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Continuities

A Transhistorical Bestiary

> "The modifications which nightmare assumes are infinite; but one passion is almost never absent—that of utter and incomparable dread."
>
> —Robert MacNish (1834, 123)

The symptoms of the night-mare experience have been studied in relation to sleep paralysis in the last quarter century, but the night-mare spirit itself has persisted for millennia. The entity has stalked human beings throughout history, not merely within a particular society or during a specific time. In fact, the ubiquity of the night-mare led one nineteenth-century scholar to suggest that it was the origin of all mythology (Laistner 1889). Although it is difficult to imagine a researcher making this sweeping assertion today, the night-mare's prominent role in folk tradition through the ages is clear. The night-mare's past is worth exploring for what it reveals about successive eras' conceptualizations of the relationship between mind and body. Although the night-mare entity has been known by various names since ancient times, expectations regarding the physical manifestations of its uniquely evil habits have remained remarkably constant throughout its long history. We have seen that the defining features of the night-mare form a distinct and stable experience. The characteristics that shape this easily discernible pattern include the impression of wakefulness, an inability to move or speak, a realistic perception of the immediate environment, intense fear and anxiety, lying in a supine position, a feeling of pressure on the chest, difficulty breathing, and the awareness of a "presence" that is often seen or heard.

Alu

One of the earliest surviving written descriptions of the night-mare is an Assyrian reference to the evil spirit *alu*, a demon that "hides itself in dark corners and caverns in the rock, haunting ruins and deserted buildings, and slinking through the streets at night like a pariah dog" ready to rush out and envelop the unwary "as with a garment" (Thompson 1903, Tablet 1B; Thompson 1908, 81).

The *alu* creeps into its intended victim's bedroom in darkness, pouncing on the unsuspecting sleeper. There is also a Babylonian reference to "the man whom an evil *alu* hath enveloped on his bed" (Rawlinson 1861–1864, 4:50). This night-mare is a demon "which throws itself heavily on a sleeper, preventing him from moving or opening his eyes, and which disappears as soon as he awakes" (1:44). Although only fragments of these narratives remain, the features of the assault—the heavy, "enveloping" presence that oppresses sleepers and thwarts their movements—make it clear that the attacker is a night-mare.

Lilith

One of the most notorious manifestations of the night-mare entity is the female spirit Lilith. The earliest mention of a demonic being that appears to be related to Lilith is found in the Sumerian King list (circa 2400 BCE), which states that the father of the great hero Gilgamesh was a *Lillu*-demon (Patai 1990). The *Lillu* was one of four related evil spirits; the other three were *Lilitu*, a female demon (probably the prototype for the Hebrew Lilith); *Ardat Lili*, Lilith's maidservant, who had sex with men at night and then bore demonically hybrid children; and *Irdu Lili, Ardat Lili*'s male counterpart who impregnated women during his nocturnal visits (Jacobsen 1939; Stol 1993).

A Babylonian terra-cotta relief, dating from about 2000 BCE, depicts Lilith in human form—with the notable exception of her wings and owl feet. She is standing on two reclining lions and flanked by owls, indicating both her potent command and her nocturnal domain. A seventh-century BCE tablet found in northern Syria shows Lilith as a winged sphinx across whose body is written, "O, Flyer in a dark chamber,/Go away at once, O Lili!" (Patai 1990, 222). These lines are representative of texts from a genre of formulas designed to protect women in labor.

There is one brief, but nonetheless highly contested, reference to Lilith in the Torah: "Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest. There shall the owl nest and lay and hatch and brood in its shadow" (Isa. 34:14). Since the Hebrew term (*lilit*) used in this context is a *hapax legomenon*—a word that occurs only once in a particular text—it is impossible to make a definitive statement as to its usage and meaning. In English-language Bibles, *lilit* is occasionally translated as "screech owl"; in the Vulgate, Jerome translated the word as *lamia*, an evil being that killed infants and seduced sleeping men. Although it is not possible to identify this early *lilit* conclusively as a female night-mare spirit, the figure described is clearly associated with evil, the night, and flight.

Lilith next alights textually on the Talmud, the Jewish commentaries on the Torah (circa 400 CE). The references to her are again quite brief, but here their sketchy quality seems to indicate that there was already a firmly established

cultural understanding of Lilith's wicked behavior that made explicit details and explanation unnecessary. We learn that she has wings (Nid. 24b) and long hair (Erub. 100b) and that she is, at least partially, human in appearance. Men are admonished to prevent her access to them at night: "One may not sleep in a house alone, and whoever sleeps in a house alone is seized by Lilith" (Shab. 151a; fn: "The night demon"). These limited Talmudic allusions are the first (at least in literary records) to identify Lilith as both a demon of the night and a night-mare figure.

