# THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS

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*The sleep of reason produces monsters*, a companion display to the 2020 Adelaide Biennial, presents highlights from the historical lineage of monster imagery in art, specifically in European printmaking from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. Artists' imaginings of monsters were inspired by biblical, mythological and literary descriptions, folklore, and contemporary events, as well as the ever-evolving visual language of monster representation. The monster was generally an evil beast or threat which played on human fears and follies, at times representing a warning or omen, on other occasions presenting temptations or trials to be overcome, and frequently representing the devil, Satan, or death, in one of their many guises.

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> Monsters are things that appear outside the course of Nature (and are usually signs of some forthcoming misfortune)[1]

German artist Albrecht Dürer's (1471–1528) first great series of woodcuts, *The Apocalypse*, presents chaotic scenes of death, destruction, visionary spectacles and monstrous beasts. The fifteen large-scale woodcuts illustrate the prophetic visions discussed by St John the Divine in the last book of the Bible, Revelation. Throughout his text St John refers to a dragon and several monstrous beasts – each having seven heads and ten horns – including the beast that came out of the sea, which 'resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion'.[2] In plate 12 from *The Apocalypse* (p. 35) Dürer used St John's description as a starting point to imagine this beast with seven different animal-like heads, some resembling known species such as the ostrich, lion and snake, while others were purely fantasy.

First published in 1498, Dürer's *The Apocalypse* assumed immediate significance in light of contemporary fears that the end of the world would occur in the year 1500. Events such as unnatural births and celestial phenomena were also considered omens and fuelled this speculation, one such example being the birth of a deformed pig in the village of Landser, Alsace, on 1 March 1496. The pig, which had one head, two tongues, four ears, two bodies and eight feet, was depicted by Dürer in his engraving *The monstrous sow of Landser* (pp. 20, 35).[3] Dürer was aware of the sow through a widely circulated broadsheet published by German writer Sebastian Brant (1457–1521), in which Brant speculated on the meaning of this creature, including that it represented a political message ('power in the hands of sow-like people') or an apocalyptic warning, as a symbol of 'the Antichrist'.[4]

While these examples relate to a specific time period and circumstances, images of monstrous creatures were often used by artists to evoke psychological fear and reinforce moralistic messages.

In the Netherlands in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450–1516) created nightmarish paintings populated with 'fantastic' creatures. His style was influential on subsequent artists, including Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525/30–1569), who worked with the engraver Pieter van der Heyden (c.1530–after 1572) to present his ideas in printed form. In his series *The seven vices*, 1558, Bruegel warns of the perils of sinful behaviour, presenting a world of depravity, torture and temptation, replete with 'Boschian' monsters – hybrid creatures displaying human, animal, reptilian and insect features, and bearing an assortment of limbs, bodies and heads. Bruegel's single-

sheet engraving, *The battle of the money bags and the strong boxes* (pp. 37, 50–1), expresses a similar moralistic message: illustrating the consequences of greed and the pursuit of wealth, as humanoid money boxes and treasure chests are embroiled in a chaotic, and somewhat comical, battle.

The interrelated themes of witches, death and disaster were topical in German and Netherlandish printmaking during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Artists responded to the fears and superstition that surrounded these themes. Witches were often represented as grotesque hags with destructive supernatural powers, while personifications of death, usually as skeletal figures lurking in the shadows, were reminders of mortality. For instance, in Hans Baldung's enigmatic woodcut, *The bewitched groom*, c.1544 (p. 37), the old crone holding a flaming torch is a witch, who has presumably caused the horse to mortally wound the groom. One interpretation links this image to a popular folk story about a sinful robber–knight who unsuccessfully tried to avoid retribution by disguising himself as a stable hand.[5]

Sin and temptation are themes embedded in the Bible and in hagiography – from the serpent tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to Christ's temptation in the wilderness and the tribulations of monastic saints exiled in the desert. And the tempter is invariably the devil. Not surprisingly, the devil or Satan is one of the most frequently depicted 'monsters' in European printmaking. A shape shifter, he can manifest himself through many guises. As Ambroise Paré wrote in his 1575 publication, *On monsters and marvels*:

> Demons suddenly assume whatever form pleases them; and often one can see them transformed into animals, such as snakes, toads, owls, dunghill-cocks, crows, he-goats, asses, dogs, cats, wolves, bulls, and others; verily they take the bodies of human, living or dead, afflict them, torment them and prevent their natural operations ... They have several names, among which *demons, cacodemons, incubi, succubi, nightriders, goblins, imps, bad Angels, Satan, Lucifer, father of falsehood, Prince of darkness, legion* ... and an infinity of other names ... according to the differences in the evils they carry out and the places where they are most often located.[6]

A popular 'temptation' subject that provided artists with limitless scope to visualise demons as monstrous creatures was that of St Anthony. St Anthony of Egypt (c.251–356) spent fifteen years of hermetic existence in the desert, where he was tormented by a multitude of devils.[7] The two best-known engravings on this subject are by German artist Martin Schongauer (c.1450–1491) and French artist Jacques Callot (1592–1635) (pp. 2–3, 38). Schongauer's engraving from c.1470–75 sees the saint attacked mid-air by nine maniacal grotesque demons, whereas Callot's engraving, created in 1635, presents a nightmarish hellscape, undoubtably informed by the horrors of the Thirty Years War raging in Europe at this time. Boschian monsters not only torment the saint, but battle each other on land and in the air, presided over by a colossal dragon raging in the sky. The 1874 publication of Gustave Flaubert's novel, *The temptation of Saint Anthony* inspired French artist Odilon Redon (1840–1916) to explore radical new iconography for this subject. Redon's tempters, seen in three dark and mysterious series of lithographs, include amoebic forms, fragmentary beings and ghostly apparitions. They accord with Redon's philosophy to give 'human life to

Albrecht Dürer, Germany, 1471–1528

above: *The beast with the seven heads and the beast with the lamb's horns,* plate 12 from *The Apocalypse*, c.1496–97, published 1498, Nuremberg, Germany, woodcut on paper, 38.9 × 27.3 cm (sheet); Bequest of David Murray 1908
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
photo: Stewart Adams

below: *The monstrous sow of Landser*, 1496
engraving, 12.0 × 12.7 cm (image and plate), 12.2 × 12.9 cm (sheet); Felton Bequest, 1956
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

unlikely creatures according to the laws of probability, while as much as possible, putting the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible'.[8]

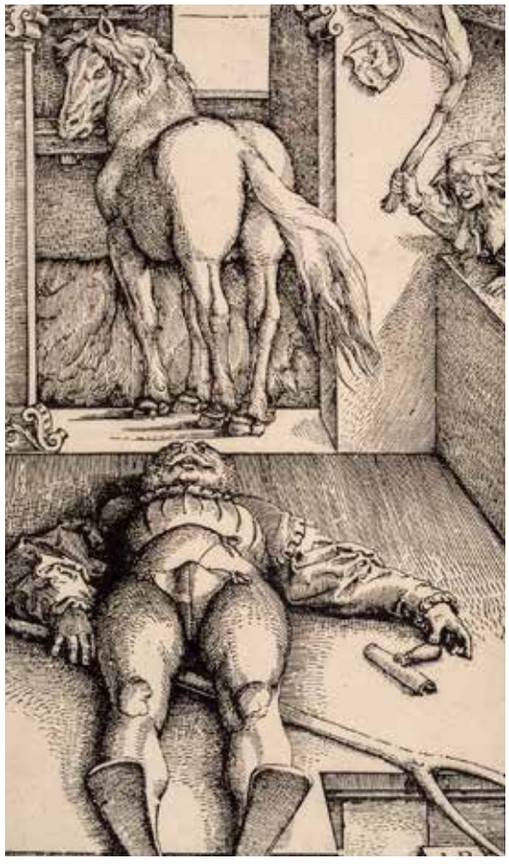
The mutability of devil imagery in European printmaking is endless, and can be seen even within a single artist's oeuvre. For instance, in Dürer's *The Apocalypse* series, mentioned earlier, the devil is symbolised by the dragon, which in plate 11 appears as a multi-headed dragon in a celestial battle with St Michael and his angels, and in the final image (plate 15), as a scaly, claw-footed, winged creature with drooping breasts. Fifteen years later in the engraving *Knight, death and the devil*, 1513, Dürer devised a new persona for the devil – as a horned beast with a wild boar's snout, walking upright on goat-like legs.

