

LILITH THE DEMON, MEDIA EVOLUTION AND THE ORIGINS OF GENDERED CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

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REVIEW ARTICLE / DOI: 10.20901/ms.17.33.2 / SUBMITTED: 15.12.2025.

ABSTRACT *This article adopts a genealogical approach to character assassination, tracing the migration of gendered reputational destruction across symbolic regimes from the Edenic demonization of Lilith to a posthuman virtual regime characterized by its permanent visibility and diffused agency. Drawing on rhetorical theories of scapegoating, liminality, and the state of exception, as well as feminist and media studies scholarship, the article argues that character assassination functions as a symbolic media infrastructure that stabilizes sociopolitical order by externalizing collective anxiety and anger. Lilith is the prototype scapegoat, a liminal subject whose transgression was the first to be coded as existential threat to humanity, thus making “sin” the outcome of female autonomy, and this is the basis of gendered reputational violence deployed against women.*

KEYWORDS

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, GENDER, LILITH MYTH, MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE,
DIGITAL JUDGMENT, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

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Note: The author confirms that the theoretical framework, analysis, and conclusions in this article are the product of the author's original scholarly judgment. Technology-Enabled Intelligence (TE-I) tools were used in a limited, assistive role for editing, structural clarity, citation formatting, and Croatian translation of the Abstract. The author retains full responsibility for the content and scholarly integrity of the manuscript.

INTRODUCTION

Lilith is the first recognizable target of character assassination in human cultural memory, and she is female. In her demonization, femininity, and deviance become symbolically intertwined. Her refusal of patriarchal authority transforms *woman* into a figure of danger, disorder, and transgression, and establishes a symbolic pattern that persists across centuries of myth, religion, politics, and media.

Ancient Jewish traditions associated with the Enochic corpus preserve some of the earliest surviving accounts of pre-historic Lilith. Within these narratives, she refuses the rules that structure the Garden of Eden, and she leaves the Garden of her own volition. Subsequent narratives recast her as a demon, involuntarily outcast, a threat to cosmic order.

The significance of this transformation extends far beyond a single mythic figure. The suspicion attached to Lilith becomes culturally portable and plastic, reappearing across millennia, narratives and ever-evolving media forms. Female autonomy enters the symbolic imagination shrouded in a dense shadow of suspicion inherited from mythic eras. The genealogy traced here follows the transmission of stigmatized female agency across changing media environments from mythic antiquity to the present.

This essay investigates the origins of character assassination. The demonization of Lilith establishes a persistent symbolic pattern in which female deviance originates as a moral threat to paradise. And, as a result, the reputational destruction of that female becomes a mechanism of social order. Character assassination predates modern media. What media alter are the conditions of circulation, visibility, scale, speed, persistence, and audience reach across changing media environments. However, the underlying CA template itself remains stable. The demonization of Lilith provides the earliest identifiable formulation of character assassination. And the Ur-target of that reputational violence is female.

Character assassination is typically understood as a pathology of modern political life. It is associated with negative campaigning, with scandal-driven journalism, with public shaming, and with digital harassment. Such interpretations locate reputational destruction within contemporary media systems but overlook the deeper symbolic history arising around the gendered target; the female is the marked gender and the standard against which deviance is measured and stigmatized.

LILITH, THE FEMALE UR-DEMON

Lilith represents the earliest recognizable appearance of the symbolic pattern examined in this essay. In her demonization, female refusal to submit to patriarchal authority becomes deviance, and her reputational destruction becomes a control

mechanism for social order. The significance of Lilith lies in the durability of the symbolic pattern established through her transformation from autonomous human figure within established Order to female demonic threat when she deviates from it.

In early mythological traditions, she is not a marginal demon but a cocreator of the primordial human order who insists on equality. Her refusal to submit ruptures Eden's static perfection and inaugurates humanity's movement out of immobile atemporal perfection into the time-bound conditions of the embodied lifeworld where differences, labor, mortality, conflict, and moral choice come into existence. And the cost of this transition is displaced almost entirely onto the Lilith configuration of the female. What is structurally necessary for human becoming is rhetorically recoded into narratives of female deviance.

Bataille's account of transgression clarifies why this recoding is not incidental but necessary. For Bataille (1986), transgression does not abolish the taboo that condemns it. It "completes it" (p. 63). Insofar as Eden was perfection, transgression ("sin") was the ingredient necessary in the quickening of human history, the movement into diachronic/recorded time.

Yet humanity must simultaneously punish transgression in order to preserve symbolic order. Lilith's demonization thus performs this function *avant la lettre*. Her refusal supplies the energy for movement while her punishment secures patriarchal coherence, her expulsion thus accomplishing two symbolic tasks simultaneously – preserving Edenic perfection/patriarchal order while instigating and perpetuating history itself.

