**Succubi & Society:**

**A Study of *The West Indian Tale***

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Demons appeared throughout literature and history, and often come with discussions of exorcism, the ‘devil’s minions’, or even statan-worship. However, she-demons, also known as succubi, play a particularly dichotomous role in early modern Jewish literature. They are at once presented as pious and feminine, though erotic and dominant. *The West Indian Tale,* a Yiddish textbelieved to be written in 1665 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, features a royal succubus that questions many of the assumptions made throughout scholarly work about Jewish succubi from the time period. The succubus from *The West Indian Tale,* who remains unnamed, represents this juxtaposition while further complicating it; she is at once is powerful and all-knowing, yet truly commands the man she takes as her husband, and then releases him to go back to his wife.

Once upon a time, there was a man who, though Jewish, knew nothing of his own religion. So begins the story of the man from *The West Indian Tale*.[[1]](#footnote-1) This man marries a woman who convinces him to become pious and religious. After initial struggle, he becomes so pious that he looses all of his possessions and wealth, and must leave his wife with the rabbi, and go out on his own. After wondering into woods, he happens upon a small kingdom. There, he finds a queen, a succubus, who commands an entire battalion. She invites him to her bed, and he shows no hesitation. He eventually stays with her for almost seven years, and they have a son, Solomon. However, she sees his sadness over his previous wife, and allows him to leave her in search of his first wife. He eventually finds his first wife after some encounters with the law, but is only successful because of the assistance of his half-demon son. The succubus, though not the central character, plays a critical role in the lives of both this man and woman, even as she enters and exits their lives peacefully. While at once unique compared to other stories of the same time, she also continues the same motifs and themes found in other Jewish she-demons.

This succubus, like many she demons in Jewish literature, is more than just a threat to male dominance and sexuality. Jeremy Dauber, whose book *In the Demon’s Bedroom* studies such texts, notes the transition of succubi from just a threat to male sexuality and dominance to much more. He even goes as far as to say that “the demon world and demon marriage….focus on the deleterious consequences of breaking oaths and commitments rather than on the erotic aspects of the marriage, point the way forward to looking at demonic marriage as something other than the marriage itself.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This interpretation of she demons in Yiddish literature is especially apt when considering *The West Indian Tale.* The focus of the short story is on a man who becomes undeniably pious by society’s standards, yet he breaks his marriage contract, and further, his societal contract, because of a succubus. He leaves his first wife, who encouraged him to return to Judaism, and leaves his community and Jewish society for seven years. Though he does leave to return to his wife, it is only at her allowance and encouragement. Further, the man is rewarded for returning to his wife by becoming wealthy and returning to his human wife The story even ends with a lesson for its readers , “Thus everyman should pray to God to give him a wonderful wife. Let him study the holy writings and earn the privledge of entering Paradise, and he should have The succubus of this tale upsets the marriage contract, and threatens the role of the male as the head of the family.

As Dauber mentions and as do many other scholars, succubi are often portrayed as men seducers who want to cause strife yet teach lessons both men and women alike; “she-demon’s are presented here as primarily figures of sexual seduction, who both literally exist and also serve as tropes to represent the desire for unsanctioned sexual behavior.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Lilith, arguably the ‘original’ she demon of Jewish literature, who is mentioned in relation to Adam in the creation story, was painted as such.[[4]](#footnote-4) She was created from the same earth as Adam, as opposed to Eve, who was created from his rib. Lilith, Adam’s first wife, eventually became known as an evil seducer of men, whose demonic offspring fill the world. Furthermore, to ensure the dominion of her children, she strangles babies in their sleep. Succubi such as this cause evil and harm to be sent out into the world (literally by offspring) but also by ruining the morals of individuals engaging in unsanctioned sexual acts. The demonic love story of *The West Indian Tale*  moves away from these norms. The man, though seduced, does leave the demon. Furthermore, the child, Solomon,

1. Anonymous. "The West Indian Tale." In *No Star Too Beautiful: Yiddish Stories from 1382 to the Present*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, 56-63. New York: Norton, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dauber, Jeremy. *In the Demon's Bedroom.* 145-147. Connecticut: Yale University, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dauber, Jeremy. *In the Demon's Bedroom.* 143. Connecticut: Yale University, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Encyclopaedia Judaica: Lilith* Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 13. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA n.d.) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)