

## Constructing Femininity—the Lilith Case

The structures of social, religious, and scientific discourse are much more dependent on *meaning* than on the elaboration and exploration of some objective, transcendent “truths.” This has been convincingly shown in the philosophical discussions of the last five decades. My aim on the following pages is to apply this pragmatic argument to the question of femininity. My analysis will develop in three steps: First, I shall depict the results of pragmatic philosophy’s research into epistemology and—more important—historiography. Second, I shall change the perspective and examine the role of the feminine within the scope of modern psychology. In order to contrast those two approaches—third—I shall use the myth of the Babylonian and Hebrew Lilith and its modern application as an example. It will be shown that popular meanings about femininity are the product of patriarchal discourse and not mirroring a transcendent idea of the female.

### 1. Introduction: The linguistic turn, pragmatism, and historiography

20th century philosophy is characterized by two highly important changes: the linguistic turn and the pragmatic turn. These changes had a strong impact on the contemporary discourses concerning truth, objectivity, science, relativity, etc. Unfortunately, their radical consequences are only acknowledged by a few scholars. Therefore, it is important to stress briefly what is at stake here.

*Ludwig Wittgenstein* was the first who argued that language is not an objective description of reality. The same sentence or uttering can adopt very different meanings and connotations when applied to a different setting. Therefore, sentences do not carry meaning in themselves but only in connection with social interaction—this is the basic idea underlying Wittgenstein’s theory of *Sprachspiele*. Plainly speaking—and skipping various important contributions to this theory—the philosophy of language does no longer seek for the roots of human consciousness or any transcendent source that might be accessible by means of language.<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein’s arguments were carried on by *John L. Austin* and applied to a linguistic theory of meaning,<sup>2</sup> whereas others examined their impact on epistemology and the self-consciousness of modern philosophy. Among the latter ones, Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty are of strong influence.

*Davidson* analyzes the structures of communication in such a way that the utterings of a person can be understood *without* referring to an object this person “has in mind” and which is traceable by our own consciousness. First, he points out that “[a]las, there are no such objects. Every object has an infinity of logical independent properties, even those objects, like numbers, all of whose ‘essential’ properties we specify.”<sup>3</sup> But to admit this does not imply the assumption that communication is totally contingent, solipsistic or relative. Davidson argues that as soon as we give up the common notion that objects stand before our minds and are reflected by our words we get rid of a whole bunch of epistemological difficulties: “The simple fact is that we have the resources needed to identify states of

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1 Cf. the introduction to “The Linguistic Turn” by R. Rorty in Rorty 1967: 1-39.

2 Austin 1962. Of course, Austin did not relate directly to Wittgenstein.

3 Davidson 1989: 4.

mind, even if those states of mind are, as we like to say, directed to non-existent objects, for we can do this without supposing there are any objects whatever ‘before the mind’.”<sup>4</sup>

In his groundbreaking study about the “mirror of nature” *Richard Rorty* developed a similar philosophy.<sup>5</sup> According to Rorty the philosophical search for accurate descriptions of the world has to be given up. There are simply no traceable (!) correspondences between language, thought, and reality. The realist’s program will never be successfully carried out and has to be avoided from the outset. At this point Rorty refers to the Anglo-American tradition of pragmatism giving it a new and radicalized notion. He sums up his theory:

[Pragmatism] is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. [...] The pragmatist tells us that it is useless to hope that objects will constrain us to believe the truth about them, if only they are approached with an unclouded mental eye, or a rigorous method, or a perspicuous language.<sup>6</sup>

For the pragmatist the only interesting and fruitful area of research is the communication between people. What is at stake and can be determined is the way different people gained consensus about questions of their daily life, their scientific opinions, and the rules of their cultural interaction. These “discourses of the day” never transcend the horizon of a given historical situation. We ought to “see this community as *ours* rather than *nature’s*, *shaped* rather than *found*, one among many which men have made.”<sup>7</sup>

The consequences of this pragmatic attitude can hardly be overestimated. Among the humanities the debate is still vividly going on, concentrating on the difficulties of historiography, narrativism,<sup>8</sup> and the social construction of reality.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, as far as the academic study of religion is concerned, this discussion has not yet really been assimilated.<sup>10</sup> Turning to religious discourses the primacy of *communication* comes into play. With regard to the social construction of femininity we can assume that images of the feminine are not the reflection of “how women are” or the “nature of femininity” but of how certain people want women to be. We shall have to talk about *power* and not about truth.<sup>11</sup> This brings me to my second point.

## 2. C.G. Jung and psychological mythmaking

When we approach the discourses about femininity the *Sprachspiele* invented by Carl Gustav Jung and his school are of impressive dominance. Although his theory reflects the discourses of the beginning of the 20th century,<sup>12</sup> the psychological interpretation of myths, fairy tales, or dreams is still highly dependent on Jungian thought. Noll correctly says, that “[f]or literally tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of individuals in our culture, Jung and his ideas are the basis of a personal

4 Davidson 1989: 18.

5 Rorty 1979.

6 Rorty 1982: 165.

7 Rorty 1982: 166 (italics Rorty).

8 White 1973; Koselleck 1989 (cf. esp. 349-375); Müller & Rösen 1997; Kippenberg 1997: 259-270.

9 Of almost canonical status is Berger & Luckmann 1966 (cf. also Luckmann 1980). With regard to sociological system-theories the important studies of Niklas Luhmann have to be mentioned (cf. Luhmann 1993). Luhmann’s construction recently has been criticized by Hartmut Esser and others because it fails to *explain* social *action*. For this reason Esser’s sociology makes use of the *rational choice theory* which seems to become a new paradigm for the social sciences (Esser 1991; Esser 1996: 540-542).