This transformation is both punitive and productive. Lilith's demonization preserves the essence of mythic order by purging it of contradiction, simultaneously supplying a durable symbolic template for future acts of reputational destruction. From this point forward, *character assassination* becomes one of the primary technologies through which power manages *liminality*. Paradoxically, the one who disrupts harmony is branded as the embodiment of danger rather than the mother-figure of the human story.

This essay treats myth not as allegory but as *media infrastructure*, as the earliest site where reputational violence is formalized as governance. As Eliade (2005) emphasizes, myth does not merely symbolize belief but narrates a "sacred history" that structures social reality itself (p. 5), making it an appropriate analytic site for tracing the origins of reputational governance. From demonological narratives, the logic evolves into juridical systems, where accusation precedes evidence; into religious institutions, where heresy is moralized; into early modern witch trials, where female autonomy is criminalized and annihilated; into mass media, where scandal becomes spectacle; and now, into contemporary digital platforms, where outrage is automated and exposure becomes permanent and constantly circulating, technologically amplifying itself. Each media regime alters the speed, scale, and scope of character assassination without altering its underlying grammar.

Media do not create character assassination. They alter the conditions under which it circulates: mythic narrative, religious teaching, juridical spectacle, print culture, mass broadcasting, and digital platforms differ substantially as commutative environments, yet each consistently transmits the conversion of female autonomy into social threat. Although the medium evolves, the underlying stigmatization of the “female transgressor” remains stable.

FROM RITUAL SACRIFICE TO REPUTATIONAL DESTRUCTION

Classical *Scapegoating* theories provide rhetorical (Burke, 1939, and continuing thereafter), psychological (Allport, 1943) and anthropological (Girard, 1986) accounts of the ways in which societies seek to preserve coherence under conditions of internal strain by displacing collective anxiety, guilt, and conflict onto a designated figure. While often invoked colloquially, scapegoating is not simply an act of blaming but a *structural mechanism* through which social order is symbolically restored by transforming diffuse crises into a unitary moral narrative embodied in a single figure, the scapegoat.

Scapegoating as Symbolic Social Technology

René Girard's work provides the most systematic articulation of this mechanism. For Girard, scapegoating arises from mimetic rivalry that threatens to dissolve social distinctions; violence is resolved not by eliminating its causes but by unifying the community against a victim who is rendered responsible for disorder. As Girard writes, “The surrogate victim is accused of crimes that are indistinguishable from the crisis itself” (Girard, 1986, p. 16). The scapegoat's destruction restores order not because guilt has been addressed, but because violence has been redirected and socially sanctioned.

Importantly, Girard emphasizes that scapegoats are rarely chosen at random. They are typically marked by *difference, marginality, or symbolic ambiguity*, making them credible vessels for projected blame. “The victim is selected not for what he has done, but for what he represents,” Girard explains, noting that persecutory unanimity depends upon a figure who can plausibly absorb collective hostility (Girard, 1986, p. 25). Psychological approaches converge with this account, as Allport (1943) observed that scapegoating intensifies under social stress by redirecting frustration toward a convenient target to protect dominant groups from confronting actual responsibility.

Rhetorical theorists have further demonstrated how scapegoating operates through language and symbolic framing. Kenneth Burke's analysis of *Mein Kampf* identifies the scapegoat as a rhetorical *condensation symbol* through which social contradictions are simplified and moralized. Burke observes that Hitler's strategy depended upon “unifying hatred” by projecting internal conflict outward, transforming social failure into moral contamination embodied by the Other (Burke, 1989, p. 193).

Recent scholarship in character assassination and reputational politics further extends scapegoating theory into contemporary *media environments*. Keohane et al. (2025) demonstrate that character assassination disproportionately targets women and racialized figures, functioning not merely as political attack but as a mechanism of moral boundary enforcement. Female targets, they argue, are routinely framed as embodiments of disorder, duplicity, or illegitimacy-traits that echo the symbolic logic of the scapegoat rather than evidence-based critique (Keohane et al., 2025, pp. 283–285).

Taken together, these traditions reveal scapegoating as a *transhistorical symbolic technology* rather than context-bound practices. What changes across epochs is not the logic of scapegoating but the media infrastructure through which it operates. Ritual sacrifice, juridical punishment, mass-mediated scandal, and algorithmic outrage each instantiate the same structural function whereby social crisis is converted into reputational destruction that appears necessary, moral, and restorative.

This framework is essential for understanding Lilith not as a mythic anomaly but as a prototype – an early articulation of how female transgression becomes the symbolic site upon which social order is negotiated, preserved, and violently enforced.

Original Transgressor, First Scapegoat

This essay situates Lilith as the foundational case study in *gendered reputational destruction*. Drawing on Kenneth Burke's (1939, 1984, 1989) theory of symbolic *naming* and the scapegoat mechanism, Arnold van Gennep's (1960) and Victor Turner's (1969) theories of liminality, Giorgio Agamben's (1998, 2005) concept of the *state of exception*, Michel Foucault's (1977) analytics of *disciplinary visibility*, contemporary character assassination theory, and *feminist "killjoy" theory*, the analysis demonstrates that Lilith is not merely expelled from order – she is made to carry its contradictions throughout human history.