The relatively scanty Talmudic material on Lilith is supplemented by much richer data from Aramaic inscriptions on incantation bowls. Several seventh-century CE ceramic bowls have been found which are engraved with magical texts directed against Lilith. (It seems likely that the formulas themselves originated in the oral traditions of much earlier times.) While the Talmud reflects the views of the learned elite regarding Lilith, these incantation bowls reveal her reputation in the general community. The inscriptions indicate that, during the night, female Liliths have sex with sleeping men (and male *Lilin* couple with women) in order to breed demonic offspring. Once they succeed in joining themselves to a human being, they are considered married and must be formally divorced before they can be forced to leave (Patai 1990). Women in labor and newborn babies are particularly vulnerable to attacks since Lilith is jealous of her victims' human partners. She also attempts to prevent the birth of human children by creating fertility problems or causing complications during childbirth (Scerba 1999).

In addition to instilling terror, Lilith's attacks were thought occasionally to be fatal (Chambers 1999). Lilith hates children born to human couples and attacks them, sucking their blood and strangling them while they sleep. (Her victims might themselves become assaulting demons, similar to victims of other supernatural figures, such as vampires.) In the Jewish folk tradition, circumcision protected male infants from Lilith's murderous aggression. The eight-day period following a boy's birth marked a time of escalating concern for the family, culminating in an all-night vigil to ensure that he was not attacked before the day of circumcision.

The earliest form of the most familiar version of the Lilith legend appears in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, an anonymous work most likely written at some point during the seventh to the eleventh centuries;[1] although, again, it is impossible to know how much earlier the story may have been present in folk and oral traditions. It is here that we find Lilith portrayed as Adam's first wife. The idea of Eve having a predecessor is not new to this text, but prior written references make no specific mention of Lilith. According to "Ben Sira,"

> [God] said, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18). He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie

> below,' and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air.

God immediately sent three angels to bring her back. They came upon Lilith at sea.

> They told her God's word, but she did not wish to return. The angels said, "We shall drown you in the sea." "Leave me!" she said. "I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days." When the angels heard Lilith's words, they insisted she go back. But she swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God: "Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant." (Stern and Mirsky 1998, 183–184)

In contrast to Eve, Lilith was not created from Adam, but, like him, from the earth—she therefore considered herself his equal. Given the significance of lying supine for night-mare experiences, it is interesting that Lilith and Adam's relationship ended over a disagreement about who should assume this position.

Over the last few decades, the legend from *The Alphabet* has been the most frequently quoted in describing the origins of Lilith, although, in some instances, the details of the night-mare tradition and the references to child-killing are routinely ignored.[2] Ben Sira's biography of Lilith has rather been transformed into a feminist allegory of the prelapsarian equality of women and men. *Lilith* magazine, for example, "charts Jewish women's lives with exuberance, rigor, affection, *subversion* and style" [emphasis mine]—and the independent publication's Web site quotes the Ben Sira text as the inspiration for the magazine title.

It is remarkable that (with the exception of contemporary feminist readings of the story) the Lilith night-mare spirit has retained essentially the same form for thousands of years. Anthropologist and folklorist Raphael Patai observes that "a citizen of Sumer circa 2500 BCE and an East European Hasidic Jew in 1880 CE had very little in common as far as the higher levels of religion were concerned. But they would have readily recognized each other's beliefs about the pernicious machinations of Lilith, and each other's apotropaic measures for driving her away or escaping her enticements" (1990, 251).

Ephialtes

The male night-mare is well represented in the literature of ancient Greece, where he is typically known as *ephialtes* ("leap upon"). Because the Greeks

considered being choked or strangled to be one consequence of a night-mare attack, the entity was also called *pnigalion* ("throttler"). As is the case with Assyrian and Babylonian text fragments and the early allusions to Lilith, ancient Greek writings depict a syndrome that is unmistakably that of the night-mare. The crushing pressure that the evil spirit exerts on the supine bodies of its victims remains a common theme. According to Soranos,[3] a second-century CE physician, "the sleeper feels that somebody is sitting on his chest or suddenly jumps upon it or that somebody climbs up and crushes him heavily with his weight. The sufferer feels incapacity to move, torpidity, and inability to speak. Attempts to speak often result only in single, inarticulate sounds" (Roscher 1900, 19).

Ancient Greek writings attest to the remarkable stability of the core night-mare experience over the past two millennia, but, just as we have seen in contemporary settings, specific explanations for the experience varied and competing interpretations coexisted. In opposition to the popular conception of night-mares as the visits of evil spirits, for example, the ancient Greek physicians denounced any suggestion of supernatural origins. According to Soranos, the sleeper may be convinced that the pressing demon is trying to violate him or her: "Some are so affected by empty visions that they believe they are being attacked and forced to the vilest acts" (Roscher 1900, 19). Physicians argued that the night-mare's "empty visions" found their origin not in the supernatural, but in a variety of gastric disturbances following the eating of indigestible food, general overeating, or alcoholic excess. They noted that the state of "sleep-drunkenness," the transitional phase between sleep and wakefulness, is particularly favorable to the production of night-mares. Sometimes, before falling completely asleep or just after waking up, visions of the "dream" may persist so vividly that the sleeper mistakenly believes that he or she sees the vision in actual reality. Although ancient Greek physicians associated the night-mare with epilepsy and madness, they considered it a true disease only if it occurred chronically (Roscher 1900).