10 In von Stuckrad 1999 (ch. II) I discuss the implications of “a pragmatic study of religion” (*Pragmatistische Religionswissenschaft*) at greater length. See also the remarks of Kippenberg 1992: 53.

11 This aspect was well examined by Kögler 1992.

12 Cf. Röbling 1989.

religion that either supplants their participation in traditional organized Judeo-Christian religion or accompanies it.”<sup>13</sup> This holds true especially within the popular discourses of esotericism or “New Age” publications, where the dangerous implications of a one-sided discourse are only merely reflected, if recognized at all.<sup>14</sup>

There can be no doubt that today the perspectives Jung proposed are of minor relevance for professional psycho-therapy or cultural theory. But if we take into account that popularized psychology and mythological interpretation have a strong impact on social discourse—much stronger than professional debates—, it seems legitimate to take the Jungian paradigm as our point of departure.

In the following, I shall sketch briefly the main arguments against the Jungian depiction of femininity. The topic will be described from two different perspectives: The feminist’s critique of the construction of femininity as deficient masculinity and the historian’s critique concerning the validity of transcultural archetypes that are taken from a certain historical situation.

### 2.1. The feminist’s critique

With regard to methodology C.G. Jung’s arguments are highly refutable, a fact that is persuasively shown in a number of studies<sup>15</sup> but only merely conceived by scholars of Jungian psychology. That Jung’s patriarchal attitude has not really been disputed is astonishing, since a large number of Jungian psychologists—and often the most convinced ones—are women. This calls for explanation and reflects the dangerous *circulus vitiosus* of social and scientific discourses. We shall come to this point later.

The starting point of the Jungian theory is the assumption that the differences between “male” and “female” are not of a mere polar kind but of an antithetical dualistic one. Therefore, the male and female parts of the human soul are considered as being in a constant dispute with one another. In the male soul the masculine parts normally hold the majority, whereas the female soul is dominated by the feminine characteristics. As is well known, the characteristics of the different gender, also found in anyone’s soul, are called *Anima* in the men’s case and *Animus* in the women’s.

When trying to describe *Anima* and *Animus* in greater detail, Jung shows a considerable preference for the masculine perspective. He *always* starts with the depiction of the male’s characteristics and, in a second step, simply defines the opposite as the female. This is not polarity but the definition of femininity as deficient masculinity.<sup>16</sup> The patriarchal thought patterns are unmistakably recognizable when we look at the language Jung uses to depict the *Anima*. Scattered over his huge *opus* we find descriptions such as these:<sup>17</sup> The *Anima* is easy to influence (1972, 6: 508), has illogical whims (1972, 11: 31), is a compensation for courageous adventures that all end in frustration, is a seducer that raises illusions, sentimental, and is full of resentment, irrational, conceited and irritable (1972, 9/2: 21-25). The *Anima* is a “psychopompos” that tries to seduce man by means of erotic fantasy as water-nymph, “succubus” or witch with magic poison (1972, 9/1: 35-38).

This is patriarchal discourse with a despiseful attitude towards femininity. The integration—*individuation*—of the masculine soul can only be attained when he forces the irrational female parts under the control of his *logos*. For women the process of integration is significantly different, though. Women are dominated by the weakness of their gender in such a way, that the male parts of the female soul (the *Animus*) can never be fully integrated. The *Animus* is not the positive aspect of masculinity but a caricature of it, a caricature women helplessly try to camouflage as male competence. As Jung points out, the *Animus* is not the *logos* but “brings forth meanings” as a begetting and fertile being (1972, 7: 227-230). The *logos* of the woman “often means a pitiful incident” (1972, 9/2: 23) and

13 Noll 1997: 291.

14 Cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 496-513.

15 Of special value are Lauter & Schreier-Rupprecht 1985; Weiler 1991; Brockmann 1991; Baumgardt 1993; Derungs 1996. There the following arguments are proposed in more detail. Of general interest is also Faber & Lanwerd 1997.