The essay's intervention is deliberately *genealogical*. It does not claim that any single theoretical tradition anticipates the present argument in full. Burke theorizes scapegoating without platforms; Agamben theorizes exception without gendered reputational life; Foucault theorizes discipline without mythic origin; feminist theory names demonization without tracing its full symbolic genealogy; and media studies documents outrage without situating it within a sacred grammar of expulsion. What appears here as a single *transhistorical mechanism* – gendered character assassination as both moral infrastructure and media system – only becomes visible when these partial insights are read in relation to one another through the figure of Lilith.

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AS SYMBOLIC MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE

Contemporary scholarship on character assassination (CA) often defines it as a strategic communicative act: CA is a deliberate effort to damage a target's moral standing by highlighting alleged wrongdoing, hypocrisy, or deviance. Within political

communication and media studies, CA is typically analyzed in relation to campaigns, scandals, disinformation, and reputation management. While these approaches correctly identify CA as a mediated phenomenon, they tend to under-theorize its symbolic depth. Character assassination is not merely a tactic deployed within politics; it is a *symbolic media technology* through which politics itself is stabilized.

From Action to Essence: The Core Mechanism of Character Assassination

Character assassination operates by collapsing allegedly unseemly or forbidden behavior into fixed moral identity. Rather than addressing conduct, context, or circumstance, it transforms discrete acts into enduring markers of character, rendering the targeted subject legible only through a framework of alleged contamination. This conversion performs crucial stabilizing work by locating disorder in a person rather than a system. Thus, character assassination restores symbolic coherence without resolving the contradictions that actually produced the conflict.

This conversion performs a crucial social function. Complex political, economic, and cultural tensions – often diffuse, abstract, and structurally produced – are rendered intelligible by being attached to a person. Character assassination simplifies controversy or uncertainty by localizing it. The target becomes a symbolic container for anxieties that would otherwise be difficult to name or resolve. Through this process, CA strategies direct attention away from the complexity of resolving systemic contradiction and toward individualized/gendered moral blame.

Scapegoating, Spectacle, and Ritualized Exposure

The equilibrium produced by CA is not accidental. It is ritualized. Drawing on rhetorical theory, CA can be understood as a modern instantiation of scapegoating, a symbolic process that allows communities to purge guilt and restore coherence by projecting disorder onto a designated figure. Kenneth Burke's *dramatistic* account of victimage is particularly instructive here. For Burke, a community externalizes its own tensions by transferring them onto a figure – the scapegoat – who can be punished. The scapegoat absorbs guilt, thus enabling the collective to imagine itself purified without confronting and rectifying its own complicity.

Character assassination performs this function within mediated environments. It creates what might be called *ritualized exposure*, in which accusations are publicly repeated across platforms, formats, and audiences until they saturate the target's public persona with moral blame. This accusatory deployment against a targeted individual is embodied in slogans and memes. *Meme culture* further intensifies character assassination by inviting participatory repetition by online communicants that stabilizes moral judgment through circulation (Shifman, 2013, p. 18). Repetition is essential since a single accusation rarely suffices. CA requires circulation through headlines, commentary, parody, memes, and now algorithmic recommendation to demean the target's public selfhood.

Media systems not only transmit character assassination processes but also preserve and reactivate the symbolic association between female autonomy and social threat that has persisted across changing historical epochs and communicative forms. This process is intensified further through *spectacle*. *Carnavalesque* forms – ridicule, satire, grotesque exaggeration – play a central role in normalizing transgression against the target. Humor functions as moral insulation. It distances participants from the harm they enact while simultaneously expanding the audience. To laugh at the target is to participate in their symbolic degradation without assuming responsibility for it. As Bakhtin (1984) observed, carnival suspends ordinary moral hierarchies under the guise of play. In the context of CA, this suspension enables cruelty to masquerade as entertainment.

Importantly, CA does not require consensus. It requires recognizability. Even those who contest the accusation often contribute to its circulation by repeating the target's name alongside the alleged offense. This dynamic is particularly evident in digital environments, where visibility itself becomes punishment. Once a target's name is algorithmically linked to moral suspicion, reputational damage persists independently of resolution or correction. CA thus produces what might be called *temporal asymmetry*. Accusation circulates indefinitely, while exoneration – if it occurs at all – remains localized and ephemeral. Moreover, sociological research on gender and labeling confirms this asymmetry, showing that women's transgressions are "more likely to be interpreted as a reflection of character than of circumstance" (Schur, 1984, p. 12).

Asymmetrical Gendered Scapegoating

While CA affects all individuals, its deployment and consequences are unevenly distributed. Gender plays a decisive role in determining both who is targeted and the ways in which accusations are constructed and interpreted. Acts framed as assertive, visionary, or innovative performed by men are far more likely to be framed as pathological, immoral, or dangerous when performed by women.

