

The incubus in the collections

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A small print inspired me to examine the appearance of the incubus in the University's collections. Investigation of an engraving by Thomas Holloway (1748–1827) led me along a trail of connections between people and objects. One of the main ideas linking these donors, artists and works of art is a relationship between art and science. This relationship becomes apparent in the analysis of a painting by Henry Fuseli (also known as Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741–1825), titled *The nightmare* (1781).

The nightmare is Henry Fuseli's most renowned work, one which has become a familiar image in Western art.¹ The sensational subject matter made such an impact on artists that it sparked numerous reproductions and even caricatures.² Fuseli himself painted a second version between 1782 and 1791,³ and it is Holloway's print based closely on this later work that is found in the Baillieu Library Print Collection. This engraving (left) is a proof or a rare trial impression from 1791 which, according to the inscription on the verso, was given to the art dealer Robert Balmanno by Fuseli himself. It depicts a woman, trapped in sleep paralysis, being visited by an incubus.

Artists and scholars have been fascinated by the origins and meanings of the work. Fuseli was



Opposite: Thomas Holloway, *The nightmare*, 1791, after Henry Fuseli, engraving, image: 12.7 x 10.2 cm; plate: 22.9 x 14.8 cm; sheet: 27.8 x 20.8 cm. Reg. no. 1959.5074, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne. Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959.

Left: Henry Fuseli, *The nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 126.7 cm. The Detroit Institute of Arts; Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr and Mrs Bert L. Smokler and Mr and Mrs Lawrence A. Fleischman. Photograph © 2005 The Detroit Institute of Arts.

deeply interested in literature and many of his works were inspired by Shakespeare's plays. He was also so interested in the work of English satirical printmaker William Hogarth (1697–1764) that he relocated from Switzerland to England.⁴ In turn Fuseli was a fundamental influence on many artists, in particular his contemporary, the famous Englishman William Blake (1757–1827). It seems logical then that *The nightmare* would have a literary source; perhaps it is the surprising fact that some of Fuseli's sinister art implies a literary origin where there is none, which makes it so shockingly original.

It is even difficult to trace the origin of the incubus itself. This may be because 18th century mores prevented discussion of the definition of the creature. In Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's dictionary* (1906) the incubus is described as 'one of a race of highly improper demons'. It is not until more contemporary sources such as Charles Walker's *Encyclopaedia of secret knowledge* (1995), that an incubus is defined as a demon which lies upon sleepers in order to have sexual intercourse with them.

Represented in the image by the monkey or imp sitting on the woman's torso, the incubus is said to have arrived in the woman's bedroom

on the horse.⁵ The absurdity of such an event has led to a number of satirical responses. The painting's 18th century audience and even some scholars have also thought that the inclusion of the horse is a pun based on the title; the nightmare is really a female horse.⁶ Humour is just one of the many facets of the work, but it is the nightmare as a medical phenomenon that is pertinent to the University's collections.

Fuseli was rumoured to have eaten raw pork and opium to inspire nightmares,⁷ hence parallels may be drawn between the effects of opium—which include hallucinations—and some of the strange features of the image such as the bulging orbs of the horse's eyes. In the 18th century, beliefs about nightmares sat between superstition and medicine. As a medical condition, one of the main symptoms of a nightmare included experiencing a violent pressure on the breast or stomach.⁸ In the picture this idea is personified by the incubus, therefore it is the incubus and not the horse which represents the nightmare.

The Baillieu Library Print Collection includes a significant representation of prints by Hogarth, so that it is possible to see the works that influenced Fuseli. Some of the Hogarths, and the print by Holloway,

were donated to the University by Dr John Orde Poynton, a medical doctor. Poynton received an honorary doctorate from the University of Melbourne in 1977 in recognition of his extensive contribution to the shaping of the collection, both in terms of his knowledge and through his considerable donation of books and prints.⁹ It is not unusual to find notes written on medical prescriptions by Poynton interleaved into his books in the Baillieu Library. Poynton collected a wide range of prints but it is interesting to note the connection between the collector as a scientist and the image as a scientific curiosity.

