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MacDonald Scholar in the Making

This is a new, occasional feature to *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*. In this section the journal highlights students at the undergraduate level who are writing criticism on George MacDonald. The future of MacDonald studies depends, to a large degree, on younger scholars interested in MacDonald.

The Fear and Fascination of the New Woman in George MacDonald's *Lilith*

Erika Ditzman

Published in 1895, *Lilith* presents George MacDonald's interpretation of the New Woman, a fictional archetype proposed by Sarah Grand's 1894 essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" during the *fin de siècle*, the transitional period from the Victorians to Modernism. Greatly debated for her resistance to Victorian norms, MacDonald's feminist rendition of Lilith, the rampant fiend who seduced and killed innocent men in medieval Jewish myth, asserts a fear of non-traditionalism at the turn of the century. Conversely, though, being representative of this nineteenth century feminist icon, Lilith suggests a fascination with the New Woman. MacDonald's *Lilith* posits a tension at the end of the nineteenth century, that between fear and fascination of the New Woman who threatened the normalcy of Victorian society.

Being challenged by a more contemporary view of the ideal woman, the semi-sacred mother figure of the Victorian era is disregarded and replaced by the New Woman of the *fin de siècle*. Beginning in the 1890s, the newly literate population was met with expanding markets, creating "commercial opportunities for the proliferation of the written word in the period, opportunities enabled by increased literacy and technological development in printing, marketing and transportation, and created a form of journalism which continues in the mass market" (Marshall 3). The newfound print culture brought controversial literature that questioned traditional values by debating morals, aesthetics, politics, and science. Most notably, the social status of women was challenged by the appearance of the New Woman.

First proposed in Sarah Grand's 1894 essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," the New Woman offered a controversial debate on the placement of women in British culture. Grand immediately confronts the

Bawling Brothers, those men who “howl down every attempt on our part of our sex to make the world a pleasanter place to live in,” and comes to the conclusion that “men generally are Bawling Brothers . . . which makes all men out to be fiends” (Grand 88-89). The Bawling Brotherhood, according to Grand, consists of just two types of men, both of which have absolutely no respect for women, taking advantage of their timidity and submission. The first is “he who is satisfied with the coy-kind of woman as being most convenient; it is the threat to any strike among his domestic cattle or more consideration that irritates him into loud and angry protests” while the other is “under the influence of the scum of our sex, who knows nothing better than women of that class in and out of society, preys upon them or runs himself or them, takes his whole tone from them, and judges us all by them” (89). Grand does not blame these men, though, as she explains that their perceptions are simply the result of their limited comprehension and cognitive abilities, never thinking “of looking up to where she had been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s Sphere, and prescribed the remedy” (89). The remedy, Grand explains, is patience and pity, helping the “child man” recognize his weakness: the genuine belief that he is perfect (Ledger 157). The New Woman addresses these men with “an air suggestive of the fact that she could tell them a thing or two if she took the trouble,” henceforth establishing a moral and intellectual superiority about women far beyond their Victorian restraints of motherhood (Character Note 80).

As a result of Grand’s “Woman Question,” novelists of the *fin de siècle* often incorporated the New Woman into their writing as a feminist symbol, criticizing the Victorian expectations of marriage and domesticity. *Fin de siècle* literature portrays a woman in masculine clothing, carrying her elbows away from her side, contributing “to [the] aggressive air of independence which finds its birth in the length of her stride” (Character Note 80). Her hands are steady and her brow serious, “for the brain behind is crammed as full of high projects as is the satchel she carries of pamphlets on the missions, rights, grievances and demands of her sex” (Eastwood 91). With “sudden gleams of electric fire, alternating with murky darkness” the New Woman speaks with authority and ambition, “content with nothing less than the reformation of the entire male sex” (91-92). Grand reinforces these attributes in her most notable novels: *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), and *The Beth Book* (1897). The novel form served as an outlet for Grand’s social complaints, allowing female readers to join in on the conversation and break what she called “the conspiracy of silence” (Huddleston). Grand’s old-fashioned criticisms, reflected in all three novels, accepted that marriage was a woman’s primary purpose, but denied the notion

that women lacked enough intelligence to make an educated decision about whom they could marry. Women are given the opportunity to select their own marital partners.