Susan Bordo's (2018) analysis of Hillary Clinton's treatment in U.S. media as a presidential candidate provides a contemporary illustration of how gendered character assassination operates through scandal construction rather than evidentiary critique. Bordo argues that the Benghazi hearings and the email controversy functioned not as proportionate assessments of wrongdoing but as symbolic narratives assembled through "selective emphasis, repetition, and insinuation" (Bordo, 2017, p. 6). These episodes condensed diffuse cultural anxieties about female authority into reputational attacks that framed Clinton herself as the source of institutional failure. As Bordo notes, what was construed as criminal negligence in Clinton's case was routinely "excused, ignored, or normalized when practiced by male counterparts" (2017, p. 71) – a pattern that has recently become more visible in light of 2025 revelations regarding email use and classified material by male political figures.

Keohane et al.'s analysis of character assassination against Kamala Harris demonstrates the persistence of this gendered logic across electoral cycles. Harris, like Clinton, was

routinely targeted not for specific policy positions but for perceived deficiencies of temperament, legitimacy, or moral fitness – traits that collapse professional conduct into characterological judgment (Keohane et al., 2025). Together, Bordo and Keohane et al. show that contemporary gendered character assassination operates as a reputational scapegoating mechanism, whereby CA is less a response to transgression than a means of disciplining female political agency.

Male Heroism vs. Female Defiance

By offering women as privileged targets for reputational destruction, CA resolves a fundamental contradiction within patriarchal order. Female autonomy destabilizes hierarchies that depend on obedience, reproduction, and symbolic containment. Rather than confronting this instability directly, CA recodes autonomy as deviance. The woman who refuses – who speaks, leads, desires, or withdraws consent – is transformed into a threat to collective well-being. Through this transformation, CA converts existential anxiety into moral certainty.

This mechanism helps explain why character assassination is so persistent, even when it appears irrational or excessive. Its function is not to adjudicate truth but to restore symbolic coherence. In moments of crisis – political upheaval, economic instability, cultural change – CA intensifies because the need for symbolic resolution increases. The target becomes a stand-in for forces that cannot be easily controlled. Punishing the target produces the illusion of control.

Media systems amplify this dynamic by privileging conflict, personalization, and emotional intensity. News values favor scandal over structure and platforms reward engagement over nuance. In such environments, CA thrives not because audiences are uniquely malicious, but because attention is captured most effectively by moral drama, and moral drama requires villains.

This is where the distinction between *critique* and character assassination becomes crucial. Critique addresses one's actions, policies, or arguments; CA addresses one's being. Critique presumes the possibility of accountability and change, whereas CA fixes attention on the target's public persona and forecloses restorative possibilities. Once a target is defined by moral contamination, further evidence becomes irrelevant.

Understanding CA as symbolic media technology thus shifts the analytic focus. Rather than asking whether particular accusations are fair or accurate, the more consequential question becomes: *What work does reputational destruction perform for the social order that sustains it?* The next section turns to Lilith as the earliest figure through whom this genealogy is fully articulated. In her demonization, the mechanisms of scapegoating, liminality, and exception converge for the first time, producing a symbolic template that will endure for millennia.

LILITH: LIMINALITY, SCAPEGOATING, AND THE FIRST STATE OF EXCEPTION

Lilith occupies an exceptional ontological position in the symbolic history of Western culture; she is the first liminal (Agamben, 1998, 2005; Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960). She is neither fully inside nor fully outside the mythic order from which she is expelled. This threshold position – simultaneously foundational and excluded – marks her as a liminal subject in the strict anthropological sense. It is precisely this liminality that renders her dangerous, powerful, and ultimately indispensable to the symbolic economy of patriarchal order. Liminality, as theorized by van Gennep and Turner, designates transitional figures who disrupt stable categories and require ritual management. Lilith occupies this position at the level of myth. This autonomy renders her symbolically dangerous because it exposes the vulnerability of patriarchal hierarchy.

It is at this juncture that the scapegoat mechanism becomes operative. Kenneth Burke's dramaturgic theory (1938, 1989) of victimhood provides a powerful lens through which to understand Lilith's transformation from co-creator to demon. For Burke, scapegoating allows a community to displace its internal contradictions onto a symbolic victim, thereby restoring coherence without confronting the underlying conflict. The scapegoat absorbs guilt, anxiety, and disorder. Through ritualized punishment, the community imagines itself purified.

Surrogate Victimhood

"The surrogate victim is accused of crimes that are indistinguishable from the crisis itself" (Girard, 1986, p. 16). Lilith functions as the inaugural scapegoat of patriarchal cosmology. Her refusal exposes the critical contradiction at the core of Edenic order: equality between the genders is incompatible with patriarchal hierarchy. Rather than resolving this contradiction, the myth displaces it onto her figure. She becomes the bearer of disorder, with her autonomy refigured as an existential threat. In demonizing her, the myth absolves the patriarchal order of responsibility for its own instability. Guilt is transferred outward; authority is preserved.

