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WOMAN'S LORE

4,000 years of Sirens, Serpents and Succubi

An Apollo Book

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For my brother
because once, a long time ago,
he did the same for me.

Contents

To hear her whisper woman's lore so well,
and every note she spake entic'd him on

Keats, *Lamia*, 325–326

A Note on Capitalization and Pluralization

In all cases, the monsters discussed in this book have been given English plurals (Lamias as opposed to Lamiae, for example). In spanning numerous time-periods, languages and civilizations, the pluralizations of these names naturally vary wildly. Moreover, since these creatures are often under-attested in written sources, we don't always know their pluralizations for a given time period. The plural of the creature 'Gello' for example, was 'Gelloudes' in Byzantine sources, but should we back-apply this to Hellenistic Greece, where we don't have a surviving plural form of the word? For the sake of simplicity and clarity, English plurals are used instead.

Capitalization will also always be used for the demons under discussion. This is because they often shift from being a proper name of a single person, to a species of monsters, and back again. Lamia, for example, is both a much-wronged queen and a race of snake-tailed, seductive women. Often it's unclear which is meant in an individual source. To avoid confusion, capitalization will be maintained throughout.

Timeline

The key dates concerning our demons are in the left-hand column of the timeline below. To try to contextualize the 4,000 years of this tradition, the right-hand column contains important dates from history, such as the death of Tutankhamun and the beginning of the Crusades.

	*c.*3400–3300 BC – Earliest form of writing appears in Mesopotamia.
*c.*2000–1500 BC – First Lamashtu incantations and amulets.	*c.*1790 BC – Hammurapi becomes king.
*c.*1500–1000 BC – Writing of the first composite Lamashtu incantation in Ugarit, the likely Lamashtu text from Hattusa, and the Lamashtu text from Emar.	1323 BC – Death of Tutankhamun.
*c.*700–600 BC – First Pazuzu incantations and amulets.	631 BC – Death of Ashurbanipal.

*c.*700–600 BC – Egyptian Pazuzu statuette inscribed with the name 'Ssm son of Pdr'.

*c.*570 BC – Death of Sappho.

*c.*500–400 BC – Greek vase showing Lamia with a phallus produced.

*c.*480 BC – Vase showing the sirens as bird-bodied women surrounding Odysseus' ship produced.

*c.*450 BC – Crates writes his play describing Lamia with a 'staff'.

405 BC – First performance of Aristophanes' play *The Frogs*, which mentions Lamia's testicles.

306 BC – The concubine Lamia is captured at the Battle of Salamis by Demetrius.

*c.*300–200 BC – Likely period in which the poet Erinna was writing.

281 BC – Death of Duris of Samos, who wrote about Lamia.

609 BC – Fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

586 BC – Sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II and the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

509 BC – Creation of the Roman Republic.

499–449 BC Graeco–Persian Wars.

347 BC – Death of Plato.

323 BC – Death of Alexander the Great.

*c.*60 BC – Diodorus Siculus writes *Library of History*, including his rationalizing account of Lamia.

19 BC – Horace writes his *Ars Poetica*, mentioning Lamia devouring children.

AD *c.*115 – Death of Dio Chrysostom, who wrote about Lamia seducing and eating sailors.

AD *c.*120 – Date that Zenobius, the proverb compiler who preserved the fragment of Sappho relating to Gello's love of children, was teaching in Rome.

AD 172–200 – Period in which Apuleius wrote the *The Golden Ass*.

AD *c.*200 – Composition of Philostratus's *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.

AD 200–500 – Compilation of the Babylonian Talmud.

AD *c.*300 – Manufacture of the silver scroll inscribed with the charm story of the encounter between Artemis and the headache monster Antaura.

44 BC – Julius Caesar assassinated.

AD 75 – Writing of the last known cuneiform text.

AD 122 – Construction of Hadrian's Wall begins.

AD 224 – Sassanian conquest of Mesopotamia.

AD 324 – Constantine moves the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople.

AD 300–400 – Compilation of the *Cyranides*.

AD 300–400 – Earliest Mediterranean amulets produced that show Sisinis or Solomon impaling a woman with long, loose hair.

AD 397 – Death of Saint Ambrose.

AD 400–500 – Greek Palestinian amulets, which depict Sisinnios impaling a woman, often shown with a snake tail and described as 'Abyzou' produced.

AD 400–800 – First attestation of the Sisinnios story in Mesopotamia and Palestine.

AD 420 – Death of Jerome, translator of the Vulgate Bible.

AD 476 – Fall of Rome.

AD 500–600 – The majority of the amulets depicting Sisinnios or Solomon impaling Abyzou produced.

AD 500–800 – Incantation bowls made and used.

AD 570 – Birth of the Prophet Muhammed.