Despite the development of naturalistic explanations, the popular belief in ephialtes as an actual being persisted for some time. Ephialtes was thought to be a shape-shifter, able to take on various forms during his nocturnal attacks on helpless human victims. He might initially appear as a familiar person before transforming into a horribly disfigured creature. The dead could also reappear as vengeful night-mares. The Roman poet Horace describes several witch-like hags attempting to murder an innocent boy to obtain a love charm from his "parched marrow and dried liver." The unfortunate child pleads with them to spare his life, but when he realizes that they cannot be swayed from their evil purpose, he threatens to return from the dead to attack them: "Every night, incumbent on your troubled breasts/I will chase off your sleep with fear and trembling" (Roscher 1900, 28). The revenant (ephialtes) became a well-known

manifestation of the night-mare spirit, and fear-induced sleep loss was a classic consequence of an attack by such a being. Soranos explains: "Those who have suffered from the affliction for a long time are pale and thin, for, because of their fear, they do not get sleep" (Roscher 1900, 28). The gaunt, drawn appearance of the night-mare sufferer, particularly on the morning after an attack, is commonplace in folk tradition (as we have seen with the haggard/hag-ridden connection in Newfoundland).

In addition to purely terrifying attacks brought on by ephialtes, the ancient Greeks and Romans also recognized a type of sexual experience involved in supernatural contact related to sleep. Unlike Horace's vengeful revenant, ephialtes could also appear with sexual intent. The Greek historian Herodotus provides an account of an ephialtes who appeared to the (unnamed) wife of King Ariston of Sparta in the form of the king himself—although it was in actuality the spirit of the deceased hero Astrobacus. According to the queen:

> There came to me an appearance like to Ariston, and lay with me, and then put on me the garlands which he had. So when that figure was gone, presently Ariston came to me. Seeing the garlands on me, he asked me who had given them; I said they were his gift, but he denied it. Then I said, and swore it, that . . . he had come a little while ago and lain with me and so given me the garlands. When Ariston saw that I swore to that, he perceived that the hand of heaven was in the matter. (Herodotus 6, 65–69)

Although ephialtes could apparently manifest as both erotic and nonerotic night-mares, the precise differentiation that was made in the classical world between sexual sleep-related experiences and attacks of the night-mare remains difficult to determine (Hufford 1982).

Pan

The night-mare was not only a shape-shifter that could morph into a variety of forms, it could also manifest as a hideous hybrid, combining both human and animal features. Ephialtes was particularly identified with minor woodland deities, such as Pan and the satyrs (Roscher 1900). The ancient Greeks depicted these beings as primarily human from the waist up, but with goat horns and legs.[4] Pan's attacks were associated with *panikos* or panic; precisely the type of response appropriate to a night-mare attack. His visits were intimately connected with feelings of terror, and he was seen as the initiator of dreams, visions, and night-mares—particularly those that create sudden and overpowering fright.

Scholars have proposed a number of imaginative theories as they surmise how Pan came to be associated with the night-mare. The German classicist Wilhelm Roscher suggests, "The usual bedding in ancient times was the skin of a goat or cloth made of goat's hair, which by its very nature must have conjured up the appearance of goat-like nightmare demons in the person afflicted with the nightmare" (1900, 72). Literary scholar Nicolas Kiessling contends (no less fancifully) that "in the rude imagination of the sex-starved shepherd this god not unnaturally took on the shape and actions of his rams and he-goats in the mating season" (1977, 4). Despite these conjectures, however, there is no evidence that the night-mare of antiquity had a central erotic component. Roscher, who traced the night-mare from ancient Greece through the Renaissance in a work entitled *Pan and the Nightmare* (1900), took for granted the existence of a night-mare/erotic dream complex already in classical antiquity, but there is no indication that Pan night-mares possessed an erotic dimension until the second-century CE dream interpreter Artemidorus (author of *Oneirocritica*, a dream interpretation manual) wrote:

> Ephialtes is identified with Pan but he has a different meaning. If he oppresses or weighs a man down without speaking, it signifies tribulations and distress. But whatever he says upon interrogation is true. If he gives someone something or has sexual intercourse with someone, it foretells great profit, especially if he does not weigh that person down. (Artemidorus 1975, 2:37)

Before this time, folk tradition apparently maintained two relatively distinct categories of sleep-related experience: the erotic interaction and the pressing night-mare attack (Chambers 1999).

Unclassifiable Entities

Before I present the history and evolution of other discrete night-mare beings, I want to emphasize that not all encounters (or more accurately, not all descriptions of encounters) lend themselves to such ready categorization. There may have been many more examples of night-mares in the world's historical traditions that were simply not preserved in sufficient detail. One well-known instance for which there is inadequate narrative information is the biblical description of Jacob's nocturnal wrestling with a "stranger" (Gen. 32:25). The potential allusion to a night-mare is intriguing, perhaps, but despite ongoing debates among those interested in the history of parasomnias—that is, undesirable sleep-related phenomena—there is not enough information to be able to classify the struggle as a night-mare encounter. The same is true for the account of a mystical experience of the Prophet Muhammad. Some details of the event

sound quite familiar, but the interaction cannot be definitively categorized. One night in 610 CE, Muhammad was awakened from sleep and felt himself "enveloped by a devastating divine presence."