This scapegoating is not incidental. It is constitutive. Lilith's demonization establishes the conditions that permit patriarchal order to present itself as natural, harmonious, and divinely sanctioned. The violence enacted against her is made necessary, and even benevolent, by allowing her continued existence. As the source of danger, the myth justifies her expulsion while simultaneously camouflaging the coercive nature of the order she rejects as divinely ordained.

Lilith as Subject in the Portal

At the same time, Lilith's expulsion inaugurates a second, equally consequential logic: the *state of exception*. Giorgio Agamben's formulation of the *exception* describes a condition in which the subject is excluded from the protection of law while remaining

subject to its force. The exception is neither inside nor outside the juridical order; it is a zone of exposure where violence becomes permissible without legal consequence.

Lilith inhabits this position with uncanny precision. Even though she was expelled from Eden and stripped of protection, she remains bound to the order that casts her out. Her punishment is not generated through due process and does not create closure. She becomes a killable, narratively disposable demon-figure. The exception applied to her is permanent, and there is no path to reintegration. She becomes a condensation symbol of female transgression. Kenneth Burke's account of *symbolic selection* clarifies how condensation operates: symbols do not reflect reality neutrally but select and organize it according to motives (Burke, 1966).

As a condensation symbol, Lilith evokes complex and often contradictory emotional responses without requiring explicit narrative coherence. As Edelman (1964) explains, condensation symbols "evoke emotions associated with a situation without requiring detailed explanation or analysis" (p. 6), allowing a single figure to carry dense ideological meaning across contexts and epochs. Lilith's power as a condensation symbol lies precisely in this function: political language does not merely describe her transgression but constitutes it. As Edelman (1964) notes, "political language is political reality" (p. 10), enabling demonization to operate as governance rather than interpretation.

What is crucial here is that Lilith's exception (following Agamben) is not declared in response to an emergency. It is declared in response to refusal. Her act – insisting on equality – does not threaten survival, but it does threaten hierarchy. The state of exception thus emerges not as a response to chaos but as a preemptive mechanism for securing order against the possibility of transformation. In this sense, Lilith's exile prefigures the logic by which women who refuse prescribed roles are repeatedly subjected to disproportionate punishment across history.

Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power further clarifies how this exposure operates. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the transition from sovereign punishment to diffuse regimes of surveillance and normalization. Power, in this account, no longer needs to announce itself through spectacular violence; instead, it operates through visibility, assessment, and internalization, with the subject becoming an object of constant judgment.

Lilith's demonization anticipates this logic at a mythic level. Once expelled, she is rendered permanently visible as a warning. Her name circulates in the earliest demonological and biblical texts and persists today in digital information flows as a signal of danger. She becomes a pedagogical object through which obedience is taught and deviation punished. Visibility itself becomes disciplinary. The myth does not simply remove her; it preserves her as an example.

This preservation is essential. A scapegoat who disappears entirely cannot perform ongoing symbolic labor. Lilith must remain legible as a threat. Her continued presence

– across Mesopotamian demonology, biblical and Second Temple sources, medieval folklore, and contemporary cultural and digital adaptations – ensures that the boundary she transgressed remains clearly marked. The disciplinary function of her demonization thus extends far beyond the initial act of expulsion.

Rehabilitating Lilith through Feminist Frames

Feminist theory helps explain why this logic remains so potent. Sara Ahmed's (2023) figure of the feminist killjoy captures the affective dimension of female refusal. The killjoy is not dangerous because she causes harm but because she disrupts the smooth circulation of happiness scripts and schemas that sustain normative order. She exposes the cost of comfort. Like Lilith, the killjoy becomes a repository for collective irritation. Her refusal intensifies, rather than resolves, the discomfort she reveals.

Character assassination operates here as an affective regulator. By fixing the killjoy as morally reprehensible, CA relieves the community of the need to confront the discomfort she introduces. The liminal potency of refusal is neutralized through demonization, but this neutralization is never complete. As Turner (1969) observed, liminal figures often retain a residual power precisely because they cannot be fully assimilated or erased. The attempt to suppress them paradoxically amplifies their symbolic force.

This amplification is evident in Lilith's enduring afterlife. Despite centuries of demonization, she persists as a figure of fascination, fear, and reclamation. Her story continues to circulate because it names a structural tension that has never been resolved: the perceived incompatibility between female autonomy and patriarchal stability. Each attempt to contain this tension through character assassination reproduces it anew.

Lilith thus functions as a prototype in three interrelated senses. First, she is the first *scapegoat*, absorbing collective anxiety so that order may appear coherent. Second, she is the first *liminal subject*, occupying the threshold between obedience and transformation. Third, she is the first *figure of exception*, exposed to violence without protection in the name of preserving hierarchy. These roles converge to produce a symbolic architecture repeatedly reactivated across historical contexts.