AD 600 – Death of Leander of Seville, who wrote that all women who were not nuns were sirens.

AD *c.*700 – Composition of the *Liber Monstrorum*, one of the first texts to use the term 'mermaid'.

AD *c.*700–1000 – Composition of the Alphabet of Ben Sira.

AD 749 – Death of John of Damascus, the Christian monk, priest and author, who wrote dismissively about the Gello.

AD *c.*806 – Death of Saint Tarasios, who supposedly held a trial for Gello-possessed elderly women.

1072 – Death of Peter Damian, who wrote angrily about sirens and Lamias.

1074 – The Pope absolves people of obedience to bishops who allowed married priests.

1165 – Creation of the mosaic floor in Otranto Cathedral.

AD 636 – Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia.

AD 661 – Foundation of the Umayyad Caliphate.

AD 730–787 – First iconoclastic period in the Byzantine Empire.

AD 800 – Coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans.

1095 – Beginning of the First Crusade.

1153 – Death of the Byzantine historian Anna Komnene.

1204 – Sack of Constantinople by crusader armies.

*c.*1220 – Death of Gervase of Tilbury, author of *Otia Imperialia*.

1215 – Signing of the *Magna Carta*.

1273 – End of the last major crusade in the Holy Land.

*c.*1280 – Likely date of the composition of *The Treatise of the Left Emanation*.

1299 – Founding of the Ottoman Empire by Osman I.

1305 – Death of Moses de León, discoverer (or author) of the *Zohar*.

1308 – Yolande, the last surviving heir of the Lusignan family in Europe, sells the fief of Lusignan to Philip IV of France.

1346 – Beginning of the Black Death.

1391 – Composition of *Guerino the Wretch*.

1394 – Composition of *The Noble History of the House of Lusignan*.

1400–1500 – Earliest text relating the story of Melitene, Abyzou and Sisinnios in Greek.

1400 – Death of Chaucer.

1425 – Uccello finishes painting *Creation and the Fall*, including Lamia/Lilith amongst the animals.

1453 – Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II sacks Constantinople.

1512 – Michelangelo completes the Sistine Chapel ceiling.
1541 – Death of Paracelsus.
1586 – Portrayal of Mary Queen of Scots as a mermaid.

1603 – Death of Elizabeth I.

1795–6 – Publication of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*.

1837 – Publication of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*.
1838 – Queen Victoria crowned.
1848 – Publication of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.
1873 – Recording of the Mermaid of Zennor legend.
1873 – Rossetti finishes painting *Lady Lilith*.
1876 – Publication of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*.
1880 – First women graduate from university in the UK.
1891 – Publication of *Lilith: A Sequel to an Unloved Wife*.
1894 – Coining of the term 'New Women'.
1897 – Publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.
1897 – Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria.
1897 – Display of John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* at the Royal Academy.
1897 – Foundation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies by Millicent Fawcett.

1904 – Aleister Crowley writes *The Book of Law*, the foundational manuscript for his religious movement Thelema.

1909 – Completion of Waterhouse's painting *Lamia*.

1913 – Release of the film *The Vampire*.

1918 – Women achieve the right to vote in the UK.

1929 – Publication of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*.

1940 – Publication of C. L. Moore's *Fruit of Knowledge*.

1954 – Founding of Gardnerian Wicca.

1956 – First use of ultrasound in pregnancy.

1961 – Introduction of the contraceptive pill in the UK.

1963 – Publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.

1967 – Abortion legalized in the UK.

1970 – Publication of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.

1971 – First women's refuge in the UK opened.

1972 – Publication of Judith Plaskow's *The Coming of Lilith*.

1972 – Publication of Lilly Rivlin's article *Lilith*.

1975 – Sex Discrimination Act passed in the UK.

1976 – Launch of *Lilith* magazine.

1978 – First baby conceived by IVF born.

1987 – Publication of Octavia Butler's *Dawn*.

1980 – Charles Stewart travels to the Greek island of Naxos.
1987 – Release of *Fatal Attraction*.
1989 – Release of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.
1997 – First Lilith Fair.

2020 – Calida Rawles's exhibition *A Dream for My Lilith* opens.

1979 – Southall Black Sisters formed.