> An angel had appeared to him and given him a curt command: 'Recite!' (*iqra!*) . . . Muhammad refused, protesting, "I am not a reciter!" [that is, he was not one of the ecstatic soothsayers claiming to recite inspired oracles]. But . . . the angel simply enveloped him in an overpowering embrace, so that he felt as if all the breath was being squeezed from his body. Just as he felt he could bear it no longer, the angel released him and again commanded him to "Recite!" (*iqra!*). Again Muhammad refused and again the angel embraced him until he felt that he had reached the limits of his endurance. Finally, at the end of a third terrifying embrace Muhammad found the first words of a new scripture [ultimately called the *Qur'an* or Recitation] pouring from his mouth. (Armstrong 1994, 137)

In the account of Muhammad's struggle, some characteristics of the night-mare are evident, including awakening to a presence, hearing a brief audible command, and being held in a crushing embrace.

The night-mare figure is clearly evident in later Muslim folk traditions. Avicenna (Ibn Sina), one of the greatest medieval physicians, describes the night-mare in his *Canon*, using three Arabic terms: *al-kabus*, the squeezer; *al-khanaq*, the strangler; and *al-gathum*, that which alights or perches (Jarcho 1980, 254). (Like the ancient Greek physicians, Avicenna believed that the night-mare was related to disturbances of the brain: apoplexy, epilepsy, or mania.) The fact that there is evidence of subsequent folk traditions, however, is insufficient grounds on which to characterize either Jacob's or Muhammad's encounters as a night-mare, particularly in the absence of more detailed descriptions of the phenomenology of their experiences.

Mara/Mare

The night-mare not only thrived in ancient and classical traditions, but in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse beliefs, as well. According to Ernest Jones, the Welsh neurologist and psychoanalyst, "*mara*, from the verb *merran*, literally means a 'crusher,' and the connotation of a crushing weight on the breast is common to the corresponding words in allied languages (Icelandic *mara*, Danish *mare*, Low German *moore*, Bohemian *mara*, Swedish *mara*, Old High German *mara*)" (1931, 243). The mara is referenced in the earliest Anglo-Saxon literature, in the epic poem *Beowulf*. The monster Grendel, referred to at least twice by the term *maere*, is described as a descendent of Cain (Kiessling 1968). (Early mystical Jewish literature depicts Lilith as returning to torment Adam after her sojourn in the Red Sea, but not before attacking Cain and bearing numerous spirits and demons as

a result of their union.) Grendel, a cannibalistic devourer, invariably carries out his attacks in the dead of night on sleeping men, crushing and tearing them apart. Prior to Beowulf's confrontation with Grendel, Hrothgar explains that previous heroes have been defeated, in part, because they were unable to remain awake during the night when Grendel preferred to attack.

The mara makes another literary appearance in the twelfth-century Icelandic poem, *Heimskringla*. In some societies, the night-mare is not attributed to an evil spirit, but rather to the magical activities of living beings who are motivated by envy and malice. The Finnish princess, Driva, was angered because her husband, Vanlandi, left her to visit Sweden for several years. When Vanlandi did not come home by the time he had promised, Driva bribed a witch to enchant Vanlandi into returning or, if the sorcery failed, to kill him. When Vanlandi's companions would not allow him to leave, the witch crushed the warrior to death.

> A drowsiness overcame him and he lay down to sleep. But he had hardly gone to sleep when he called out, saying that a nightmare rode him. His men went to him and wanted to help him. But when they took hold of his head the nightmare trod on his legs so they nearly broke; and when they seized his feet it pressed down on his head so that he died. (Sturluson 1932, 9–10)

The Swedes cremated Vanlandi's body near the Skuta River and set a stone for him which read: "There trod the troll-wise sorceress on the warrior lord. And there was burned on the Skuta bank that generous man whom the Mare killed" (Sturluson 1932, 10). This medieval Icelandic example not only blurs the distinction between the mara and the human witch, but incorporates the belief, as seen in the Lilith tradition, that the night-mare can cause death.

British historian Owen Davies argues that by the early modern period, the archaic mara was no longer a current concept in many countries, including France and England, and that the principal figure of supernatural evil in most people's lives was the witch. Even in regions where belief in the mara continued, it was closely linked with a living, human witch. In Poland, the term *zmora* designated "people who are alive and able to disturb their neighbors' sleep by making them feel an enormous weight resting upon their body" (Schiffman 1987). As we will see, this association of the night-mare with human witches became one of the most salient historical transformations of the pressing spirit in early modern Europe.