16 Cf. Baumgardt 1993: 67.

17 Detailed references can be found in Baumgardt 1993: 69-79; cf. also von Stuckrad 1997: 16-19.

is taken in by inferior thinking (1972, 9/1: 138). Also very telling is his opinion that “rid by the Animus a woman can not be affected by any logic of the world” (1972, 9/2: 24).<sup>18</sup>

These examples may suffice to show the preconceived attitude of Jungian thought with regard to femininity. From a pragmatist’s perspective not the indebtedness in the discourses of his time is astonishing but the prominent position this theory is still granted today in psychological and, even more important, in popularized interpretation of myth. How successful this invention of a psychological model was, can be seen in the fact that Jungian psychology is often defended by women. As Kurt Derungs puts it:

It is always amazing that female Jungians [“Jung-Frauen”] proclaim interpretations that discriminate women, and parrot old testament and patriarchal doctrines. [...] The domestication and intensification of patriarchal patterns is in a way embodied in the female disciples whom it is often allowed to propose—within the frame of social conformity—a kind of pseudo-feminism. Backstage this turns out to be one of those calculated sporadic “criticism.”<sup>19</sup>

The Jungian *Sprachspiel* is so dominant because a new psychological paradigm can only be formulated *after* leaving the Anima-Animus-scheme behind. Davidson and Rorty show us that it is impossible to argue for a new paradigm *within* the language of the old one.<sup>20</sup> If we want to describe women as having equal characters we simply have to avoid the Jungian language and invent new patterns of discourse.

But there is also another reason for the perpetuation of Jungian interpretation of myth and gender: the total lack of an historical perspective that makes this theory *a priori* immune to falsification.

## 2.2. The historian’s critique

“A serious discussion between psychologists and historians working on religious phenomena has up to now either not taken place at all or was, if tried sometimes, characterized by a mutual lack of understanding.”<sup>21</sup> As Carsten Colpe points out, this is due to the fact that psychology is supposed to be only interested in the inner aspects of the human self whereas historiography means to concentrate on the exterior aspects of human life. Now, the demarcation between inner and outer aspects is by no means easy to draw. But while historians have become increasingly aware of the psychological dimensions laying behind the *writing* of history, most psychologists claim that their profession is of a transhistorical nature, if they are bothered by that question at all. What happens in psycho-analysis is the following: “The entire pantheon of all the world’s mythologies, torn out of any semblance of its original cultural contexts, is utilized as an ‘objective’ reference point for the interpretation of personal experience.”<sup>22</sup>

With regard to mythological interpretation, the problem arises that not the individual selves with their dreams, visions or biographical imagination come into play but textual, archeological or other historical sources. These sources are the product of certain persons or groups in certain historical contexts, thus demanding a text-critical investigation. This is exactly what psychological interpretation fails to do. Scholars of the history of folk tradition use to emphasize that most of the fairy-tales exist in different versions, emerging from totally different social and historical settings.<sup>23</sup> Concentrating on “archetypes” or fundamental psychic dispositions imagined by psychological mythmaking the interpreter refuses to recognize the distinctive roles the elements of the story play in the entire narrative situation. This can easily be shown in the case of the famous collection of fairy-tales (“Kinder- und

18 For further references and an excellent analysis cf. Baumgardt 1993: 99-134.

19 Derungs 1996: 21 (All translations from German in this paper are mine). With regard to the perpetuation of patriarchal psychological interpretation cf. also Baumgardt 1993: 125-128.

20 This paradox has been worked out in the first chapter of Rorty 1989.

21 Colpe 1993: 51.

22 Noll 1997: 291.

23 Cf. Ruth B. Bottigheimer’s illuminating essay “Bettelheims Hexe: Die fragwürdige Beziehung zwischen Märchen und Psychoanalyse”, in Derungs 1996: 29-39 (with further references).

Hausmärchen”) by the Grimm brothers that functions as the primary evidence for psychological imagination. As a matter of fact, this collection from the German folk tradition chose only those variants of the stories which the editors thought of stemming from “real popular tradition,” a concept unmistakably reflecting the discourses of the first half of the 19th century.

The “standard” version of famous fairy-tales are, therefore, by no means of any transcultural validity. Furthermore, up to the end of the 19th century other collections—those by Perrault (1697) and Bechstein (1857)—were sold more often than the Grimms’ one.<sup>24</sup> An illuminating example is the story of the “Little Red Riding Hood” which exists in a variety of versions. The young girl not always is the helpless victim of the wolf, but is also able to escape thanks to her cleverness. And even the “standard” color of her hood is not red.<sup>25</sup> We meet the same variety with respect to other “classic” stories like *Amor and Psyche*. The “Enzyklopädie des Märchens”<sup>26</sup> mentions no less than 442 (!) variants within the Greek traditions. This is an impressive hodgepodge for *any* possible interpretation in psycho-analysis.

If we want to avoid the fallacies lying behind psychological projective mythmaking we have to combine a critique of ideology with a serious critique of text:

The definition of the historical setting, the reconstructions and explanations are indispensably being worked out by the common methods of the historical discipline [...], not by psychological means. When these definitions of the setting, reconstructions, explanations are done [...] one can understand the determined and explained phenomenon in a psychological sense—even, if it is foreign to us, i.e. if we miss the corresponding archetype in ourselves.<sup>27</sup>

Interpretation of myth has to take into account the many contingent factors that shaped the present version of the story. Moreover, the analysis has to concentrate on the distinctive discourses that generated either the transmitted myth or its present understanding. In most cases, the interpretation tells more about the interpreter than about the source interpreted. Especially in the case of psychological mythmaking the textual basis is not explained but *used* and applied to a preconceived pattern emerging from a certain discourse.

