Fear in the early modern period
Strange creatures from the Baillieu Library Print Collection
Lisa Jacomos

‘Maybe there is a beast … maybe it’s only us …’
William Golding, Lord of the flies

Like the boys in Golding’s Lord of the flies, human beings have learnt to be afraid. In primordial times, this fear helped ensure the continuation of humanity. As prehistory progressed into history, the threat of animal predators lessened. Yet humans had evolved with an innate fear that could now be manipulated and harnessed in specific directions. In short, people were told what they should fear. These fears spread and became part of the culture. If one takes visual culture as an expression of societal beliefs, much can be learnt from an analysis of this culture. This article explores human fear as expressed through several early modern prints donated to the University of Melbourne by Dr J. Orde Poynton, whose gift forms the core of the Baillieu Library Print Collection.

On 6 November 1959, Dr Orde Poynton donated 850 rare books and approximately 4,000 prints to the Baillieu Library.1 Having been witness to part of the new library’s construction, he was eager to house his collection within its walls, and his welcome donation was the foundation of the library’s rare print and book collections.2 Such rich holdings offer the researcher many narratives and perspectives on art, and its place in, or its reflection of, society. This article discusses four prints from the collection.

Professor Paul Trout argues that the phenomenon of human fear originated in the primordial anxiety that came with an early awareness of oneself as potential food for predators.3 It is reasonable to assume that early humans were accustomed to witnessing members of the animal kingdom, including other humans, being consumed by larger predators. In this sense, Trout argues, fear was an essential emotion. Without it, one would not instinctively avoid dangerous predators, and the human species would be at risk.4 Yet, despite its practicality, fear had the potential to run rampant in the human mind. It is Trout’s argument that an attempt to control fear was the source of human myth-making. Through myths, humans could inform other members of society about the dangers found in nature. In this way, myths directed fear onto different sources; humans were told what to fear, so that they did not fear everything. This practice helped to elicit a sense of control. As language developed, narratives became more sophisticated, and the predator’s physiognomy was dependent only upon the human psyche.4 Anthropologist D.S. Lamb maintains that myths are always based on reality.5 In this way, rather than an entirely imagined being, the mythical predator is created through a combination of traits from actual living creatures.7 David Gilmore points out that the traits of the imagined ‘monster’ are linked to inherent human fears.9 To early humans, the physiological symptoms experienced from sheer terror in the face of a predator led to a belief that the predator must possess supernatural powers.9 Trout asserts that this belief in a greater power, and the desire to appease it through offerings, is the foundation of religion.10 As humans evolved further, primitive animal gods gave way to human gods.11 Trout explains that with the development of social structures, and the need to experience love, humans created a god that epitomised this value. The new, human ‘God’ served as a comfort from the evils of the world.12 However, the creation of the human God did not assuage the inherent fears, and these erstwhile beast-gods became epitomised in the Devil.

Of all animals, few have influenced Christianity as much as the snake. The fact that this unassuming creature plays such an integral role in the origin myth
cannot be coincidental. American anthropologist and animal behaviourist Lynne A. Isbell claims that, although the number of fatal snake attacks is small, snakes are humans’ most feared creature. She argues that this is due to the snake’s status as the primate’s original, and most dreaded, predator. In this way, as humans evolved, this innate fear has evolved with us, leaving us with a strong, natural fear—for apparently no explicable reason.

The Bible, the fundamental book of Christianity, and arguably Western history’s most influential book, addresses this fear. In the book of Genesis, Chapter 3, we see the first mention of the snake or serpent. We are told that he is ‘sotyller’ [more subtle; cunning or manipulative] than any other beast. For this reason, Satan, the lord of all evil, appears in the form of a snake and speaks to Eve (the first woman). The serpent tricks Eve into committing a drastic mistake and dooming humankind. As punishment for his role in the act, the serpent becomes ‘curssed aboue all catell [cattle], and aboye euery beast of the felde’. The next part is crucial. Not only is the serpent cursed, but the proper, God-sanctioned relationship between humans and snakes is laid out: ‘I will also put enemytie betwene the & the woman,
betwene thy sede and byr sede: 'The same shall treade downe thy head, and thou shalt treade vpon hys hele'.

Humankind’s innate fear of snakes has now been justified. If one is to take the story literally, God is telling us that the snake will always be our enemy. In this way, our fears are not only justified, but are reaffirmed by the Genesis story: our prototypical fear has now become the catalyst for the original sin.

The moment of Eve’s bamboozlement is depicted in two works in the collection, each with a vastly different interpretation. The first is known as ‘Garden of Eden’, from the Dance of death series by Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677) after Hans Holbein the younger (1497–1543); the second as ‘Lucifer discovering Adam and Eve in Paradise’, by Charles Grignion after Francis Hayman.