Incubus and Succubus

The term *incubus* (from the Latin *incubare*, which means "to lie upon") came into use around the beginning of the Common Era (Stewart 2002). Several centuries

later, *succubus* ("to lie under") became the word reserved to denote the female pressing spirit. The feminine term is conceptually confusing, though, because the succubus typically lies *upon* the sleeper, as well. More recently, the gender distinction has become blurred and *incubus* has been used to refer to night-mare spirits of either sex.

Since ancient times, people recognized that at least two different kinds of experience were included in traditions of supernatural contact related to sleep: one that primarily involved feelings of terror and another that contained a sexual element (Chambers 1999). Some terms for these events have been used in a restricted sense, referring to sexual encounters or to terrifying attacks involving pressure and restraint. Other terms are broader and can refer to either or both experiences. *Incubus* appears to have had sexual connotations from its initial appearance in early Christian tradition.

Monks of the early Church believed that demons inspired sexual dreams. These evil spirits were able to manipulate individuals' thoughts and memories and to activate or set in motion sinful ideas. Unholy thoughts were thus originally conceptualized as an inevitable part of the human condition. According to Evagrius, who became a monk in Egypt around 382 CE, "it is not up to us whether evil thoughts might trouble the soul or leave it in peace. What does depend on us is whether they linger or not, and whether they set the passions in motion or not" (Stewart 2002, 289). A sleeper, for example, had some degree of power in determining to what extent he would be affected by his dreams. If sleep events were thus controllable, then anyone who experienced an unholy dream was potentially responsible. The culpability of human beings was of particular concern in determining the level of sinfulness involved in erotic dreams and nocturnal emissions. Excusable nocturnal emissions were thought to become sinful if they resulted from erotic dreams that the sleeper had allowed to linger, and, most importantly, had been consensual (Elliott 1999, 20). The Christian laity thus came to view the erotic dream as dangerous.[5] Potentially pleasurable sexual dreams were demonized and joined with manifestations of the pressing, strangling night-mare to give rise to a night-mare/erotic dream complex. The available label adopted to refer to this dual experience was *incubus*. The sexual night-mare and the terrorizing night-mare traditions were therefore not merged until the early Christian period, when the "control of inner cupidity became a salient diagnostic of spiritual progress" (Stewart 2002, 280).

It was not only the Christian laity who recognized the incubus; Augustine writes in *De Civitate Dei* that he accepts the reality of the existence of these evil erotic beings.

> There is, too, a very general rumor, which many have verified by their own experience, or which trustworthy persons who have heard the experience of others corroborate, that sylvans and Pans, who are commonly

> called "incubi," had often made wicked assaults upon women, and satisfied their lust upon them; and that certain devils, called Duses by the Gauls, are constantly attempting and effecting this impurity is so generally affirmed, that it were impudent to deny it. (Augustine 15:23)

As we have seen in the context of the contemporary night-mare, however, this eroticization of the encounter is not a peculiarity of European history. The erotic form of the night-mare tradition is less easily traced than its primary features, but it is an aspect of the experience that appears in different historical and cultural contexts.[6]

Witch Trials

In the sixteenth century, by the time of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the witch hunts had already begun. Trials often included accusations of sex with the devil, and the incubus was not infrequently a key figure in the legal proceedings. The primary charge against women accused of witchcraft was that they had made a pact with Satan; sexual encounters with the devil were believed to seal the pact, as well as confer on the devil complete power over the witch. The allegation that a human being had had sex with the devil (in the form of an incubus) was, in fact, the chief accusation in many trials, and countless women were burned as witches as a direct result of this particular interpretation of a night-mare attack (Powell 1973). Part of the debate surrounding witchcraft focused on whether submission to an incubus was sufficient evidence that a woman was a witch. This question contributed to a larger controversy over whether witchcraft genuinely involved unnatural acts or whether its primary crime was heresy (Hufford 1982).

Manuals devoted to witch hunting developed detailed schema of incubi and succubi that interacted with human beings to further the devil's cause. The most notorious of these compendia of lore about witches, incubi, and demons in the later Middle Ages is *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), written by two Dominican friars, Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger. The 1495 edition of the text opens with Pope Innocent VIII's famous "Witch Bull": "It has indeed lately come to Our ears, not without afflicting Us with bitter sorrow, that . . . many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic Faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi, and succubi." Kramer and Sprenger give particularly forceful expression to the traditional incubus beliefs. The authors contend that women are more susceptible to the night-mare than men—since they are more feeble and credulous and less self-controlled—and that widows and virgins (particularly nuns) are disturbed more often than married women. In a change from earlier views, Kramer and Sprenger also note that "the Incubus devils used to infest women against their wills," but in the present, witches "willingly embrace this most foul and miserable servitude" (1971, 111).

Incubi were believed to be incapable of procreating without the assistance of human beings. Kramer and Sprenger describe the elaborate process whereby a succubus gathers semen by having intercourse with a man and then transforming herself, or transmitting the semen, to an incubus, who in turn impregnates a woman. The authors devote much of their text to the habits of incubi and succubi and discuss a number of questions, such as "How do witches copulate with incubi?" and "Does the incubus operate more at one time than another?" Literary historian Nicolas Kiessling points out that the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* "marshal lengthy arguments from every church father that they have available and every word of Scripture that has been related to the subject. Their reason and logic show little imagination. But they are utterly frank in describing the lurid details of intercourse with demons" (1977, 38). The effect of the exhaustive witchcraft manuals, as well as the prosecutions, was to further elaborate upon and maximally diffuse the night-mare tradition.