Introduction

Set in ancient Greece, John Keats' 1819 poem *Lamia* tells the story of a beautiful snake-woman – the eponymous Lamia – who falls in love with a handsome charioteer, Lycius. Setting out to ensnare him, Lamia disguises her serpentine nature, seduces him with her 'woman's lore', and conjures incredible riches out of nowhere so they can live in luxury together. The besotted Lycius decides to marry her, but his mentor Apollonius comes to the wedding and exposes Lamia for the snake she is. Her true form revealed, she vanishes with a shriek, leaving Lycius to die of heartbreak without her. It's a strange little poem, which stands or falls on whether the reader enjoys the ambiguity at its heart: even though Lamia is deceptive, even though she is a literal monster, even though their relationship is described as one of 'sweet sin', the sympathies of the poet seem to lie with the lovers, and the reader is left feeling that Apollonius should have minded his own business, and that Lamia and Lycius could have lived together quite happily, if a little sinfully, had they just been left alone.*

Keats did not invent Lamia, or the story: he lifted it wholesale from Greek myths. The legend of the serpentine Lamia disguising

* When he wrote *Lamia* Keats was in the midst of his own romance with Fanny Brawne, whose mother was firmly against their relationship given the state of Keats' finances and health. Presumably this made Keats a little more sympathetic to the lovers, and a little less in favour of strident parental figures preventing marriages (however sensible their reasons for doing so).

her snake-form to seduce the handsome young charioteer, and being exposed at her wedding by Apollonius, is first attested in around AD 100, in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius*. However, Keats's ambiguity is entirely absent in this earlier version – far from planning a happy life with her charioteer, Lamia admits she intended to eat him on their wedding night, and reveals she lures in attractive young men because their blood tastes the freshest.

Marriage was not the only method the ancient Lamia had for ensnaring her prey – another story describes her sitting by the sea with bare breasts and a serpentine tail, luring shipwrecked sailors to her with her beautiful face and chest before eating them alive. Lamia was so associated with seduction there was even an ancient Greek courtesan known by this name, but she was not just a danger to tasty young men – she also caused miscarriages, and murdered infants and their mothers. In most versions of the story this was because Lamia used to be a mortal woman who was beloved by Zeus and forced by an envious Hera to eat her own children. Turned monstrous by grief and guilt, Lamia went on to kill mothers and their babies out of uncontrollable jealousy that they had what she had lost.

Although Lamia is all but forgotten today, her legends are full of the echoes of more familiar myths. A scaly-tailed, bare-breasted seductress luring sailors to their doom has distinctly mermaid-esque undertones. A succubus with a habit of murdering infants and their mothers recalls the Jewish demon Lilith, the first wife of Adam. Fleeing the garden of Eden when she was refused equality with her husband, Lilith spent her time on the other side of the garden wall attacking children and pregnant women and seducing men. Lilith was also associated with snakes, and was frequently portrayed as the snake of Eden itself. In medieval art she appears as a hybrid monster with a serpent's tail instead of legs and the bare breasts and face of a beautiful woman, holding

out the apple to Eve and looking indistinguishable from any mermaid or Lamia.

There are suggestions of other, lesser-known, monsters in Lamia as well: she looks a lot like Melusine, a beautiful snake-woman with a knack for marrying into the noble families of medieval Europe (and best known now as the Starbucks logo); she has similarities with the Byzantine Gello, a snake-tailed ghost of a girl who had died still a virgin, and who murdered young mothers and children out of jealousy. There are hints, too, of Abyzou, a child- and mother-killing monster who was defeated by King Solomon. Lamia even looks a little like a particular version of the prophetic Sibyl who lived in an earthly paradise in an Italian mountain, and tried to hide her snake tail from her lovers.

The similarities between these serpentine, child- and mother-killing succubi are no coincidence. Legends of all these creatures were bound up in each other, were part of a single tradition that has spanned almost the entirety of human history. The purpose of this book is to trace this tradition, to understand how it was passed down through the centuries, how it changed, and why it was so prolific and so widespread. To see where it began, we have to go back nearly four millennia.

The figure that stares out from a Mesopotamian amulet of the early first millennium BC (that is, around 800 BC) looks drastically different from any Lamia or mermaid. Carved into an oblong of grey stone is a demon with the head of a lioness, the talons of a bird, and a human torso. Although her head and feet are side-on, she has twisted her body so her bare, pendulous breasts are facing outwards, and on either side of her a wild pig and a jackal are standing on their hind legs, preparing to

suckle on her teats. In each of her upraised hands, she clutches a snake. This is the Mesopotamian demoness Lamashtu – a monster attested in ancient Mesopotamian texts from as early as 2000 BC, who specialized in activities like choking babies on amniotic fluid and using her terrifyingly long fingers to reach inside women and drag out fetuses before their term.

We can trace a direct line of descent from this demon of the second millennium BC down to Lamia, Lilith and the mermaid, along with a multitude of other serpentine succubi. To get there we have to go via a snake-tailed ancestor of Richard the Lionheart, a child-eating wolf-monster of ancient Greece, a Roman spirit of headaches, the Queen of Sheba, a host of seductive vampires, and a rather sad species of virgin ghost called Lilitu. Some of the greatest literature and art has been inspired by these creatures, from Keats' poem to the best (and worst) of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings; from vivid collections of early Babylonian incantations to glittering medieval bestiaries and striking sets of Byzantine amulets; from the works of Hans Christian Andersen and Bram Stoker to the novels of Octavia Butler.