There are examples of objects and images infused with Fuseli's art in several of the collections at the University. Our purpose here is to focus on those which have been significantly influenced by *The nightmare*. The first example is a book held in the Special Collections of the Baillieu Library. Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), poet, botanist, inventor and the grandfather of Charles Darwin, created a literary response to the image in his epic poem, *The botanic garden: A poem, in two parts* (1788–1790), a fusion of science and art which incorporates botanical engravings and imaginative illustrations. The relevant section is as follows:

So on his NIGHTMARE
 through the evening fog
 Flits the squab Fiend o'er fen,
 and lake, and bog;
 Seeks some love-wilder'd Maid
 with sleep oppress'd,
 Alights, and grinning sits upon
 her breast.
 —Such as of late amid the murky
 sky
 Was mark'd by FUSELI'S poetic
 eye;

Two editions of Erasmus Darwin's book are found in the Baillieu's collection. Firstly a 1791 edition, which from the bookplate we see was presented to the Zoological Department by Professor Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer.¹⁰ Like Poynton, Spencer was an English-born man of science and received an honorary doctorate from Melbourne. He was appointed foundation chair of biology at the University in 1887.¹¹ The book contains prints after Fuseli by Anker Smith (1759–1819) and represents an important bridge between Baldwin Spencer as a scientist and as a patron of the arts. A link has been implied between the incubus or monkey which desires to mate with the woman, and to Erasmus Darwin's grandson's well-known theories about evolution. That is, the nightmare as a hybrid species between humans and

apes or again, a hybrid of fantasy and science.¹² However, Erasmus Darwin's main purpose in writing the work was to encourage people, through the medium of poetry, to engage with scientific knowledge.¹³ It could be said then, that both the poem and *The nightmare* itself are precursors of science fiction.

Erasmus Darwin and Fuseli were friends; perhaps this is one of the reasons why Fuseli had a great interest in applied science and medicine, and consequently the interplay between art and science.¹⁴ Likewise, Baldwin Spencer's donation of the book represents his own appreciation for science and art. It could also be argued that a number of collections and objects owned by the University, indicated by donors such as Poynton and Spencer, are a dialogue between art and science. This idea is embodied by Poynton's donation of an image of an incubus; the demon is both visually and scientifically fascinating.

The second version of *The botanic garden* held by the Baillieu Library is a fourth edition published in 1799 and containing printed illustrations by Holloway.¹⁵ This version provides the opportunity to view the image in relation to its literary counterpart, as an illustration for *Loves of the plants*, the second volume of the epic work.

So that as well as being seen as an individual work of art in the Print Collection, it may also be seen in its literary context in the Special Collections.

Fuseli was also a printmaker; he executed prints after his paintings so that they could be more widely distributed and generate extra income.¹⁶ He does not seem to have done this with *The nightmare*, but a host of printmakers took up the mantle of creating prints in the manner of Fuseli, demonstrated in this instance by Anker Smith and Holloway. Prints after the painting were responsible for making impressive sums of money, and for popularising the image.¹⁷

The second example of a work inspired by *The nightmare* is Norman Lindsay's (1879–1969) *Julia's monkey* (1920). This work is a departure from the original image as its focus shifts from science to sexuality. Though it differs visually from Holloway's image, the horse being absent for example, the influence of the first version of Fuseli's painting is apparent. This time it is a monkey rather than a demonic incubus seated on the woman's torso. Julia, one of Lindsay's unknown models,¹⁸ is not paralysed and is instead tempting the monkey with a piece of fruit. The reproduction of *Julia's monkey* in

Norman Lindsay, *Julia's monkey*, 1920, etching, engraving, soft ground, stipple; plate: 17.9 x 23.0 cm; sheet: 23.0 x 25.4 cm. Reg. no. 1981.2018, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne. Reproduced with the kind permission of Lin Bloomfield, Odana Editions.