Contemporary historians and folklorists have noted that it is possible, even likely, that many of the preternatural experiences described during witch trials did not initially contain sexual elements (e.g., Chambers 1999). Rather, inquiring authorities assumed that witchcraft must involve sexual acts with the devil/incubus and so they steered narratives in that direction through their questioning: "Judges showed a particular interest in the issue of whether the intercourse with the devil was voluntary or forced, frightening or pleasurable. Whether or not actual erotic nightmares or erotic dreams had occurred to the accused, there was a likelihood that erotic nightmare scenarios would occupy a conspicuous place in the final confession" (Stewart 2002, 293). Ironically, the Church's zealous efforts to throw off the incubus appear only to have strengthened its hold.[7]

One of the best ways to study the night-mare beliefs of early modern Europe is to examine trial records of the time (Davies 2003). In England in 1599, for example, a woman named Olive Barthram was prosecuted for witchcraft. During the trial, her neighbor, Joan Jorden, testified that a shape-changing spirit sent by Barthram tormented her at night. The intruder, which entered through the chimney, was "a thick dark substance about a foot high, like to a sugar loaf, white on top."[8] On another occasion, the spirit appeared in the shape of a cat and made rustling noises:

> At II o'clock at night, first scraping on the walls, then knocking, after that shuffling in the rushes: . . . [he] kissed her three or four times, and slavered on her, and lying on her breast he pressed her so sore that she could not speak, at other times he held her hands that she could not stir, and restrained her voice that she could not answer. (Ewen 1933, 188)

The records from the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 reveal that the incubus played a similarly significant role in colonial American prosecutions. Cotton

Mather, a socially and politically influential Puritan minister, successfully argued that it was appropriate to admit spectral evidence into the legal proceedings (Mather 1692). Thus, in Salem, just as in the earlier trials in Europe, testimony that the accused witch's spirit (specter) appeared to the witness in a dream or vision—regardless of the physical location of the accused at the time—could be admitted as evidence.

Two of the clearest examples of these spectral night-mare encounters appear in testimony during the trials of Bridget Bishop and Susanna Martin. The transcripts of the proceedings show that during the course of Bishop's trial, Richard Coman alleged that, while he was in bed eight years before, "the curtains at the foot of the bed opened where [he] did see her and [she] presently came and lay upon [his] breast or body and so oppressed him that he could not speak nor stir, no, not so much as to awake his wife, although he endeavored much so to do it"[9] (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1977, 1:102). Similarly, during Susanna Martin's trial, Bernard Peach testified that

> being in bed on a Lord's day night he heard a scratching at the window. He saw Susanna Martin, wife of George Martin of Amsbury, come in at the window and jump down upon the floor. . . . She . . . took hold of [his feet] and drew up his body into a heap and lay upon him about an hour and a half or two hours, in all which time this deponent could not stir nor speak. Feeling himself beginning to be loosened or lightened, he began to strive to put out his hand among the clothes and took hold of her hand and brought it up to his mouth and bit three of the fingers . . . to the breaking of the bones, after which Susanna Martin went out of the chamber. (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1977, 2:562)

The transcripts of the Salem witch trials preserve such detailed accounts of night-mare episodes that we can, once again, easily recognize the consistent features of the experience. As further evidence of the stability of the night-mare's symptoms, folklorist Patricia Rickels published a small collection of night-mare accounts in 1961 from her fieldwork in Louisiana. She describes the reaction of a study participant: "I read her the account of one of Bridget Bishop's victims, written down in Salem, in 1693, and she approved it as 'Just right'" (1961, 59). Nearly three hundred years after they were first described, details of night-mare attacks were both recognizable and deemed accurate.

The question of the reality of witchcraft and the locus of responsibility for night-mare encounters was never uniformly decided during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the main period of witch hunting. The belief in seductive incubi and succubi was, however, seriously challenged in the writings of Reginald Scot, who, in the process of proving that witches do not exist, dismissed all stories of evil night-mare spirits: "Thus are lecheries covered with

the cloke of *Incubus* and witchcraft . . . speciallie to excuse and meinteine the knaveries and lecheries of idle priests and bawdie monkes; and to cover the shame of their lovers and concubines" (1584, 48). Scot believed that incubus accounts were fabricated to disguise the lechery of priests. He cites lines from *Canterbury Tales* to support his argument:

> Wommen may go now saufly up and doun;
> In every bussh or under every tree
> Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
> And he ne wol doun hem but dishonour. (Chaucer 1957, 3:878–881)

Thus, in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," Chaucer writes satirically that incubi became less frequent with the introduction of mendicant friars, who, he insinuates, replaced them. He asserts that "dishonoring" (in the sense of violating chastity) is well within the capability of friars—there is no need to attribute the behavior to incubi.

