Lady Macbeth, a woman whose connection to witchcraft/Lilith leads to her destruction. *The Witch* raises concerns about the nature of witches as sexually predatory child-killers, thereby subtly reinforcing the stereotype and fear of unattached women with no male “head.” However, *The Witch* also does important work in demonstrating that male oppression and the exploitation of women are often the impetuses behind the female adoption of the traits of Lilith. Therefore, the play provides a framework within which its early modern audience could reevaluate the condemnation of Lilith-like women and begin to understand this behavior as a form of empowered resistance.

In speaking about the influence of myth within society, Levack writes:

Every culture has been known to generate myths about persons, sometimes possessing peculiar powers or physical characteristics, who invert the moral and religious norms of society and who therefore represent a threat to the very fabric of that society. It can be argued that a belief in the existence of such individuals is necessary in order to establish what those norms are, or at least to reinforce those that are generally accepted. (36)

This need to invoke myth in order to reject it is certainly demonstrated within the early modern period, specifically in reference to the myth of Lilith as related to contemporary gender dynamics. However, I would also argue that the myth of Lilith is importantly invoked in an

attempt to *criticize* existing social norms through juxtaposition. While the texts discussed here do not offer a monolithic message concerning the appropriate feminine role within society, the included “proto-feminist” reclamations of this mythical figure identify a powerfully subversive trend in early modern literature running parallel to the more typical misogynistic one.

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Vita

Katelyn McCarthy was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where she fostered a love for the outdoors and horseback riding. She developed a simultaneous interest in literature and politics and thus earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Political Science from Lehigh University in 2011. She decided to continue her study of English Literature with a focus in Gender Studies at Lehigh University and earned her Master of Arts in 2012.