The fatal implications of this circular method can be demonstrated with regard to Lilith, the Great Goddess who was made into a witch twice—in the first place by means of patriarchal religious intentions and, secondly, thanks to the “interpretation” of psycho-analysis.

### 3. Lilith: from Goddess to witch

In the course of the last decades Lilith has become the chiffre for a certain aspect of female power. Both feminist circles and psychologists made use of her fascinating religious features, though in a contrary way. The former relating to her as a symbol of female self-consciousness and strength, the latter taking her as a key example for the dark side of the Anima. Usually the interpretations rest on a commonly adopted version of the Lilith story, regardless of the historical and religious situation that molded the plot. Thus, by contrasting the psychological—and partly also the feminist—description of Lilith and the historical evidence of the sources involved, we are able to show how patriarchal discourses generate assumptions about femininity.

#### 3.1. The psychological myths of Lilith

The story of Lilith, Adam’s first wife, is usually told as follows:

24 Bottigheimer in Derungs 1996: 34-37.

25 A huge collection of different versions is presented in Zipes 1982 and Ritz 1997.

26 1: 469, article by Georgias A. Megas.

27 Colpe 1993: 58.

After God had created Adam he recognized that it was not good for Adam to be alone. So he made another creature from the dust of the earth—a female—and named her Lilith. But soon Lilith began quarreling saying: “Since I am made from the same earth as you I am not willing to accept the lower position during sexual intercourse.” When she saw that Adam was to force her violently she spoke the secret names of God and flew from paradise. She was flying through the air and found a new home on the banks of the Red Sea. In deep disgrace she began to strangle new born children and had sexual intercourse with the Lord of the Demons, thus bringing forth a huge number of new demons. Adam argued with God and made him send out three angels in order to bring Lilith back. But the angels were not able to fulfill their task because Lilith refused to go with them. Instead, they made an agreement that Lilith swore to exempt those children from killing who’s cradle carry the names of the three angels.

After the return of the angels Eve was created from the rip of Adam while Lilith remained a danger for every man sleeping alone in the night. She seduces him by means of her fascinating beauty, and from the semen that falls on the ground she creates new members of her demonic army.

There are several aspects of this story that attract the imagination of modern interpreters. It was A. Lewandowski who argued that Lilith made a big mistake when she reacted in this “hot-headed and drastic” manner. She behaved like a woman possessed by her Animus who tries to enforce recklessly her instinctive power. It would have been better to look at the “lower position” from a symbolical or psychological angle. Hence, Lilith would have been able to accept the lower position as the symbol of the earth whereas the upper position adopted by Adam was to symbolize the man’s domain of the heaven. Consequently, it was Lilith’s duty to change her attitude and behavior in order to accept the position she was given by Adam.<sup>28</sup>

Against the background of religious evidence this interpretation must be called naïve and misleading because it is only the psychological imagination that forces the female into the lower position; the connection of earth and woman is by no means a religious archetype, as we will see later. Here Lewandowski creates a circular argument that only fits to patriarchal self-description.<sup>29</sup>

Another scholar of Jungian psychology using the Lilith myth in a prejudiced way is Siegmund Hurwitz. Although he draws on a remarkable variety of Babylonian and Jewish sources his analysis focuses solely on the dark side of the Goddess. He even acknowledges that taking religious textual evidence as basis for psycho-analytical interpretation is a dangerous endeavor. But regardless of that danger he precedes in Lewandowski’s direction when he tries to imagine the feelings of the ancient men who simply had to be terrified by the female claim for autonomy. Sooner or later, the matriarchal system was to be overcome because the development of the human soul requested it. That Lilith did not cope with the new situation and „overshot the mark by striving herself to overpower the male domination is by all means psychologically understandable. Thus, in this dispute the patriarchal point of view *had to prevail* in that time.”<sup>30</sup>

In this perspective femininity that tries to be dominant is defamed as a wrong way of expressing the Animus. Gerda Weiler is absolutely right when she observes:

Nothing has changed. The relation of the genders still remains a battlefield on which the war is carried out. Only in the woman’s “possibility of being overcome” the terrified psyche of the patriarchal man sees a positive turn of the neurotic conflict. Only when Lilith internalizes the patriarchal point of view the danger for man’s power is banished and man is able to turn to the female without fear. [...] Patriarchal masculinity, always being on guard not to lose its predominance, is incapable of a mature relation with a woman who realized her *matriarchal femininity*.<sup>31</sup>

It is exactly this matriarchal femininity that Jungian psychology is never able to trace in the mythological data. This is all the more regretful since the story of Lilith makes visible a hidden discourse underlying the patriarchal telling of the myth. If we leave the vocabulary of psycho-analysis behind and take a fresh approach to the Lilith myth we will possibly arrive at a better understanding of the way different cultures and societies made their consensus about the relation of the genders.