Eastwood's 1894 essay on "The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact" goes as far as to claim the fictional New Woman a syren, holding dominion over the male sex and "luring the easy victim to his destruction. She only has to strike a vibrating 'key-note' on her seductive lyre and behold he lies grovelling at her feet! And he likes it, for never does she let him feel bored a single minute. Whether in the capacity of lover or husband, she continues to hold him spell-bound" (90-91). Eastwood's comparison of the New Woman to a seductress resists the expectation of marriage, as sexual intimacy is not restricted to the husband, but open to lovers as well. Ella Hepworth Dixon's "Why Women are Ceasing to Marry" in 1899 attributes this resistance to the increase in women's education, eliminating the meek wife and replacing her with an intelligent, outspoken woman who is able to make her own decisions. Of the many *fin de siècle* writers, English feminist and social reformer Josephine Butler served as the direct link between George MacDonald's *Lilith* and the New Woman from which MacDonald reconfigured the Lilith myth. Participating in various public campaigns promoting women's rights, Butler most notably campaigned for a repeal of the 1864 Contagious Diseases Acts, a preventative of the spread of venereal disease that fined and detained prostitutes under suspicion of being diseased. Butler additionally founded Newnham college, Cambridge, as a college designed for women, giving them the opportunity of a higher education. Butler provided her good friend, MacDonald, insight and perspective into the emerging feminist movements of the *fin de siècle*.

Lilith first appears between 700 and 1000 CE as a Jewish myth in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, being mocked by an anonymous author for trying to defend her individual rights. Lilith's story proceeds to describe her creation by God, being formed from the same earth as Adam, and, therefore, his equal and co-ruler of the earth. Despite this apparent equality, Adam imposes sexual superiority over Lilith, taking the top position during sexual intercourse. Lilith becomes an abnormal woman and rejects Adam, explaining that "the two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth" and should, therefore, demonstrate equal status during this sexual act (Sira). Adam's refusal compels Lilith to become a demon, killing infants, seducing men in their sleep, and taking their sperm to create new demons. Being portrayed as a monster for her independence and self-reliance, uncommon traits among women, she spreads fear among men.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti constructs his painting, *Lady Lilith*, and poem, "Body's Beauty," in concordance with the Jewish myth. *Lady Lilith* pictures a seductive woman, with loose flowing hair and clothing that emphasize her

sexy figure, seemingly a sexual invitation for men to gaze upon her.



Figure 1: *Lady Lilith* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

“Body’s Beauty” accompanies Rossetti’s visual artistry, explaining Lilith “as a snake, a witch and an enchantress capable of ensnaring and ‘strangling’ men in her hair” (Bycroft). Rossetti writes:

(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,
 That, ere the snake’s, her sweet tongue could deceive,
 And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
 And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
 And, subtly of herself contemplative,
 Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
 Till heart and beauty and life are in its hold.
 The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
 Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
 And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
 Lo! as that youth’s eyes burned at thine, so went
 Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
 And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (Rossetti)

Lilith’s seductive image, promoting the male gaze and eventually entrapping them, is incorporated into MacDonald’s *Lilith* but refined to model the *fin de siècle*’s New Woman.

A close reading of George MacDonald’s *Lilith* confirms a tension at the end of the nineteenth century, that between fear and fascination of

the New Woman who threatened the normalcy of Victorian society. As a rendition of the New Woman, Lilith acts of her own volition, freeing herself from societal expectation and reliance by dominating men. Although Lilith is not specifically identified until chapter XXX of the text, the various physical forms she takes prior are addressed and embody these overarching characteristics. Lilith's position of self-reliance is tested by MacDonald, though, as the main character, Vane, stumbles onto her cold and naked form. Vane attempts to revive her, feeding her ripe grapes and bathing her in "blessed water" (MacDonald 99). With a religious connotation, the grapes representative of wine, used as the blood of Christ in religious ceremony, and the water representative of holy water, MacDonald uses Christianity to control Lilith. In response, Lilith resists and retaliates, demonstrating her self-sufficiency in the form of a white leech that sucks Vane's "blood at a dangerous rate . . . yielding to life" (105). By feeding on him, Lilith gathers strength enough to resume domination over men and force Vane into submission. Vane, hypnotically transfixed, promises, "I will be your slave!" (110). The connection between the white leech and woman is made evident when "she drew down [his] face to hers, and her lips clung to [his] cheek. A string of pain shot somewhere through [him], and pulsed" (110). These two beings are one and the same; two of the many forms Lilith takes.

