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## Spirits, Go

By [ALAN RIDING](#)

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LONDON, Feb. 21 — The poet Philip Larkin famously declared that the English discovered sex in 1963, but a new show at Tate Britain proposes the far earlier date of 1782, the year curious Londoners flocked to the Royal Academy's summer exhibition to look in amazement, confusion and excitement at Henry Fuseli's painting "The Nightmare."

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Detroit Institute of Arts

"The Nightmare" (1782) by the Swiss-born British artist Henry Fuseli, from an exhibition at Tate Britain.

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There, amid the usual worthy portraits and landscapes, Fuseli's oil displayed the prostrate body of a sleeping maiden, with a depraved-looking ogre or incubus sitting on her chest and the head of a blind horse protruding menacingly through red curtains. What could it mean?

It was a decade before a Church of England minister cleared things up by denouncing Fuseli as one of the "libertines of painting." Fuseli naturally objected, insisting he would never play to the "charm-struck crowd." But, yes, "The Nightmare" was about sex: with her head thrown back, her arms hanging limply yet sensually, the young woman was surely dreaming of sex.

Fuseli also appears to have added his own pun. The "mare" of "nightmare" comes from the German "mara," meaning a tormenting spirit who applies pressure on a sleeper's chest. Thus, it may well have been Fuseli's joke to accompany the "mara" — the imp in the painting — with a "mare" in the form of a horse's head. Ah, the stuff of dreams.

"The Nightmare" soon became a popular image, copied by other artists and reproduced in prints.

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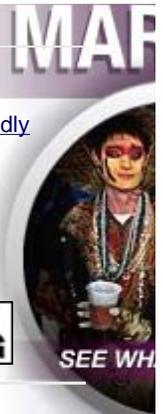
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Indeed, a print of the oil was pinned up in Freud's office in Vienna. And now, the original — on loan from the Detroit Institute of Art — is again drawing crowds as the centerpiece of "Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination," which continues at Tate Britain through May 1.

Still, this is not a sex show, even though a veil does isolate some saucy images. (Or is the veil there to make sure no one misses them?) Rather, it is an exploration of the world of fantasy, mysticism, horror and sexual perversity that found expression in art and literature in Britain between 1770 and 1830 and which, fueled by novels, movies and even pop music, later became known as Gothic.

In literature, the iconic work was Mary Shelley's 1818 "Frankenstein." In art, the fad translated into paintings and drawings with strong narratives, muscular Michelangelo-inspired men and naked nymphs, as well as myriad fairies and demons. In one sense, these works were a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment; in another, they represented a search for a uniquely British mythology.

The political context was relevant. Britain had just lost its American colony, while the French Revolution was spreading turmoil across Europe. The ferocity — even vulgarity — of the cartoons in this exhibition testifies to the political battles taking place in Britain itself during the oft-unstable reign of George III.

The odd thing is that the man who came to personify the Gothic in English art was Fuseli, a Zurich-born self-taught artist who was in his mid-30's when he moved to London and who never spoke English fluently. Yet, more than any of his contemporaries, he turned to Shakespeare and Milton for material, attracted in both cases by the supernatural elements in their writing.

Among the 50 paintings and drawings by Fuseli in this show is "The Weird Sisters," his take on the witches in "Macbeth," itself a much copied — and parodied — image. Many others are more erotic. For instance, his two paintings based on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" — "Titania and Bottom With the Ass's Head" and "Titania Awakening" — portray Titania gloriously naked.

Fuseli certainly liked his dreams, ghosts and spirits. In "Queen Katherine's Dream," taken from Shakespeare's "Henry VIII," the dying and deposed queen is visited by "spirits of peace." His contemporaries were similarly inspired: an engraving by Robert Thew has Hamlet meeting the ghost of his father, and William Blake has Richard III haunted by the ghosts of his victims.

Fuseli also tapped into Milton's "Paradise Lost," with "Satan Starting at the Touch of Ithuriel's Lance" presenting Adam and Eve in happy naked embrace. And as a Swiss, he was close to Germanic folklore and legends. All in all, he was devoted to mumbo-jumbo.

The 18th-century Swiss theologian Johann Casper Lavater wrote of Fuseli: "Specters, demons and madmen's phantoms, exterminating angels; murders and acts of violence — such are his favorite subjects; and yet, I repeat, no one loves with more tenderness."

But was Fuseli also a good painter? In a way, the question is unfair as he was among those artists more concerned with what they say than how they say it. Certainly, his fantastic imagination prompted the Surrealists to revive interest in his work in the 1920's.

Blake, too, was interested in the supernatural. Tate Britain displays 25 of his watercolors, drawings and paintings, including several from his Apocalypse series. Others use biblical subjects, like "God Writing on the Tables of the Covenant." Quite his strangest and certainly most Gothic work is "The Ghost of a Flea," which shows a muscular vampire-like figure and, it was said, resulted from Blake's conversation with a flea.

Perhaps most surprising, though, is how the Gothic still appeals to the British, at least if measured by newspaper art critics here, who have responded with a peculiar mixture of delight and embarrassment.

"By the end of this show," Richard Dorment wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*, "I had come to feel that Fuseli is a schlock artist, but a great one." In *The Independent* on Sunday, Suzi Feay wrote of "The Nightmare:" "It's camp, it's tacky, it's silly. It's pure Fuseli." But she then confessed: "Gothic art, like the Gothic novel, is a guilty pleasure: so enjoyable, you feel it can't be doing you any good."

For Rachel Campbell-Johnston, writing in *The Times*, "this is a thrillingly extravagant, exhilarating show." But it also speaks of a key moment in British history. "As room after room of images unfurl," she wrote, "we watch a nation peering for the first time into the inner recesses of its psyche, exploring its dreams and its memories and desires, probing its fears and its phobias." And it all began one summer's day in 1782.

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