In the Hollar/Holbein print (pictured on page 39) the serpent has a human female face. Typical of representations of the scene, the tree of knowledge of good and evil occupies the centre of the composition, with Adam and Eve on either side. The serpent winds its tail around the tree and stares fixedly into Eve’s eyes, while Eve, in an almost trance-like state, holds the apple aloft, seemingly for approval from the serpent. Interestingly,
Adam also appears to be seduced by the serpent. He stares at the beast’s body while with his left arm he reaches absentmindedly for another apple. The figure of the serpent is depicted with some ambiguity: it is unclear whether Eve sees her own face reflected back at her, or merely that of an anonymous woman. If it is another woman, it would certainly be the first that Eve has ever seen. Perhaps Holbein is alluding to the potential danger of women when they gather in groups. It is worth noting that when Hollar’s print is compared to Holbein’s original, the face of the serpent has changed. Hollar has removed the serpent’s headdress, essentially causing the creature to look more like Eve. It is possible that the artist is making comment on women/Eve as inherently evil. Certainly these artists did not invent this trope: the origins of the female-headed serpent have been traced back to at least the 13th century.17

Francis Hayman’s composition (pictured opposite) is distinctly different from Holbein’s. To understand the differences between the two, we must consider not only the dates of the original works, but also their contexts. While Holbein’s depiction of Eve’s temptation was designed to accompany the relevant biblical text, Hayman’s was produced to illustrate

Book IV of Thomas Newton’s 1749 edition of John Milton’s Paradise Lost.18 In his epic poem, Milton famously emphasises the humanity of the Devil. Hayman’s composition shows Adam and Eve reclining together on the base of the tree, while Satan appears behind them as an angel: a human with feathered wings, suggesting his identity as the fallen angel, Lucifer (detail below). Satan’s features are strikingly similar
to Adam’s, yet, in contrast to Adam’s serene expression, Satan’s features are contorted into a scowl. His hair is wildly dishevelled, and he is fully clothed, setting him apart from the nude couple. Curiously, no fruit is present on the tree. The strongest indication that something is amiss is the presence of the goat in the lower right-hand foreground. The goat is positioned between the left hand of Adam and the right hand of Satan and, bizarrely, is standing on its hind legs. This strange, unnatural behaviour foreshadows the dramatic events that are to occur, in which Adam and Eve will fall from God’s favour.

The goat is another animal that features strongly in Christian mythology, and was linked to lust in the Middle Ages. It is possible that there is something inherent in the nature of goats that led to the belief in their unbridled lust. Yet the demonising of goats has much deeper roots than this. The first known representation of Satan features on a sixth-century mosaic in the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. In this mosaic, Satan appears as an angel sitting at the left hand of God, three goats at his feet. This scene depicts the verse in Matthew which states that Jesus will separate the Good from the Evil as a shepherd separates the sheep from
the goats: ‘and he shall set the shepe on hys ryght hande, but the goates on the lyfte’. As with the snake, it appears that the goat has suffered a poor reputation since the beginning of Christianity. However, unlike the snake, the goat has not been banished from society. Indeed, goats were kept in close proximity to humans in the medieval and early modern periods. Due to their proximity to humankind, goats became a choice vessel through which Satan could attack society. As such, they quickly became associated with witches—the greatest enemy of early modern societal order. The 16th-century European fascination with witches was due, according to some scholars, to an effort to explain political instability and the spread of disease.\(^{21}\) With a focus on monstrous behaviour rather than on physical appearance, any person could be accused.

Despite the lack of physical clues to detect witches in reality, a rich iconography grew to indicate witches in the printed image. The Baillieu Library Print Collection holds two fascinating examples. Albrecht Dürer’s print, known as ‘Witch riding backwards on a goat’ (opposite), contains a complex array of iconography that appears to be unique to this image. Historian Charles Zika argues that this is due to
Dürer’s attempt to combine cultural ideas to create a cohesive prototype for the witch.\textsuperscript{22} The most striking aspect of Dürer’s composition is its inverted nature. At the centre of the composition the elderly, female witch sits atop a goat. The witch grips the goat with her left hand, emphasising its sinister nature. The mode of witch transportation was a significant concern for the authors of the notorious witch-hunting guide \textit{Malleus maleficarum}; they dedicated an entire chapter to the topic. While transportation generally includes flying through the air by the power of the Devil, the common factor is that there is something unnatural about how witches travel.\textsuperscript{23} In Dürer’s composition this is expressed as the ‘inverted ride’. While the goat travels from left to right, the witch faces in the opposite direction, her hair flying unnaturally in the wrong direction. In a brilliant touch, Dürer emphasises the inversion of the image by inverting his well-recognised signature. There is a long tradition of the inverted ride; it was a form of forced humiliation in the late Middle Ages for those who subverted gender norms.\textsuperscript{24} In this way, not only is the witch travelling in an unnatural manner, but one can read the witch’s voluntary inversion as embracing her perversion. It seems that Dürer is making comment on feminine power. To further emphasise her power, the witch is holding a distaff upright as a form of pseudo-sceptre. Being a tool used for spinning, which was considered women’s work, the distaff became an iconographical representation of womanhood. Dürer’s witch wields the distaff powerfully in her right hand, while beyond its point a formidable storm begins to brew. In the foreground, four putti busy themselves with mysterious work. It is unclear what exactly they are doing, yet they serve to create a chaotic scene, emphasising the disorder of the image.