The following section traces how this architecture has migrated across historical periods, from witch trials to modern political media, while retaining a recognizable underlying logic. Female autonomy is converted into threat, circulated through dominant media, and sanctioned without proportionality. The media change, but the grammar does not.

Transhistoricity: From Eden to the Public Cybersphere

What changes across historical regimes is not the logic of character assassination but the media through which it circulates. As Icks and Shiraev have demonstrated, strategic reputational attacks, including character assassination, are "not a modern invention but a recurring strategy observable across historical epochs and political systems" (2014, p.

3). As media systems evolve, gendered character assassination adapts to new forms of circulation, institutional authority, and public visibility. Mythic demonization, juridical spectacle, mass-mediated scandal, and algorithmic outrage each rearticulate the same symbolic grammar, with reputational destruction substituting for structural accountability, and punishment reinstating moral order through the displacement of the target.

The continuity lies not in form but in function. The medieval European and early Colonial American witch trials provide a stark illustration of this migration. In these juridical-religious spectacles, female autonomy – particularly sexual independence, social influence, or epistemic authority – was recoded as demonic threat. Accusations were prosecuted without substantive evidence, with rumors substituted for proof. After confessions were coerced, public punishment was spectacular and disproportionate. The accused woman's identity was subsumed into the charge itself. She was not punished for particular acts alone but for what she was reconstituted to represent: disorder, contagion, and rebellion against divinely sanctioned hierarchy (Karlsen, 1987).

From Juridical Warning Spectacle to Mass Media Moralization

The witch trials also reveal how character assassination operates most effectively when embedded within authoritarian institutions. Courts, churches, and local communities collaborated in the production and circulation of accusation. Media in the modern sense did not yet exist, but pamphlets, sermons, and public executions functioned as technologies of amplification. "The transfer of blame and frustration to a convenient target is a universal human tendency, intensified in times of social stress" (Allport, 1943, p. 6). The spectacle of punishment stabilized order by rendering dissent visible and terrifying, reinforcing the power of the Authority.

As print culture expanded and secularized publics emerged, the mechanisms of character assassination adapted accordingly. Moral condemnation increasingly traveled through newspapers, broadsides, and later mass-circulation periodicals. While the language of demonology gave way to that of propriety, decency, and respectability, the underlying structure persisted. Women who transgressed gender norms – through sexual autonomy, political activism, or intellectual authority – were framed as immoral, hysterical, or corrupting. Reputation became a central site of discipline (Karlsen, 1987).

Modern political history offers numerous examples of this pattern. Women who entered public life were routinely subjected to scrutiny that exceeded any reasonable evaluation of policy or competence. Review of media coverage of the campaigns of US Presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris are cases in point (Bordo, 2018; Keohane, et al, 2025). Their bodies, private lives, emotions, and perceived deviations from femininity became legitimate objects of public judgment. Character assassination operated as a gatekeeping mechanism, discouraging participation by transforming visibility itself into risk. The moralization of female presence in public space thus served to stabilize male-dominated institutions.

Mass media intensified this dynamic by accelerating circulation and expanding audience reach. Radio, television, and tabloids transformed scandal into spectacle, privileging narrative simplicity and emotional resonance. The woman as target became a familiar trope: seductive, corrupting, manipulative, and untrustworthy (Bordo, 2018). These representations reflected prejudice, but they also performed symbolic labor. By repeatedly associating female autonomy with danger, mass media reinforced the moral asymmetry that character assassination requires to function.

The rise of networked digital media has extended and amplified this grammar. Platforms collapse temporal and spatial boundaries, enabling accusations to circulate instantaneously and persist indefinitely. Searchability ensures that reputational damage is archived, while algorithms ensure its amplification. The result is a condition where character assassination no longer requires centralized authority or coordinated intent because it emerges from the infrastructure itself.

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION AND VIRTUAL REPUTATIONAL VIOLENCE

In the public cybersphere, character assassination operates through what might be called *ambient accusation*. The target does not need to be formally charged or publicly condemned. Association, insinuation, and repetition suffice. A name linked to an allegation becomes a reputational hazard. Visibility becomes punishment. The boundary between public and private dissolves, and the possibility of redemption recedes.

This digital intensification also transforms the temporality of character assassination. In earlier regimes, punishment was often bounded – by ritual, by sentence, by death itself. In digital environments, there is no natural endpoint. Accusation recurs through recommendation systems, resurfacing content, and user-generated repetition. The past is never past, and the subject remains perpetually exposed to ongoing judgment. The state of exception becomes normalized not as an episodic suspension but as a permanent background condition (Agamben, 2005).

