

THE NIGHTMARE: FUSELI AND THE ART OF HORROR

Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* is the consummate image of sexual terror, which has inspired mystery and speculation for generations.

Ever since it was first exhibited to the public, at the annual Royal Academy exhibition of 1782, *The Nightmare* has been an icon of horror. It shows a young woman lying in a restless sleep in her bedroom, oppressed by a foul-looking imp which sits on her stomach. To the left, a horse glares out from the gloom. The original visitors to the Academy exhibition in 1782 were shocked by the subject matter - but also intrigued. The Academy exhibitions in the late eighteenth century were dominated by portraits, landscape paintings, or scenes illustrating literature and history. *The Nightmare* did not fit any of these categories. What did this painting really show? What did it mean? Was it an allegory of some kind, or simply a sick fantasy? The art critics were mystified; one complained, 'The Nightmare, by Mr Fuseli, like all his productions has strong marks of genius about it; but hag-riding is too unpleasant a thought to be agreeable to anyone'. Another remarked that 'there is a wildness of conception in Mr Fuseli's picture of the Night Shade at the Royal Academy, which teems with that usual concomitant of genius, inaccuracy'.

The painting had created a real stir, exactly as Fuseli would have wanted. This Swiss-born painter had moved to England in the mid-1760s, and tried to establish himself as a translator and writer. But he turned to the visual arts around 1770, encouraged (by his own account) by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the newly-appointed president of the Royal Academy - and spent most of the following decade in Italy, studying ancient art and the Old Masters, and gaining a reputation for his wild imagination among connoisseurs and fellow artists. Now, back in England, he made a concerted effort to make his name as a painter. In previous exhibitions he had displayed large, dynamic compositions of scenes from Shakespeare and Milton. These were eye-grabbing, powerfully visual works, and had been fairly well-received by the critics and the public. But in 1782, he risked his reputation by showing only this single, rather small, but unconventional painting.

Over 55,000 people went to the exhibition in 1782 - this when the population of London was only about 750,000. Many more would have read about the painting in the newspapers and magazines, and still more could have seen the print reproducing the image that was published in the

following year. *The Nightmare* made Fuseli's name as an artist, and established his reputation as a painter of the weird, the supernatural, and the shocking. Rumours abounded that he ate raw pork in order to inspire weird dreams or took opium. Meanwhile, the influence of this painting has endured. It has been reproduced in print, copied, lampooned and satirised repeatedly, appearing in caricatures, on-book covers and album-sleeves. It has inspired other artists and writers, and in the present age, film-makers, from F.W. Murnau, the maker of *Nosferatu* (1922) to Ken Russell, who re-staged *The Nightmare* in his 1986 movie, *Gothic*.

Over the last two centuries, art historians, psychologists, literary critics and historians of science have pondered this picture, as well. Theories about the meaning and importance of this work have multiplied. It has been related to eighteenth-century theories of sleep paralysis and nightmares – Fuseli knew doctors and scientists and had a keen amateur enthusiasm in the field – and to traditional folklore, with its stories of supernatural night-visitors preying on virgins. Psychological interpretations have focussed on the painting as an expression of Fuseli's sexual desires and frustrations. On the back of this canvas Fuseli painted an unfinished portrait of a woman, associated by a number of commentators with Anna Landolt, the object of Fuseli's unrequited love during a visit to Switzerland in 1779. The main painting has, then, been interpreted as an expression of the painter's sexual revenge or frustration, and the imp's features have been taken as resembling Fuseli's own. Literary allusions to Shakespeare and to the playwright Thomas Middleton have been detected, and the art-historical sources of the various figures in the painting have been tracked down. Yet the painting remains a mystery.

Every element of this picture has elicited commentary, rumour and speculation . . .

The voluptuous woman on the bed is based on an ancient sculpture, but is clearly a modern-day woman of the eighteenth century. Figures like this can be found in titillating paintings and illustrations of the time, called 'fancy pictures'. The sickly glitter of the painting itself suggests a perverse or ironic re-working of such images, with the intimate, dishevelled boudoir

interior typical of such compositions transformed into a clammy and claustrophobic setting, the theme of frivolous erotic play displaced by an act of monstrous sexual violation.

The imp is a supernatural character drawn from ancient myth, literature and folklore. Strictly speaking, it is this imp – and not the horse to the left – which is the ‘nightmare’. The term derives from ‘mara’, the name a spirit which in northern mythology visited sleeping women suffocated or molested them, and is not connected to the word ‘mare’. Other traditional stories told of women being made pregnant by nocturnal fairies, and giving birth to weird, only half-human children.

The horse pushing its head through the curtains must be the imp’s mount, which he has used to ride through the night to this woman’s bedroom. The confusion between ‘mare’ and ‘mara’ (meaning spirit) has meant that this animal is traditionally identified as ‘the nightmare’. Like all of Fuseli’s figures, this draws on a range of art-historical sources. The horse is based on a ghostly figure in Salvator Rosa’s *Saul and the Witch of Endor* (c.1668, Louvre) combined with the famous sculpture of ‘The Horse Tamers’ in the Piazza Quirinale, Rome.

The table top has some mysterious-looking bottles on it. Perhaps they are just perfumes, but they might be meant as medicines, drink, or even laudanum, the narcotic mixture of alcohol and opium that was in wide use in Fuseli’s time.