28 Lewandowski 1977: 79.

29 For critical comments see Weiler 1996: 150-151; von Stuckrad 1997: 77-78.

30 Hurwitz 1983: 139 (I quote from the German edition; italics Hurwitz).

31 Weiler 1996: 150-151 (italics Weiler).

### 3.2. The textual evidence: sources and contexts

The modern myth of Lilith is composed of many details that were combined in different historic and religious settings. I shall now try to take the story apart in order to reveal the several strata of the myth. To begin with, the version told above is of a relatively late origin, emerging from discourses among rabbinical and cabbalistic Jews of medieval times. Before analyzing those discourses I have to sketch the “prehistory” of our myth focusing on the features of the ancient goddesses which Lilith is closely related to.

#### 3.2.1. The Mesopotamian background

The earliest of Lilith’s traces reach far into the Babylonian past. In the old Sumerian time, around 2000 BCE, Lilith seemed to be an aspect of the goddess Ishtar, a fearful and respectful aspect including the dark potencies of Ishtar. The names of this divinity are “Lilitû” or “Lamashtû.”<sup>32</sup> With regard to Lamashtu there survived a lot of texts that confirm the close links between Lilith and Ishtar/Inanna. The so-called “Labartu texts” undoubtedly mention Lamashtu as a goddess. Yet her character is a very bad one: she roars like a lion, bringing evil and mistress to the people and also to animals, plants, and rivers. She is after the new born babies, torturing them either with fever or cold. Only amulets, incantations, and other magic rituals can protect people from Lilith.<sup>33</sup> Her father is Anu, Babylonian god of the first generation. Furthermore, she is introduced as “accepted and trusted friendly by Irnina,” i.e. Inanna. Thus, we can suppose that in this first state of her demonic carrier Lilith carried not only the dangerous aspects of Ishtar but also the heroic ones. The dark side is not only terrifying but also venerable.<sup>34</sup>

We obtain additional confirmation for the links between Inanna and Lilith by a Sumerian version of the old epic poem of Gilgamesh. This fragmentary text is dated between 1950 and 1700 BCE but scholars assume that the original myth is much older, maybe going back to the fourth century BCE.<sup>35</sup> Here Lilith is introduced with the name *Ki-sikil-lil-la-ke* which means “the maiden Lilith;” furthermore she is described as “the maiden that always screams” and as “rejoiceress of every heart.” Once again we see how close the demonic and the light aspects of the goddess appeared to the worshippers. We can also assume that our modern dichotomic attitude towards this figure will never allow us to understand the very discourse of the people who developed this narrative.

The demonic aspects of Lilith captured the imagination of many believers. By means of amulets and magic people tried to protect their children from being harmed by Lilith. Interestingly, the standard model of amulet was by no means restricted to one specific “Lilith,” but we have a huge legion of “Liliths,” among them even *male* ones! As Wolfgang Fauth resumes: “From the [...] cited phrase ‘Liliths of every kind and species’ one can already infer that the sizable flock of these demons was depicted by the imagination in a multiple, yet merely tangible, differentiation.”<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, we have to acknowledge that the religious figure Lilith consists of a highly diversified set of features. Since the Aramaic and Mandaic texts examined by Fauth lead us to the Jewish discourses of the rabbinical period, this fact is of paramount importance. Instead of looking for a continuous and monilinear development of our myth we have to take into account the specific contexts that shaped the story of Lilith. I shall pick up this topic in my discussion of the Jewish discourses. But before that, a famous iconographic evidence must be mentioned. In the so-called Burney relief the strong image of Lilith is easily recognizable. This terra-cotta relief (37 x 49.5 cm), dated between 2,000 and 1,800 BCE, shows a naked, winged goddess with talons standing on two lions and flanked

32 Cf. to the following Weiler 1996: 135-152; von Stuckrad 1997: 62-68.

33 Cf. Myhrmann 1902.

34 In Hindu mythology this aspect of the goddess is played out by Kali.

35 Kramer 1938. Cf. also von Stuckrad 1997: 63-65.

36 Fauth 1986: 71.

by two owls.<sup>37</sup> The head-dress of the figure clearly shows her divine character.<sup>38</sup> Thus, a couple of strong attributes of the old-oriental goddess can be derived from the Burney-relief. Lilith is clearly related to the element of air, shown by the two wings and the owls. Consequently, Lilith has to be described as *Lady of the Heaven*. The lions, for their part, illustrate the connection between Lilith and Ishtar, who is often depicted resting on lions or leading them with a cord.<sup>39</sup> Both aspects do not fit to a concept of femininity that is passive and “earth-like” but remind us of a quite different discourse concerning the female, which was still alive in Greco-Roman antiquity. Hence, to adequately understand the myth of Lilith we have to consider the common meanings about the Great Goddess during that time.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.2.2. *She of many names*