Gender remains central to this process. Digital culture has not neutralized the moral asymmetries that structure character assassination; it has magnified them. Women who speak publicly, assert authority, or refuse accommodation are disproportionately targeted by harassment, disinformation, and reputational attack. Their transgressions – real or imagined – are framed as evidence of moral failure rather than political disagreement. Once again, autonomy is converted into threat. (Bordo, 2018; Keohane et al., 2025)

What distinguishes the digital era is not cruelty alone but *deniability*. Participants can claim innocence by invoking humor, irony, hoax, or algorithmic inevitability. Platforms can disclaim responsibility by attributing outcomes to user behavior or automated systems. The scapegoat mechanism reaches a new level of efficiency where harm is distributed,

responsibility diffused, and accountability obscured. Following Bataille, algorithmic character assassination in the digital public sphere amplifies transgression – speech, refusal, visibility – while simultaneously demanding its ritual punishment. Outrage does not eliminate deviance; it metabolizes it. The target's symbolic destruction fuels a system that cannot acknowledge its dependence on dissent (Bataille, 1986), operating without visible executioners.

Thus, the digital return to mythic unreality is unmistakable. Digitized/virtual images, narratives, and symbolic associations eclipse embodied interaction. Attacks on reputation produce material consequences – loss of livelihood, safety, or health – but through unreal means. In this sense, the public cybersphere resembles the same ineffable space from which the grammar of character assassination first emerged: a mythic realm where symbolic acts have real effects, and punishment is detached from procedural constraint.

This transhistorical continuity reveals why character assassination persists despite shifts in political ideology, media technology, and cultural norms. It is not sustained by ignorance alone but by its capacity to resolve tension. By offering women as legible targets for collective anxiety, CA provides a symbolic solution to crises of authority and meaning. The cost of this solution is borne by those whose autonomy exposes the fragility of the order itself.

The next section examines how this logic culminates in contemporary digital environments, where algorithmic governance automates scapegoating and transforms character assassination into a posthuman regime of reputational punishment.

FROM SPECTACLE TO INFRASTRUCTURE: ALGORITHMIC COMPLETION OF AN ANCIENT LOGIC

In the contemporary digital environment, that which earlier regimes accomplished through mythic demonization, juridical spectacle, and mass-mediated scandal is now enacted infrastructurally. Judgment no longer requires a visible sovereign or centralized authority because it is rendered automatically through circulation. In digital environments, character assassination operates through algorithmic amplification rather than formal accusation.

As Phillips and Milner (2017) note, online antagonism “performs social work” even when framed as humor or play (p. 5), reinforcing moral hierarchies while diffusing responsibility. Moving rhetorical agency from a person to a technological operation intensifies the scapegoat mechanism described by Burke (1939, 1989) and Girard (1986). The human target still absorbs collective anxiety, while accountability dissolves into systems that appear neutral, automated, or inevitable. Burke's observation that “the ‘enemy’ is made to bear the burden of internal division” (1939/1989, p. 202) finds its most efficient realization here: the scapegoater disappears into the platform, while the scapegoat remains permanently exposed.

Agamben's state of exception likewise shifts from episodic to ambient. In digital environments, procedural safeguards collapse preemptively, allowing accusations to circulate without evidence and punishment to be administered without trial or sentencing. Reputational exposure persists without end, with the exception no longer declared, but normalized. The subject exists as reputational *bare life*: visible without protection, searchable without recourse.

Crucially, this completion remains gendered. Digital platforms do not neutralize the asymmetries that structure character assassination; rather, they amplify them. Women's actions are moralized rather than debated and transformed into evidence of toxic contamination rather than simple disagreement. So, the asymmetry inaugurated with Lilith's exile persists under algorithmic governance. Platforms disclaim responsibility by attributing outcomes to emergent properties of neutral systems. The scapegoat mechanism thus reaches its most perfected form to date, here where harm persists, while agency evaporates. In this sense, the digital return to mythic structure is unmistakable.

DIGITAL SANCTITY AND THE RETURN OF THE MYTHIC

Recent media scholarship increasingly challenges the assumption that digital modernity represents a secular break from mythic or sacred forms of meaning. Instead, scholars argue that contemporary media infrastructures reactivate symbolic and ritual logics under new technological conditions. Lynch (2012) observes that "the sacred may be understood as operative forms of meaning and value in increasingly secularized societies, enacted through narratives that elicit powerful collective emotional responses" (p. 18). Digital platforms, in this sense, do not merely host outrage or controversy; they organize affect, judgment, and exclusion in ways structurally analogous to religious ritual.

Studies of mediated communities further demonstrate that digital environments intensify, rather than dissolve, symbolic boundary maintenance. Campbell and Fulton (2012) show that when communities encounter new media technologies, they often respond by strengthening practices of moral regulation and exclusion: "[B]ounded communities respond to digital media by intensifying symbolic boundary work, including practices of exclusion and shunning, in order to preserve identity" (p. 193). This dynamic closely parallels the amplifying power of algorithmic character assassination, where reputational destruction is not simply malignant communicative behavior but functions as a stabilizing ritual that relies upon symbolic expulsion to keep order.