Bernard Picart’s (1673–1733) depiction of \textit{A witch going to a nocturnal meeting} (or \textit{Une sorcière allant au sabbat}) explores some of the same themes. This print (pictured on page 43) is taken from the book \textit{Impostures innocentes} (from either the French version published by Picart’s widow in 1734,\textsuperscript{25} or the English version published in 1756).\textsuperscript{26} The French text at the bottom of the page informs the reader that this is after a design by François Mazzoli, known as Parmigianino (discussed further below). As in Dürer’s composition, the witch sits at the centre of the print and is depicted during transit. But Picart’s witch sits atop a mysterious, hybrid beast. This beast has a curious form: elongated body, mammalian tail, gaping fish-like mouth, and glassy eyes. It is propped up by only two claw-like legs, and its lower body appears to be covered with hair. The beast is pulled forward by a winged male demon who clutches it around the throat. Like Dürer’s witch, the rider clutches a distaff, albeit in a less powerful pose. This witch is covered from head to foot, disguising its gender; only the distaff indicates that the witch is, indeed, female. At the rear of the beast sits a goat, clutching the witch’s shoulder in an unnatural, humanoid manner. The preternatural nature of the goat is emphasised by its unusual horns and long tail. A band of witches accompanies the mounted witch on her journey; one of them appears to be carrying a baby to take to the ritual sacrifice.

While Picart’s composition is bizarre, its strangeness does not compare to the original Parmigianino composition, where the truly bizarre nature of the witch’s mount is revealed. The original print shows the witch riding a giant, disembodied phallus. When faced with such confronting imagery, it is difficult to ignore the sexual connotations of the print. Sexual orgies, where witches copulate with
devils to show their allegiance, are an accepted part of the witches' sabbath mythology. Here, Parmigianino references this in an obvious way. Again, the connotations are of a subversion of societal and gender norms, in which women abandon their usually passive role.

Humans have always been afraid. With the spread of Christianity in the early modern period, innate anxieties were explained by Christian mythology and traditions. Through the telling of these myths, fears were justified and reaffirmed. As society became unstable, fears moved from the tangible to the intangible. Malevolent beings, namely witches, were blamed for the seeming downfall of society. While early modern images of demons and witches may seem comical to our contemporary sensibilities, this 'scapegoating' is not unique to that period of history. Each time a society becomes unstable, fears were justified and reaffirmed. As the telling of these myths, fears were explained by Christian mythology and traditions. Through prints, both early modern and contemporary, and is interested in what these works can tell us about our own society.

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The past can tell us about ourselves and the unchanging human condition. As a popular medium, prints can tell us about societal beliefs. More research will no doubt offer even richer illustrations of the human condition in the 21st century.

1 Merete Smith, 'Dry light is best', University of Melbourne Library Journal, 2001, p. 11.
4 Trout, Deadly powers, p. 64.
5 Trout, Deadly powers, pp. 107, 134.
7 Trout, Deadly powers, p. 134.
9 Trout, Deadly powers, p. 196.
10 Trout, Deadly powers, pp. 141, 204.
11 Trout, Deadly powers, p. 212.
12 Trout, Deadly powers, p. 211.
13 Lynne A. Ishell, The fruit, the tree, and the serpent: Why we see so well, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 3.
14 Ishell, The fruit, the tree, and the serpent, pp. 4–5.
15 Verses quoted are from the Great Bible of 1539, which was available in every church in England during the reign of King Henry VIII (c. 1509–47).
16 In the English Standard Version of the Bible, this text reads: 'The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”' (Genesis 3:14–15).
22 Zika, Exorcising our demons, p. 305.
24 Zika, Exorcising our demons, pp. 307–8.
26 Bernard Picart, Impostures innocentes, or, a collection of prints from the most celebrated painters …, London: J. Boydell, 1756, plate 12.