Johann Jakob Bachofen’s famous study on the matriarchal order (1861) was widely accepted in academic circles and psychologically applied by the Jungian scholar Erich Neumann in his book “The Great Mother.”<sup>41</sup> Since that time the nourishing aspect of the near-eastern goddesses was the main concern of scholarly research. This holds true even if we acknowledge the different “motherly” characteristics, like strong defense of the beloved children, etc. In the last decades the shortcomings of this assumption—although not recognized within psycho-analysis and popular interpretation of myth—has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars of religious history.<sup>42</sup> From the study of the ancient documents a picture emerged that included the motherly aspects merely as *one* of many attributes of the goddesses. And what is more, that aspect is not the most prevailing one. Contrasting this modern attitude the ancient goddesses integrate a number of different characters within one religious figure. I shall sketch the predominant features using Ishtar/Inanna/Anat as example, since Lilith is closely related to this goddess.<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly enough, the *aggressive goddess* is of crucial importance within ancient religious discourse. Especially the Sumerian-Akkadic Ishtar and the Canaanite Anat may serve as good examples for this, because their rage of murder and their active assistance in wars is almost proverbial. In the famous epic poem of Gilgamesh Ishtar appears as strong challenger of the Godfather Anu. She threatens him that if he refuses to give her the “Bull of Heaven” to kill Gilgamesh she will smash the doors of the lower world, bringing death to all living creatures.<sup>44</sup> In an Akkadic prayer Inanna/Ishtar is called “the warlike daughter of Sin, experienced in the use of the weapons” and “Lady of the battlefield.”<sup>45</sup> Her Canaanite relative Anat is likewise honored as mighty warrior. The cuneiform texts from Ugarit tell us that “Anat slaughters between the two cities [...], heads fall under her like lumps of earth, [...] and she bathes her knees in the blood of the strong, her thighs in the clot of the warriors.”<sup>46</sup>

Often the ancient goddess appears in the *erotic image*. To be sure, not every naked female figure found in the soil of the old orient is a hint to a divine aspect of the goddess, if it is a goddess at all.<sup>47</sup> Yet the textual and iconographic evidence is strong enough to illuminate the ancient discourse about sexuality. Interestingly, the goddesses are almost never characterized by sexual passivity but act as

37 Opitz & van Buren 1934–1936: 350.

38 Cf. Weiler 1991: 137 with ill. 10.

39 Many iconographic references can be found in Winter 1983 and Johnson 1988 (index “Lion/Löwe” and “Ishtar/Ishtar”). Therefore, a few scholars adopt the position that the Burney-relief shows a winged Ishtar, and not Lilith.

40 What looks like an unnecessary roundabout in my argument will (hopefully) become clear later.

41 Neumann 1997, first published 1956.

42 Cf. especially the important studies of Winter 1983 and—concerning the Judaeo-Christian tradition—Patai 1978, Keel & Uehlinger 1992, as well as Weiler 1994.

43 I worked out this approach in more detail in von Stuckrad 1997: 30-60 (see also the iconographic material there).

44 Gilgamesh Plate 6 I, 94-100.

45 Falkenstein & von Soden 1953: 328-329.

46 Cuneiform texts from Ugarit, ed. Dietrich, Loretz & Sanmartín (KTU) 1.3 II 5ff.

47 Sometimes the disregard of the limits of archeological interpretation leads to highly speculative and often totally wrong historical assumptions. Within the field of feminist research this can be exemplified with the theories of Marija Gimbutas, still a famed author of (popular) studies. Cf. the criticism in Röder, Hummel & Kunz 1996: 273-298.

strong women who enjoy the meetings with their partners. Again, Inanna and Anat may serve as examples: The ritual marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi (Tammuz) is described in a hymn for the Babylonian new year's feast.<sup>48</sup> The ancient imagination did not shrink from a vivid picture of lust and joy of the two partners. Thus, the sexual activity of the goddess and her companion belongs to the sacred sphere, continuing the circle of life, death and rebirth of nature and people. In the same manner, Anat's rendezvous with Baal is pictured in the Ugaritic texts. There, the goddess is called *bilti*/'the virgin' which marks the strong difference this *Sprachspiel* had in those times if compared to the Christian concept. The term "virgin" used to represent a free woman who is marked by sexual autarchy. This sheds further light on the so-called "temple-prostitutes" of the ancient religions. Only patriarchal discourse with its concentration on power and dominance can talk of sexual property and prostitution whereas the role of the goddess as partner and initiator of the god is played down. Consequently, the priestess becomes a whore.<sup>49</sup>

The third aspect of the ancient goddess, yet, as we have seen, not the prevailing one,<sup>50</sup> is the *image of the mother*. The iconographic sources often show a goddess nursing a child, sometimes substituted by a cow and its calf. When we look at the textual evidence we meet Ishtar and Anat in the motherly aspect as well. Ashera, a Canaanite appearance of Ishtar, is not only the wife of El, the Godfather, but also his creatress. And Anat, in her famous journey to the lower world, strives to find her beloved Baal like a mother:

Like the heart of a cow for her calf,  
like the heart of a mother sheep for her lamb,  
so (longs) the heart of Anat for Baal.  
She grasps Mût by his lappet,  
She seizes him at the edge of his garment.  
She raises her voice and shouts:  
"You, o Mût, give my brother back to me!"<sup>51</sup>

What we can learn from this passage is *the facility of the ancient discourse to switch easily from one aspect of the goddess to another*. Anat's motherly, aggressive, and erotic images (she is looking for her sexual mate) are described within only a few lines. Therefore, any theory that argues for an historical development, starting with the archetype of the "Great Mother" whose nursing and terrifying features led to the different figures of the "Anima"<sup>52</sup> does not rest on the religious data.