Playboy magazine in 1967 is recognition that the image represents overt sexual desire. Unlike the Fuseli work in which sexuality is portrayed as the object of the woman's terror, in Lindsay's version the woman is actively seducing the monkey and the viewer.

Lindsay and Fuseli are not commonly compared, but the similarity between *Julia's monkey* and *The nightmare* is no mere coincidence. In the same year the artist produced other etchings such as (*Dreaming*) in

which the model, his wife Rose, is stretched out erotically in the same pose, and *Pantera* which employs the same motif and explores the interplay of mythological grotesquery and sexuality. Another print, *Creative effort*, depicts a nude woman standing between a satyr and some other grotesque-looking creature. Monkeys and demons depicted with nude women appear frequently in his work during this period.¹⁹ Lindsay drew on a Nietzschean philosophy in relation to women, with sexuality and

creativity centralised through a dominant female figure.²⁰ As well as in the Baillieu Library Print Collection, examples of Lindsay's work are held in the Grainger Museum and the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

As demonstrated by the volume of prints created after the work, and its popularity, it is no leap to assume that Lindsay was familiar with Fuseli's picture. The image provoked responses through a number of centuries and Lindsay was a 20th century Australian artist with his own interpretation of Fuseli's shocking idea of a visitation by an incubus. Lindsay heightens the experience by implying that a visit by an incubus or a beast is pleasurable. The incubus is no longer a nightmare but the object of a woman's desire. Perhaps therefore, Lindsay's work is as open to satiric responses as *The nightmare*.

The final example is a painting in the Ian Potter Museum of Art titled *Despair* (c.1916–1918) by L. Bernard Hall (1859–1935). While even further distanced from Fuseli's original version (both the horse and the incubus are absent), it is nonetheless worth noticing the similarity between the supine women in both images. Inscribed on the back of the painting is 'The Suicide' which provides further insight into the



Bernard Hall, *Despair*, (c.1916–1918), oil on canvas, sight: 100.0 x 75.0 cm. Reg. no. 1938.0007, University of Melbourne Art Collection, gift of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing, 1938.



possible meaning of the work. While the incubus is not visually apparent, the oppressive nature of the woman's depression is a nightmare weighing down on her prostrate form. Along with the painting, the Potter also holds *Study for 'Despair'*, a drawing in which the woman's animal-like anguish is more pronounced.²¹ Just as with *The nightmare*, the viewer takes erotic liberties with the nude subject; it is as if the woman's vulnerability is being preyed upon.

The painting *Despair* was purchased in 1919 by Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing (1864–1941),²² and forms part of the collection that he donated to the University in 1938. At the time of that donation a link was immediately drawn between 'the artist and the doctor as kindred spirits.'²³ The ability of the artist to transform a surface was seen as a skill similar to that of a surgeon, such as Ewing. This idea may also be applied to Poynton's artistry as a doctor and the books and works of art he collected. Poynton and Ewing were among a number of Melbourne doctors who were patrons of art in the early to mid-20th century.

In consultation with Hall, Ewing changed the title of the painting from *The suicide* to *Despair*.²⁴ Perhaps his medical background was a factor in this decision as it may not have been

deemed appropriate for a doctor to own a work representing the deliberate destruction of life. The allure of the woman, however, does not seem to be an issue in the doctor's acquisition of the work. The implied death of the woman in the image is a new idea not seen in the previous examples of the visitation of an incubus. Yet Ewing's status as a doctor and patron of art seems to have improved the woman's situation, diverting her from death, which is indicated by the change of title.

My discovery of the Holloway print in the library has led to a web of connections between objects and images across collections in the University. These links reveal the lively relationship between art and science which is imbued both in *The nightmare* and in various other works in the collections. This idea is represented by the incubus which embodies both scientific and visual novelty. The incubus is just one example demonstrating the relevance and rich possibilities available via further research into the Print Collection of the Baillieu Library.