Another sixteenth-century work, *Daemonologie*, by King James I of England, also questions the belief in demonic incubi (although not that in witches). James uses the literary device of a debate between two fictitious characters to discuss the reality of witchcraft and, in the process, challenge the supernatural status of the incubus:

> PHILOMATHES: Is it not the thing which we cal the Mare, which takes folkes sleeping in their bedds, a kinde of these spirites, whereof ye are speaking?
>
> EPISTEMON: No, that is but a naturall sicknes, which the Mediciners hath given that name of Incubus unto ab incubando, because it being a thick fleume, falling into our breast upon the harte, while we are sleeping, intercludes so our vitall spirites, and takes all power from us, as maks us think that there were some unnaturall burden or spirite, lying upon us and holding us downe. (James I 2008, 64)

Despite growing acceptance of natural causation for the incubus, however, spectral evidence of bewitchment was accepted by courts until the eighteenth century (and beyond, in some parts of Europe) (Davies 1996). The witchcraft prosecutions continued even though there was a high degree of controversy about the status of both witches and incubus encounters. Part of the reason for this seeming inconsistency is the fact that not all instances of unusual occurrences were attributed to supernatural causes. Even a robust tradition of night-mare attacks did not preclude some events from being interpreted as figments of the imagination. As Owen Davies explains this critical difference, it was only when "the nightmare experience tied in with other misfortunes, or occurred repeatedly, that witchcraft came to be suspected or confirmed" (2003, 188).

Night-mare

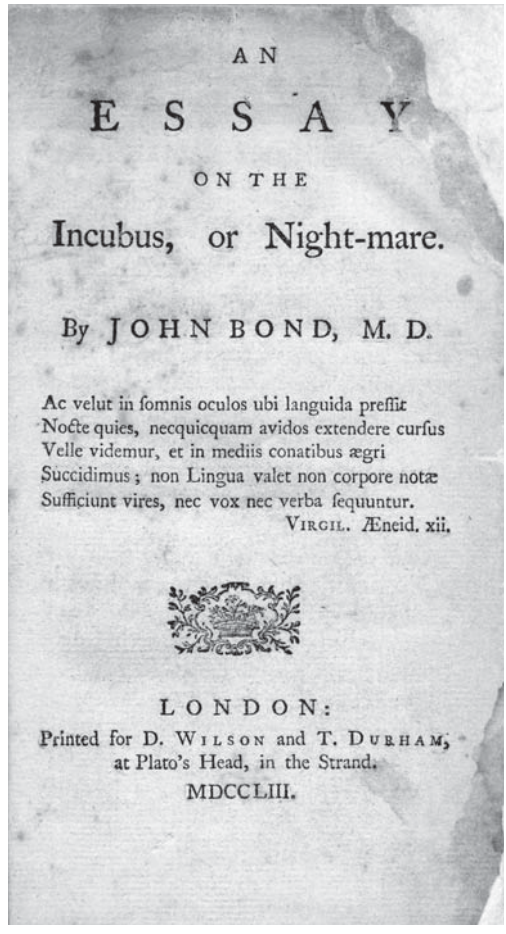
In early modern times, the incubus was a standard feature of European medical treatises and the subject of occasional theses. The night-mare was secularized and naturalized, de-emphasizing the origins of its etymological root—*mara*, the pressing spirit—and the term *incubus* came to denote a set of physical symptoms rather than a supernatural entity. Between 1650 and 1850, physicians wrote more than twenty five treatises on the night-mare (Jones 1931). These medical works depicted the experience as having an entirely natural etiology. For many people, the erotic night-mare reverted to a separate experience, distinct from an encounter characterized by feelings of overwhelming fear and oppression.

British medical texts from the Enlightenment characterized the night-mare primarily in terms of its accompanying feelings of anxiety, terror, and suffocation. Three of these accounts are worth quoting at length for the evidence they provide of the historical continuity of the encounter, even in the absence of a unifying supernatural framework. Of the many authors who wrote on the subject, the overwhelming majority were themselves night-mare sufferers (as is still the case today). One of these was a Scottish physician, John Bond, who authored the first medical night-mare treatise written in English, *An Essay on the Incubus, or Night-mare* (see illustration 2.1). (Bond's treatise was based on his doctoral thesis [1751]. Although his similarly themed dissertation predates my own by close to two hundred and fifty years, I have always felt an affinity for his work.) In the book's preface, Bond discloses his personal stake in the topic as well as reports on the then-current state of night-mare research:

> Being much afflicted with the Night-mare, self-preservation made me particularly inquisitive about it. . . . The few Authors who have mention'd it . . . have also given imperfect accounts of it; which are probably owing to their not having felt it themselves: for, as it only seizes People in sleep, continues but a short time, and vanishes as soon as they awake, the Physician has not an opportunity of making observations of his own, but must take all from the description of others, who have labour'd under it. These, I believe, are the reasons that the principal Writers in Physic have taken so little notice of it. These omissions however render an inquiry into the nature of this Disease the more interesting and necessary, and, at the same time, the more difficult. (1753, preface)

He also includes the following vivid description of the experience itself:

> The Night-mare generally seizes people sleeping on their backs, and often begins with frightful dreams, which are soon succeeded by a difficult respiration, a violent oppression on the breast, and a total privation of voluntary motion. In this agony they sigh, groan, utter indistinct sounds, and remain in the jaws of death, till, by the utmost efforts of their



AN

ESSAY

ON THE

Incubus, or Night-mare.

