

Incubus/Succubus

Incubi (masculine) and succubi (feminine) are demonic beings (see **Demon**) that seek sexual union with humans of the opposite sex. The words “incubus” and “succubus,” from Latin, literally mean “one who lies on” and “one who lies under,” respectively. In most traditions, the goal is to generate either demon children or humans with warped natures of some sort. For the purposes of this entry, this will exclude sexual liaisons with primary gods, which often result in demigod children (like Heracles). It is necessary, however, to recognize that in many traditions the exact dividing line between primary gods and the lesser figures that populate the supernatural world are hazy.

Significant characters in mythology are often given a divine parent, partly to explain why they are able to do things of which regular mortals are incapable. Not all come from primary deities, however, and morally ambiguous characters are all the more likely to come from lesser spiritual entities, or even demons. So, for example, Gilgamesh’s father was a supernatural being named Lilu, who was a lower-level god whose role was to impregnate human women. He was, for all appearances, the Sumerian equivalent of an incubus (Irdu lili was another). There were succubus-like equivalents in Sumerian texts: Lilitu and Ardit lili (“lil” means “air, wind”). In Genesis 6, the Nephilim (usually translated as “**giants**”) were similarly fathered by “the sons of God” (called the “watchers” in later Jewish literature). The difference lies in that whereas Gilgamesh’s engendering was approved by the Sumerian deities, the actions of “the sons of God” met with divine disapproval, and may have been the root cause of the flood.

Excepting the Virgin Mary, Christian and Jewish thought would consider all such human-supernatural unions inappropriate and assign them to the demonic world. Medieval Christians

came to call all children of such unions “cambions” (related to Proto-Celtic *kamb-* [“crooked, bent”]). Famous cambions from fiction and legend include **Caliban** from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610-11), and Merlin of Arthurian legend (according to Geoffrey of Monmouth).

Cambions must, of course, come from the union of incubi with human women, since succubi are presumably unable to have human children. Catholic theology from the time of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) did not believe that demon seed could impregnate human women either, so a double process was required in which a succubus collected semen from a human male, which was then used to impregnate a human female. Aquinas believed that the demons were hermaphroditic (see **hermaphrodite**), so that the same demon could perform both functions. Others came to disagree, asserting (as does the *Malleus Maleficarum* [1436]) that the demonic world was gendered, in which case two demons and some sort of transfer method was required to complete the transaction. The process somehow damaged the human male contribution such that the resulting children were marred—physically or spiritually—thus finding reasons in a single explanation for the existence of both birth defects and nasty people.

The Jewish community had the equivalent of incubi and succubi, but not cambions. Rather, sex with demons, male or female, resulted in demon children. The most famous succubus was **Lilith**, queen of demons. She later came to be viewed as the first wife of Adam, but in earlier traditions she functions more like a second wife. After their expulsion from Eden, Adam and Eve separated for 130 years, during which time both were visited by supernatural lovers—Adam by Lilith (Erubin 18b) and Eve by unnamed incubi. Numerous demon children ensued. The classes of sexual demons are called “lilin” and “liliot” (plural forms, male and female respectively). Besides Lilith, Samael (**the Devil**) has three other succubus wives: Naamah, Agrat bat Mahlat, and Eisheth Zenunim. Agrat had mated with King David and produced Ashmodai

(Asmodeus in Greek), prince of demons, who is portrayed trying to continue the family tradition in the book of Tobit (unsuccessfully, as it turns out).

Liliths (collectively), while they usually mate with humans at night, through dreams, nocturnal emissions, or masturbation, may also collect semen from marital intercourse, if the couple does not elevate it above base desires (and with the lights out).

In the Latin Vulgate translation of Isaiah, the single biblical occurrence of the word “Lilith” is translated “Lamia” although the concept of Lamia has its own history in Greek thought.

LAMIA

In Greek myth, Lamia had been a Libyan queen and paramour of Zeus. Jealous Hera compelled her to kill and eat her own children so she, driven mad, set out to murder other women’s children (Horace, *Ars Poetica* 1.340; c. 18 B.C.E.). In time her name came to refer to a class of **vampire**-like females who, like **Empusa** of Greek mythology, devoured young men, sexually and literally (Philostratus, *Apollonius* 4.25; 217-238 C.E.). Since Lilith also had a reputation for killing babies, making the connection between the two did not seem that far-fetched. Medieval representations of lamia in art often provided them with a snake’s torso (sometimes with two tails). This may have influenced the appearance of female-headed serpents in many renaissance paintings of the temptation of Adam and Eve, although there are also reasons to connect the serpent with Lilith.

QARIN(A)

In Islam, the qarîn is a sort of demonic alter-ego that accompanies each person through life. These entities are part of pre-Islamic tradition, and are mentioned in the Koran, although nothing there refers to their sexual roles. Tradition has it, however, that men get a qarîna (feminine) and women a qarîn (masculine) that comes into being at, or soon after, the person's birth. Part of this spirit companion's role is sexual, with the resulting coupling taking place in dreams. Such unions may result in children, presumably demonic. They are jealous of their human's natural spouse, and the male variety is jealous of its partner's children (and will sometimes kill them). A very powerful qarîna may prevent her man from marrying (See **Koran, monsters in**).

NATURALIST EXPLANATIONS

In many ways attempts to explain the phenomena as a natural phenomenon fundamentally miss the religious dynamic. Belief in evil, personified in supernatural villains, is a part of most religious systems. People tend to be protective of their sexuality, so having a class of supernatural sexual assailants seems to be a natural development. Particularly where sexuality is seen as especially sinful, such as in a monastic community, some explanation may be needed for such things as erotic dreams and nocturnal orgasms.