In 2008 Kerriane Stone worked in the Baillieu Library as Project Officer with the Print Collection and assisted with exhibitions. She also has a position with the Performing Arts Collection at the Victorian Arts Centre. In 2007 she completed a Master of Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne. As part of her degree,

she wrote a minor thesis on the Golden Cockerel Press, drawing upon the exemplary collection of books held in the Baillieu Library Special Collections. Previously she has held positions at the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the Museum of Lillydale.

Notes

- 1 Martin Myrone, *Gothic nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic imagination*, London: Tate Publishing, 2006, p. 43.
- 2 Henry Fuseli, *The nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 126.7 cm. The Detroit Institute of Arts; Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr and Mrs Bert L. Smokler and Mr and Mrs Lawrence A. Fleischman. Photograph © 2005 The Detroit Institute of Arts.
- 3 Fuseli's second version of the painting is now in the collection of the Goethe-Museum, Frankfurt-am-Main. For a reproduction see http://www.goethehaus-frankfurt.de/museum_en/raum3.html
- 4 Dana Andrus, 'Some implications for another reading of Henry Fuseli's *The nightmare*', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, December 1995, p. 236.
- 5 Andrus, 'Some implications', p. 246.
- 6 Christopher Frayling, 'Fuseli's *The nightmare*: Somewhere between the sublime and the ridiculous', in Myrone, *Gothic nightmares*, p. 11.
- 7 Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli*, London: Tate Publishing, 2001, p. 47.
- 8 Frayling, 'Fuseli's *The nightmare*', p. 16.
- 9 Merete Smith, 'Dry light is best', *University of Melbourne Library Journal*, vol. 7, December 2001, p. 11. See also Kathleen Kiernan, 'Lonely traveller in a transient world: The landscape prints of Jan van de Velde II donated to the Baillieu Library by Dr J. Orde Poynton', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 2, July 2008, pp. 14–20.
- 10 Erasmus Darwin, *The botanic garden*, London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1791. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. Presented by Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer.
- 11 D.J. Mulvaney, 'Spencer, Sir Walter Baldwin (1860–1929)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 12, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp. 33–36.
- 12 Frayling, 'Fuseli's *The nightmare*', p. 17.
- 13 Charles Darwin, *The life of Erasmus Darwin*, edited by Desmond King-Hele, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 31–35.
- 14 Frayling, 'Fuseli's *The nightmare*', p. 15.
- 15 Erasmus Darwin, *The botanic garden: A poem; in two parts. Part 1: Containing the economy of vegetation. Part 2: The loves of the plants; with philosophical notes*, 4th edition, London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1799. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 16 Myrone, *Henry Fuseli*, p. 41.
- 17 Frayling, 'Fuseli's *The nightmare*', p. 13.
- 18 Lin Bloomfield, *Norman Lindsay etchings: Catalogue raisonné*, Sydney: Odana Editions, 1999, p. 12.
- 19 Bloomfield, *Norman Lindsay etchings*, pp. 46–52.
- 20 Hannah Forsyth, 'Sex, seduction, and sirens in love: Norman Lindsay's women', *Antipodes*, June 2005, p. 58.
- 21 Bernard Hall, *Study for 'Despair'*, (c.1916–1918), charcoal on brown paper, sheet: 91.5 x 64.3 cm. Accession no. 1985.0004, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of Dr Joseph Brown, 1985.
- 22 For discussion of the work see also Alison Inglis, 'Despair', in Chris McAuliffe and Peter Yule (eds), *Treasures: Highlights of the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2003, pp. 190–191.
- 23 Juliette Peers, 'The full majesty of nature', in *The full majesty of nature: The collection of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing*, Parkville: The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2002, p. 4.
- 24 Inglis, 'Despair'.