The last judgement and representations of hell also provided artists with rich opportunities to visualise the devil and monsters of the underworld. In Hendrick Goltzius's (1558–1617) engraving, *The descent of the damned into hell*, c.1577, (p. 39) for instance, the naked figures of the 'damned' tumbling into an inferno are under attack from a mass of hybrid dragon-like demons as they simultaneously struggle to avoid the cavernous mouth of a giant beast, which threatens to swallow them whole.

In contrast to these bestial depictions, in the hands of some artists the devil assumed a human-like form, often with bat-like wings or horns. The engravings of British artist James Barry (1741–1806) and William Blake (1757–1827) depict Satan as a muscular classical nude. Inspired by descriptions of Lucifer in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), their engravings present Satan in a heroic or sympathetic light, rebelling against God's omnipotence. This is seen most spectacularly in Barry's large-scale engravings illustrating episodes from *Paradise Lost*, such as *Satan and his legions hurling defiance toward the vault of Heaven*, c.1792–95.

Beyond the multifaceted representations of the devil, European printmaking is witness to many monstrous beasts. In classical mythology for instance, this includes the beasts encountered by Hercules in his prescribed labours, among them Cerberus, the multi-headed dog that guarded the entrance to Hades, or the Lernaean hydra, a water snake, also multi-headed and with the ability to grow two more heads if one was cut. Dragons appear in numerous mythological contexts. Sea monsters too abound: from Scylla, the nymph who was turned into a sea monster by the sorceress Circe, to the monstrous whale that swallowed Jonah in the biblical book of Jonah, to the imagined sea monsters found on seventeenth-century engraved maps. In one of his *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, 1826, (p. 14) William Blake pairs the serpent-like sea monster Leviathan with the hippopotamus-like Behemoth: enclosed in a globe, they are thought to represent war on land and at sea, respectively.[9]

The title of this display, 'The sleep of reason produces monsters', derives from an etching by Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746–1828) (p. 39), who, in the late 1790s, turned to printmaking as an outlet for more personal and imaginative subjects. *Los Caprichos*, published 1799, the first of his four great etched series, uses fantasy and satire to draw attention to human follies and vices. He created his own visual language of monstrous creatures, these appearing, as the title to plate 43 suggests, when rational thought is abandoned and nightmarish scenarios emerge. Goya's imagery includes hybrid human–animals, bird-like creatures, witches and hobgoblins. Created in a climate of political instability, Goya's eighty plates provide a veiled social criticism of the times and allude to greed, corruption, foolishness and evil, particularly amongst the clergy and aristocracy.



above: Pieter van der Heyden, engraver, Flanders c.1530–after 1572, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, designer, Flanders c.1525/30–1569, *The battle of the money bags and the strong boxes*, after 1570, Antwerp, Flanders, engraving on paper, 23.6 × 30.5 cm (plate and sheet); N.F. Rochlin Bequest Fund 2019