The last aspect of the goddess to be mentioned is her appearance as *Lady of the Heaven*. The heavenly connotation of the goddess comes into view implicitly regarding her absolute eminence and explicitly by her close connection with the heavenly realms. Leaving the implicit evidence aside,<sup>53</sup> I shall refer to just one paradigmatic passage of the Inanna/Ishtar piety. In a Sumerian song Inanna describes herself in the following manner:

My father has given me the sky, has given me the earth: The Lady of the Heaven am I.  
Will anyone, any God, match me? [...]  
The war he has given to me, the din of battle he has given to me,  
the hurricane he has given to me, the whirlwind he has given to me.  
The sky he put as crown on my head,  
the earth he put as sandal beneath my foot,  
the gleaming coat of the gods he put around me [...]  
The sky is mine, the earth is mine—I am the Lady-Hero!<sup>54</sup>

48 Falkenstein & von Soden 1953: 97-98.

49 Cf. on this topic Lerner 1986 and Lerner 1995, 1: 162-181.

50 See also Winter 1983: 389.

51 KTU 1.6 II.

52 The thesis is explicitly put forward by Hurwitz 1983: 20.

53 Cf. von Stuckrad 1997: 53.

54 Falkenstein & von Soden 1953: 67-68.

The cult of the Heavenly Lady is one of the most important aspects of ancient piety. It is found not only in the Near Eastern religions,<sup>55</sup> but also in Egypt, where either Nût or Isis is of crucial influence. Nût represented the sky with her star-ordained body stretched out over the earth that stands for her brother Geb (i.e. a male divinity). Isis was known as Lady of the Heaven since the Middle Kingdom (2,052–ca. 1,570 BCE) and became the predominant female figure during Roman times.

### 3.2.3. Jewish discourses

Our survey of the different aspects of the ancient goddesses has already shown the remarkable parallels to the myths of Lilith. Lilith's connection with the sky, her sexual autarchy, and her power over birth and death still reflect the mighty goddess in her many appearances. To deepen our analysis we now have to answer the following questions: What religious intentions did transform the old account of the goddesses Ishtar/Inanna/Anat into the present myth of Lilith? And when was it that certain features were added to the traditional story? When we try to answer these questions we are led to the Jewish tradition.<sup>56</sup> Undoubtedly, Jewish discourses shaped the myth of Lilith in a most significant respect, so that the modern version of our story would have been impossible without the help of Jewish thinkers.<sup>57</sup> In order to explain this thesis I shall focus on two equally important areas of Jewish tradition, that is the rabbinical discussion and the cabbalistic discourse.

The rabbinical elaboration of the Lilith material can be traced within either the midrashic literature or the Babylonian Talmud (bT), the latter being compiled during the 7th to 8th century CE. The midrashim are difficult to date, but the *Midrash Genesis Rabba* (GenR) which is of special interest to us, does not bring us back before 400 CE—at least in its present versions. GenR 24:2 and 22:17 report the story of the “first Eve” who was created independently of Adam. She is not related to him, a fact that results in a quarrel between Cain and Abel concerning Adam's heir. Thus, God decides to turn the “first Eve” back to dust.—In this passage Lilith is not mentioned and a demonic character of the first Eve is not determinable. The reason for the rabbis to invent a first Eve is quite simple: The book of Genesis presents two contradictory stories about Adam and his female companion. The question arises: Was Eve created independently of Adam from the same material (Gen. 1:27-28), or was she made from the rip of Adam while he was sleeping (Gen. 2:21-23)? For pious rabbis this is a sincere problem because both stories are direct revelation from Sinai. Thus, the invention of two Eves has the great advantage that the discrepancies of the Bible text are conveniently explained.

As a matter of fact, *it was only rabbinical hermeneutics that molded the story of Lilith so popular among modern psychologists*. This becomes clear when we call in the “canonical” version of the myth, i.e. the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, recently called “Pseudo-Ben Sira” by some scholars.<sup>58</sup> A parallel version can be found in GenR 17:4 and in bTJeb 63a. The Alphabet of Ben Sira is a satiric text from early Islamic times that picks up biblical elements and combines them with humorous criticism of rabbinical thinking. It has already been said that it is the “Alphabet” that includes most of the details psychologists cling to. Yet, there are two different versions of the story, as Yassif has pointed out in his groundbreaking study. The first one reports the discussion between Lilith and the three angels sent out by God to bring her back.<sup>59</sup> But they do not fulfill their duty. They leave her alone after she has sworn to spare those Babies carrying the angels's names on an amulet. The second version copes with the sincere failure of the angels by applying a quotation from Torah: Lilith argues that she cannot go back to Adam because it is written (cf. Dt. 24:4) that the former husband of a woman is not allowed to let her in again, i.e. “only if he was the last one she had slept with. But I have already slept with the

55 Cf. the description of the Canaanite “cruelties,” including the worship of the Heavenly Lady, in 2 Kings: 23.

56 A number of interesting passages can be found in Ginzberg 1909–1938 (index “Lilith”). Yet Ginzberg's references should always be used carefully.