Philosophical analyses of virtuality similarly emphasize the return of mythic structures within digital space. Şerban (2024) characterizes contemporary virtual environments as a revival of humanity's symbolic longings, arguing that "the virtual is the latest expansion of humanity's symbolic craving for meaning, reviving mythic structures through simulated ontological spaces" (p. 305). Far from demystifying power, these environments displace myth into infrastructure, where judgment operates without visible authority. As Şerban further notes, "behind virtual realities lie phantasies, and behind those phantasies,

material consequences" (p. 312). Symbolic acts in digital space thus retain real-world force, producing reputational harm, social exclusion, and political consequences.

Moldoveanu (2025) reinforces this argument by situating communication itself as a carrier of sacred meaning under conditions of technological abstraction: "[C]ommunication functions as a means of preserving human essence in the face of technological abstraction, retaining symbolic depth even in highly mediated environments" (p. 78). This insight is particularly salient for understanding why algorithmic systems are able to mobilize *moral outrage* so effectively, insofar as the digital sphere concentrates and redistributes meaning.

Within this framework, algorithmic character assassination emerges as a contemporary ritual of symbolic purification. Though lacking a visible executioner – only metrics, shares, and engagement – the function remains unchanged. In Burkean terms, victimage is perfected through infrastructure: the scapegoat absorbs collective anxiety while responsibility is dispersed beyond any identifiable agent (Burke, 1966, 1984). Agamben's state of exception likewise becomes ambient rather than episodic, producing subjects who exist as reputational bare life – permanently exposed to judgment, deprived of procedural protection, and denied narrative closure (Agamben, 2005).

Digital sanctity thus establishes a paradoxical condition: It produces a space imagined as secular, rational, and demystified but that, nonetheless, performs sacred functions with greater reach and less accountability than earlier religious regimes. The God who once expelled the Lilith figure from Eden has been replaced by infrastructural systems that expel any and all, continuously and endlessly. The sacred has not disappeared; it has been automated.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that character assassination is neither a modern invention nor an accidental feature of contemporary media systems. It is a durable symbolic practice whose earliest recognizable form emerges through the demonization of Lilith. Within the Enochic tradition, Lilith refuses the patriarchal order of Eden and leaves of her own volition. Subsequent narratives transformed that refusal into evidence of moral corruption, recasting autonomy as danger and dissent as deviance.

Lilith's exile inaugurates a symbolic pattern that extends far beyond a single mythic figure. As the first human being (a female being) to refuse subordination, her demonization stabilizes the order she escaped by purging it of contradiction while preserving her exile as a warning. That which was necessary for human becoming (rupture, differentiation, and historical movement) was memorialized as female corruption. Note that in the mythic Garden of Eden, *perfection* is also *timelessness*, *immobility*. Lilith's defiant action in moving out of Eden literally initiates human time.

Thus, from this point forward, woman becomes available as a symbolic repository for danger, disorder, and transgression. The genealogy traced here suggests that the history of character assassination begins not with modern politics, but with a female figure whose refusal is transformed into social threat. Media evolved. Myth becomes scripture, spectacle, print, broadcast, and digital circulation. Yet the underlying symbolic pattern remains stable: Female autonomy remains essentially dangerous and reputational destruction continues to function as a mechanism through which socio-political order is maintained. The persistence of this pattern across changing media environments suggests that the origins of character assassination are inseparable from the gendered symbolic structure through which societies define deviance, authority, and belonging.

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DEMONICA LILIT, EVOLUCIJA MEDIJA I PODRIJETLO RODNO OBILJEŽENOG UNIŠTAVANJA REPUTACIJE

Leslie Reynard

SAŽETAK U ovom se članku primjenjuje genealoški pristup uništavanju reputacije te se prati prenošenje rodno obilježеног uništavanja ugleda kroz različite simboličke režime – od edenske demonizacije Lilit do posthumanog virtualnog režima obilježеног trajnom vidljivošću i raspršenim djelovanjem. Oslanjajući se na retoričke teorije žrtvenog jarca, liminalnosti i izvanrednog stanja, kao i na spoznaje feminističkih i medijskih studija, u članku se tvrdi da uništavanje reputacije funkcionira kao simbolička medijska infrastruktura koja stabilizira društveno-politički poredak eksternaliziranjem kolektivne tjeskobe i ljutnje. Lilit predstavlja prototip žrtvenog jarca – liminalni subjekt čiji je prijestup prvi označen kao egzistencijalna prijetnja čovječanstvu. Time je „grieh“ predstavljen kao posljedica ženske autonomije, što čini temelj rodno obilježеног nasilja nad ugledom usmjerenom protiv žena.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE, ROD, MIT O LILIT, MEDIJSKA INFRASTRUKTURA,
DIGITALNO PROSUĐIVANJE, SIMBOLIČKO NASILJE

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