Spanning four thousand years, the demons described in this book represent one of the longest-surviving – and farthest-reaching – traditions of mankind, appearing in ancient Mesopotamia, in classical Greece and Rome, in Judaism, Christianity and (to some extent) Islam. They have touched four continents, picking up smatterings of different cultures and civilizations, tying themselves into other legends, constantly shifting and changing, but never so much that we cannot see and follow them through the millennia. They have proven so pervasive that in Jerusalem charms are still sold to ward off one of its most famous demons, Lilith; and as late as the 1980s inhabitants of the Greek islands were still working to drive away Lamia and Gello from mothers and their children. Even in cases where outright belief in these

creatures has ebbed away, they remain – like the mermaid and Lilith – hugely important cultural touchstones.

But demons are never just demons, and stories are never just stories. As Sarah Iles Johnston (who studied Lamia and Gello in ancient Greece) put it, they are 'clay with which people mold images of their fears', a way of expressing our anxieties – and, hopefully, driving them away.

The demons examined in this book are no different, and the vast majority of fears that they reflect concern women. In creatures like the alluring, deadly Lamia and Lilith, not to mention the murderous mermaids, we can clearly see men using our monsters to confront their fears of seductive women,* and their own anxieties around sex. These monsters were used to define womanhood in the negative, and to brand as demonic any woman who behaved in a manner deemed insufficiently feminine. Many of them have been repurposed in the twentieth century as feminist and LGBTQ icons, so that Lilith, fleeing the Garden of Eden when denied equality, has found herself recast as the ultimate icon of women's liberation, and the mermaid, clearly gendered despite a complete absence of genitals, has become a trans symbol.

Perhaps more importantly, the child- and mother-killing aspects of these demons were a way for women to explore and understand the risks of pregnancy and labour, as well as the ever-present threat of infant mortality. In a world where a third of children would die before they reached adulthood (and women were almost solely responsible for childcare) and around 8 per cent of women would die in childbirth (and many more would

* Seductive behaviour, of course, could cover anything from turning up naked and actively trying to persuade a man to have sex, to existing while a man was nearby.

find their bodies permanently damaged by the experience), the charms and spells used to drive the demons away would have afforded women a small measure of control in terrifying circumstances. Incantations could be recited over sick and dying children and amulets could be placed round their necks; there were spells to help pregnancies go smoothly, and to drive demons away from the mother. The placebo effect may well have led to some real-world effects from these rituals, but just as important is the sense of agency they must have given women at such dangerous points in their lives. These aspects of the demons, and the spells that could be worked to keep them away from the childbed or a sickly infant, were passed down from woman to woman for thousands of years. They survived well into the twentieth century, almost unchanged over the millennia – a testament to the desperation of women attempting to survive one of the most dangerous things you could do in the premodern world: bearing a child.

So while this book is the story of a demonic tradition – a family tree of seductive, child-killing monsters – it is also the story of women and womanhood: of the dangers of childbirth; of attitudes to female sexuality; of women fighting for their rights. This is the true 'woman's lore' – not just a tool of seduction as in Keats's *Lamia*, but a tradition kept alive by women, that tells the story of women's lives, from 2000 BC to the present day.

There are two caveats to all of this. The first of these is that I will be using terms like demons and monsters fairly interchangeably to refer to the creatures described in this book. This is despite the fact that in, say, ancient Greece, the figures discussed here would certainly not have been thought of as 'daemons' (which was then a term that specifically referred to guiding spirits) or that in Mesopotamia Lamashtu is technically a goddess. There is simply not space to closely examine the specific supernatural belief systems of every period under discussion. 'Demons' or

'monsters', as they're used here, should be understood in the modern sense of malignant supernatural entities.

The second caveat is that every one of the following chapters could be a book in itself. There is so much to say about these creatures (who are often largely unknown in the modern day), so many stories to tell, that it felt almost impossible to stop writing about some of them. But the purpose of this book is to trace the history of the entire tradition, so the deepest dives into each individual demonic figure had to be put aside in order to understand the whole. If you want to read more about these creatures – and I'd strongly suggest you do; they're absolutely fascinating – do explore the selected bibliography.

I should also like to issue a trigger-warning. Inevitably, this book contains discussion of infant and maternal death. These issues affect a huge portion of the population. I've tried to steer away from detailed descriptions of births gone wrong and dying children, but there are plenty of people who would not want to read this book, or who are at a stage in their life where it could be extremely upsetting.

With these warnings borne in mind, we can turn to the very first member of this demonic family, the grand matriarch of them all: Lamashtu.