In the Chiloé province of Chile, an incubus-like creature called a "trauco" magically seduces women (sometimes in their sleep, sometimes not). Since the trauco's lure cannot be

resisted, women are held blameless if he impregnates them. Other cultures have similar stories.¹ As in the case of the trauco, it can be convenient in some societies to have a ready-made explanation for unexpected pregnancies, particularly among unmarried women. The victims of incubi in most cultures may not even be aware that they have been attacked, or not until it is too late, so they cannot usually be blamed (although the inquisition did just that in the case of “**witches**” who they felt were willing participants). This could function as an easy explanation for sleep-rape or for girls unwilling to identify their lovers. In some cases, the lover or rapist could have sufficient social standing, so that prosecution was undesirable to the community leaders. In any case, the demons could disguise themselves as real people, such that an apparent malefactor could be justifiably regarded as innocent.

A popular explanation is to associate these attacks with sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is usually characterized by the sense of a presence, a feeling of weight on the chest (with difficulty breathing), and panic. It is sometimes accompanied by a vision/hallucination of the assailant. As the name implies, it is associated, with waking from a light sleep. However, other than the fact that women usually perceive their attackers as male, there is rarely any sexual component, and it may be argued that such sexual experiences are something other than sleep paralysis, which is more likely related to “mares” in Germanic folklore (and other names elsewhere). Supernatural sexual assault is *always* perceived as sexual (when it is perceived at all). This is not to argue that it defies psychological explanation, just that sleep paralysis is not the correct one.

¹ Some other variations: Along the Amazon, the boto (a river dolphin) is thought to take male human form at night and seduce women. It is held responsible for both unwanted pregnancies and mysterious disappearances. The Hungarian lidérc can function in various ways, but one of these ways is as either incubus or succubus. The gancanagh (Ireland) is an incubus that seduces women. He addicts them to himself through a skin secretion, often driving them mad. Another possible ancient Greek parallel is in the practice of incubation—sleeping in the temple of a god hoping to receive some boon. Sex with the god in a dream was not unknown. Aesculapius was the most popular such boon-giver (healing).

FICTION

In 1492, Angelo Poliziano published his Latin poem, *Lamia*, but it was John Keats's poem of the same name (1819) that inspired artists and writers of the romantic era. The story attempts to redeem the main character of the Greek myth (Philostratus's version) described above. It was followed by Honoré de Balzac's short story, "The Succubus" (1837), about the 1271 trial of a succubus disguised as a woman. Dante Gabriel Raphael popularized Lilith in two poems ("Lilith," 1868, and "Eden's bower," 1869). "Lilith" was accompanied by a painting. Various academic-style painters, such as John Collier (1850-1934), attempted to portray the heroine of Keats's *Lamia*. 1899 brought an opera by August Enna (libretto by Helge Rode), based on the Greek myth, and reused the now-popular title.

In the twentieth century, a significant number of tales use the terms "incubus" or "succubus" without reference to the traditional meaning. In these stories, such a character is likely simply to be a demonic character, or a vampire (as in Marion Crawford's 1905 short story, "For the Blood is the Life"). Exceptions include the following: British poet Arthur Symonds makes Lilith the mother of Lamia in "The Avenging Spirit" (1920). In his 1962 short story, "The Likeness of Julie," Richard Matheson follows Balzac in having his succubus character take on flesh in the seduction of a teenage boy. Of course, human-devil cross-breeding is the theme of Ira Levin's 1967 *Rosemary's baby* (and *Son of Rosemary* in 1997) provided we consider the Devil an incubus. Poul Anderson's novel, *Operation chaos* (1971), has a hermaphroditic sex demon try to seduce both members of a pair of newlyweds. In Kenneth Johnson's *The Succubus* (1979), a man suffers under the wiles of Lilith, and Piers Anthony populates Hell with succubi (*For Love of Evil*, 1988). A witch calls on a succubus to persuade the hero to do her bidding in

Orson Scott Card's *Treasure Box* (1996). Richelle Mead regales us with a series of books (six, so far) in which an ordinary girl seems to have a side-job working as succubus (complete with demonic wings and tail) beginning with *Succubus Blues* (2007). Lacey Reah introduces us to a bi-sexual succubus in *Fireflies* (2011), and Jackie Kessler's "Hell on Earth" series (2007-present) currently has five books (so far) on a succubus leaving her career in Hell for a more upright job as an exotic dancer.

In the movies, *Rosemary's Baby* (above) became a film directed by Roman Polanski in 1968, but before that, in 1966, *Incubus* (Leslie Stevens) gave us the story of a succubus who falls in love and turns to God. In *Devil's Nightmare* (Jean Brismée, 1971) lost tourists are seduced and killed by a succubus. 2006 brought *Succubus: The Demon* (Sami Haavisto), in which a man tries to raise his deceased wife and gets a succubus instead. *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009) vaguely recalls Matheson's "The Likeness of Julie," in which a succubus-cheerleader goes on a boyfriend killing spree.

There are two orchestral symphonic poems related to succubi by Edward MacDowell ("Lamia," Op. 29, 1888), and Frederick Zeck ("Lamia," 1926). There is also a popular goth/pagan band named Inkubus Sukkubus (formed in 1989) and a rock band just named Incubus (formed in 1991). **Alan Humm**

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