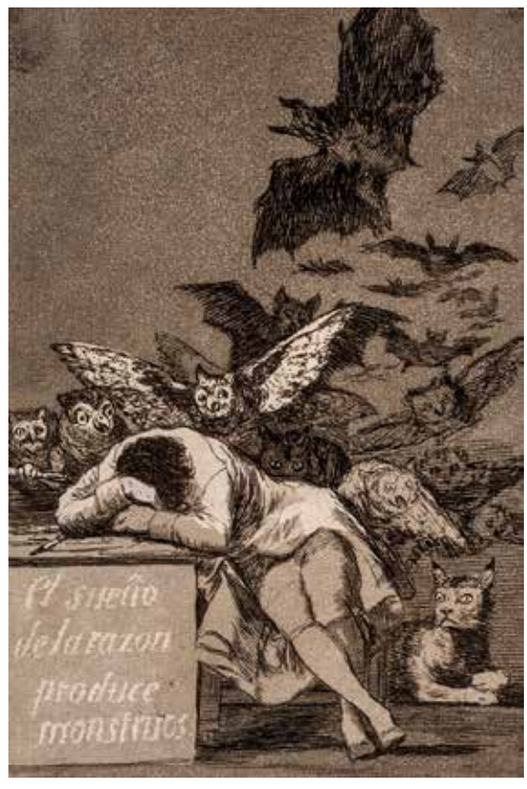
below: Hans Baldung, called Grien, Germany, 1484/5–1545, *The bewitched groom*, c.1544, Strasbourg, France, woodcut on paper, 34.0 × 19.8 cm (image); Bequest of David Murray 1908

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
photos: Stewart Adams

Goya continued his exploration of these ideas in his later series *Los Disparates*, which he worked on from 1816 to 1823, but which was not published during his lifetime. The nightmarish images appear in dark stage-like settings and resist decisive interpretation. *Simpleton* (p. 11), for instance, depicts a grinning giant playing castanets for cowering figures (one being a priest); the giant's underlying malevolence is suggested by the terrified faces of those behind him.

Goya, in common with many of the European printmakers discussed here, recognised the advantages of printmaking as a potent medium. Capable of creating multiple images for wide distribution, either as single sheets or in illustrated books, prints were an important and accessible visual source for imparting knowledge about the world – about humanity, philosophy, religion, mythology and contemporary life. It was through printmaking, more so than in the traditional high-art media of painting and sculpture, that artists could address topical fears, warnings and moral issues, in doing so, giving free rein to their imagination in representing infinite permutations of monstrous creatures. By depicting these monsters, these artists have given 'visual form to that which no one has ever seen, yet whose existence no one has ever doubted'.[10]

1 Ambroise Paré, *On monsters and marvels*, translated with an introduction and notes by Janis L. Pallister, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1982 (1575), p. 3.
2 Revelation 13:2
3 Giulia Bartrum, *Albrecht Dürer and his legacy: the graphic work of a Renaissance artis*t, British Museum, London, 2003, p. 112.
4 Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous births and visual culture in sixteenth-century Germany*, 2nd edn, Routledge, London and New York, 2016, p. 35.
5 Christiane Andersson & Charles Talbot, *From a mighty fortress: prints, drawings, and books in the age of Luther, 1483–1546*, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, 1983, p. 200.
6 Paré, pp. 87–8.
7 Details of Saint Anthony's life are known from a fourth-century biography by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, which in turn informed Jacobus de Voragine's influential book on the lives of the saints, *The Golden Legend*, published c.1260.
8 Odilon Redon, quoted in Jodi Hauptman, Marina van Zuylen & Starr Figura, *Beyond the visible: the art of Odilon Redon*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006, p. 59.
9 Martin Butlin, *William Blake, 1757–1827*, The Tate, London, 1990, p. 197.
10 Stefano Zuffi (ed.), *Angels and demons in art*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2005, p. 8.


p. 38: Jacques Callot, France/Italy, 1592–1635, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony (second version)*, 1635, etching, 35.9 × 46.7 cm (plate), 37.6 × 49.3 cm (sheet); Felton Bequest, 1958
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

above: Hendrick Goltzius, engraver, The Netherlands, 1558–1617, after Johannes Stradanus, designer, Flanders/Italy, 1523–1605, *The descent of the damned into hell*, plate 4 from the set *The four last things*, c.1577, Haarlem, The Netherlands, engraving on paper, 26.3 cm (diam.) (plate); Bequest of David Murray 1908

below: Francisco Goya, Spain, 1746–1828, *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, plate 43 from *Los Caprichos* (*The Caprices*), 1797–98, Madrid; published 1799, Madrid, etching, aquatint on paper, 21.2 × 15.0 cm (plate); South Australian Government Grant 1980

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photos: Stewart Adams