57 Cf. von Stuckrad 1997: 68-88.

58 The standard study of the text is Yassif 1977. For the passage mentioned cf. also Ginzberg 1909–1938, 4: 87.

59 Cf. Yassif 1977, 1: 64-65.

Great Demon!”<sup>60</sup> Again the *primacy of the theological coherence* over the exactitude of tradition is obvious.<sup>61</sup>

The “Great Demon,” almost unknown in Jewish literature concerning Lilith up to Ben Sira’s text, bridges the gap between rabbinical thinking and the cabbalistic discussions of medieval times. It was Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen from Spain who adopted this figure in his “Treatise on the Left Emanation” in the second half of the 13th century. Cabbalistic thinking—like the Gnostic concept—is highly interested in the way the evil came into being. Rabbi Isaac’s text is valuable because it introduces for the first time a new argument:

A significant detail in this system is that here, for the first time in a dated Jewish work, Samael and Lilith are described as husband and wife in the realm of the Satanic power, a concept which was later incorporated into the Zohar and became one of the most popular and well-known chapters in Jewish myths concerning evil.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, Rabbi Isaac “gave the story of Samael and Lilith a new mythological dimension, uplifting it from the level of narrative gossip, as it was in the edited version of Pseudo-Ben Sira, and made it a part of cosmic, and even divine, history.”<sup>63</sup>

The evil and its cosmic connotations became a standard topic for cabbalistic theology. In combination with God’s ten emanations—the *sefirôt*—the concept of evil served as a primary explanation of the cosmic struggle of the pious and Israel’s responsibility for the world. This becomes evident when we turn to the most important cabbalistic document, the *sefer ha-zohar*. This text was written by Moshe ben Shemtov de León (died 1305 CE), though Jewish tradition claims that the Zohar is a midrash dating from the 2nd century CE. The passage of interest for us—Zohar II, 231b—has an older parallel in the Midrash Tanchuma I p. 12,20 (ed. Buber). It reports the tradition according to which the demons were created at sunset on a Friday evening. Since, in the meantime, the Sabbath had begun, the creation process had to stop and the demons remained without a body. This led to the assumption that the demons were still engaged in search for a body. Then the cabbalists combined this topic with another idea. Adam turned his back on Eve after Abel had been murdered; then he was seduced by female demons—succubi—who became pregnant. From this “misused semen” there emerged a whole order of demons, the so-called *nig<sup>c</sup>e Bene Adam*, i.e. “harming demons stemming from Adam.” In the Zohar the impurity by the “loss” of semen—during nightly dreams etc.—was consequently carried on and Lilith became the Lady of the Demons who seduced sleeping men in order to get hold of their semen to create a body for her and her demonic legions.

As can easily be imagined, this detail of our story captured the fantasy of psychologists. But, instead of being an example of the archetype of the Anima’s demonic appearance, it shows the radical implications of cabbalistic discourses. As Gershom Scholem reminds us: “Here an extreme idea of purity led to the consequence that every conscious or unconscious violation of its religious laws has to be regarded as a begetting of demons.”<sup>64</sup> This mystic concept of sexual purity and the holiness of matrimony—in this extreme never elaborated in rabbinical theology—was responsible for the modern version of Lilith’s myth.

To sum up: In the course of roughly 400 years, from the 14th to the 18th century, several details were added to the Lilith myth. Although the sexual connotation has always been present in the story, cabbalistic theosophy was needed to introduce Lilith as primary demon and succubus. The rabbis, for their part, were mainly interested in the annihilation and interpretation of the Bible’s discrepancies. In every case it was a kind of *contextual theological contingency* that led to the elaboration of the Lilith myth. Psychological interpretation has to seriously consider this fact.

60 Yassif 1977, 1: 23-24.

61 Cf. Dan 1980: 22.

62 Dan 1980: 18.

63 Dan 1980: 23. See also von Stuckrad 1997: 83-85.

64 Scholem 1989: 204.

## 4. Results

Every kind of discourse is determined by a set of contingent variables. When we ask for the image of women in religious discourses we have to acknowledge the fact that historical data will never lead us to a transhistorical perspective. We have to focus on the investigation of how people in different cultural settings tried to gain consensus about the world's interpretation. The attitude towards the female does not show a linear and coherent development but changed due to theological and sociological contexts which can be made visible through historiography.

As we have seen, the myth of Lilith is a good example to show these contingent changes. Considering the various mythological features of this religious figure, ranging from the Mesopotamian religions to 18th century's cabbalistic tractates, we recognize the changing social attitudes towards the feminine. Against this background it is not advisable to obtain the simple doctrine of the "genders' battle" and its psychological construction of "male" and "female." Lilith is not the dark half of the (masculine) self but an aspect of the Great Goddess worshipped in antiquity under many names. This can be proven through the study of the oldest documents relating to Lilith. Later texts, though, belong to a religious discourse that tends to conceal or even destroy the strong aspects of the goddess. To use these texts uncritically and to skip hundreds and even thousands of years in order to proof a preconceived interpretation establishes a *circulus vitiosus* that fits to patriarchal interpretation but fails to illuminate the many aspects of femininity. Pragmatic analysis, instead, uncovers the social and religious contexts of these documents that generate social meanings about femininity adopted by men and women alike.

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