Lilith is later revealed as an evil queen, a powerful female figure who rejects the central concept of motherhood expected of women during the Victorian era. Threatened by a prophecy, foretelling her undoing by the hands of her daughter, Lilith uses her high-ranking status to eliminate any potential that the prophecy will be fulfilled, henceforth rejecting women's traditional role. Vane quickly comes to realize that this queen is the woman he had rescued, who in return struck, scorned, and left him when she was "no longer in need" of his blood as nourishment (130). His deductions are quickly confirmed when Lilith once more dominates him. Vane finds the evil queen "standing above [him] on the bed . . . Her mouth wore a look of satisfied passion; she wiped from it a streak of red," and becomes domesticated by Lilith, serving as a "tame animal for her to feed upon; a human fountain for a thirst demoniac" (133). Lilith disappears out the door with the swing of a tail, connecting the evil queen, not only to the leech but to the spotted leopardess prowling the kingdom. Intertwining these various forms of Lilith throughout MacDonald's text promotes a woman's freedom of versatility, assuming whatever identity she so chooses.

Lilith's actions may seem immoral but are necessary to break free from the traditional expectations of the Victorian era. Chapter XXIX titled "The Persian Cat" reveals Mr. Raven as Adam, who recounts his creation and the "downfall" of his first wife, Lilith:

Lilith, when you came here on the way to your evil will, you thought

into whose hands you were delivering yourself! — Mr. Vane, when God created me — not out of Nothing, as say the unwise, but out of His own endless glory — He brought me an angelic splendour to be my wife: there she lies! For her first thought was power; she counted it slavery to be one with me, and bear children for Him who gave her being. One child, indeed, she bore; then, puffed with the fancy that she had created her, would have me fall down and worship her! Finding, however, that I would but love and honour, never obey and worship her, she poured out her blood to escape me, fled to the arm of the aliens, and soon had so ensnared the heart of the great Shadow, that he became her slave, wrought her will, and made her queen of Hell. . . . (147-148)

Lilith rightfully blames Adam for who she has become, being oppressed by the expectation that she must become a mother, producing and nurturing God's children, and serve Adam as a compliant, submissive wife. Lilith, though, "will not be made any longer" (202). Adam's expectations of Lilith reflect those of Victorian women. Lilith's resistance to the norm emulates the New Woman.

The fear and fascination of New Woman is clearly evident in Lilith's refusal of religious repentance by which MacDonald attempts to empower her via her monstrous "conversion" (which takes place outside the text), and yet tame her with Christianity. Vane, with assistance from Lilith's daughter, Lona, captures Lilith and takes her to Mara, who attempts to force the demoness into repentance. Lilith sees herself in the Hell of her self-conscious and Mara explains that "the central fire of the universe is radiating into her knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge of what she is" (201-202). Lilith henceforth sees the "monster" she had created of herself. This is short-lived, though, as defiance manifests in the form of a closed hand. To submit entirely, the fist must be opened and, therefore, must proceed to the house of death to become "good." With little success, Adam finally chops off Lilith's closed hand, allowing a beautiful one to grow in its place and send her to sleep. MacDonald forces submission upon Lilith, who does not truly repent, as it is not of her free will. Repentance must be an individual choice. Without genuine regret or remorse, it cannot exist, nor can commitment to changing oneself for the better. Lilith is therefore imprisoned in sleep, existing between monster and angel. Her transformation toward "good" is not complete, as her resistance persists to reinforce the New Woman.

By producing *Lilith*, MacDonald became a part of the cultural debate over the New Woman, acknowledging that women are sexually aware, possess emotional and intellectual capabilities, and have the power of expression. MacDonald asserts that women, who are unrealized as brave, witty, and sexually aware, are not inferior to men, but superior, henceforth

positing the tension between fear and fascination of the New Woman at the turn of the century.

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