By JOHN BOND, M. D.

Ac velut in somnis oculos ubi languida pressit
Nocte quies, nec quicquam avidos extendere cursus
Velle videmur, et in mediis conatibus ægri
Succidimus; non Lingua valet non corpore notæ
Sufficiunt vires, nec vox nec verba sequuntur.
VIRGIL. Æneid. xii.

LONDON:
Printed for D. WILSON and T. DURHAM,
at Plato's Head, in the Strand.
MDCCLIII.

2.1. Title Page of John Bond's 1753 *An Essay on the Incubus, or Night-mare.*

The treatise, which is a translation and expansion of Bond's dissertation, *De Incubo*, appears to be the first English medical work on the night-mare. The Latin text reads: "and as in dreams of night, when languorous sleep has weighed down our eyes, we seem to strive vainly to press on our eager course, and in mid effort sink helpless: our tongue lacks power, our wonted strength fails our limbs, nor voice nor words ensue" (Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.908–911). The reproduction was made from an original in the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.

> nature, or some external assistance, they escape out of that dreadful torpid state. As soon as they shake off that vast oppression, and are able to move the body, they are affected by strong palpitation, great anxiety, languor, and uneasiness; which symptoms gradually abate, and are succeeded by the pleasing reflection of having escaped such imminent danger. (Bond 1753, 2–3)

Despite their literary tone, accounts such as this—related by people with firsthand experience—provide a realistic sense of the monumental terror of the night-mare. Bond's naturalistic framework for understanding the night-mare does not reduce its terror for him. He writes that he was "so much oppress'd by this enemy of rest" that "I would have given ten thousand worlds like this for some Person that would either pinch, shake, or turn me off my Back;

and I have been so much afraid of its intolerable insults, that I have slept in a chair all night, rather than give it an opportunity of attacking me in an horizontal position" (Bond 1753, 71).[10] Bond associates the night-mare with overconsumption and immoderate behavior; it is nothing but "the offspring of excess" (1753, preface). Failure to "cure" night-mares could prove fatal, but Bond asserts that the night-mare can be treated: "the most effectual remedy is to rouse them as soon as possible, by changing the position of the Body, and applying some keen stimulus immediately, such as pricking with a pin, speaking loud, etc." (71).

Medical interest in the night-mare phenomenon continued through the nineteenth century (Dacome 2004). The emphasis remained on the devastating terror that was naturally induced by the attacks. John Waller, a surgeon in England's Royal Navy—and a night-mare sufferer—attempted to elucidate the experience in order to minimize the distress of those similarly afflicted. He explains that the sleeper

> feels to be oppressed with some weight which confines him upon his back and prevents his breathing, which is now become extremely laborious, so that the lungs cannot be fully inflated by any effort he can make. The sensation is now the most painful that can be conceived; the person becomes every instant more awake and conscious of his situation: he makes violent efforts to move his limbs, especially his arms, with a view of throwing off the incumbent weight, but not a muscle will obey the impulse of the will: he groans aloud, if he has strength to do it, while every effort he makes seems to exhaust the little remaining vigour. The difficulty of breathing goes on increasing, so that every breath he draws, seems to be almost the last that he is likely to draw; the heart generally moves with increased velocity, sometimes is affected with palpitation; the countenance appears ghastly, and the eyes are half open. (1816, 22–23)

Waller's treatise also emphasizes the natural causes of the phenomenon and is memorable for his statement that, while on duty in the West Indies, he could produce an attack of incubus at any time by eating avocados (1816, 105). Waller, like Bond before him, continues the line of reasoning, evident since ancient times, that blames "indigestible foods" for night-mare attacks. This approach maintains that night-mares are the manifestation of a disordered body (due to intemperance), rather than the result of a spiritual force. A decade after Waller's publication, physician James Thatcher listed other popular natural etiologies in *American Modern Practice*: the night-mare is "a nervous affection, and arises chiefly from indigestion and oppression of the stomach, in consequence of eating a heavy supper just before going to bed. Wind in the stomach is also a very frequent cause of this complaint. Deep thought, anxiety,

and a sedentary life may produce the night-mare" (Thatcher 1826, 610). Naturalistic beliefs such as these remain current today.

The final nineteenth-century medical description I will include was written by the physician Robert MacNish in *The Philosophy of Sleep*:

> Imagination cannot conceive the horrors [the night-mare] frequently gives rise to, or language describe it in adequate terms. . . . Everything horrible, disgusting or terrifying in the physical or moral world is brought before [the victim] in fearful array; he is hissed at by serpents, tortured by demons, stunned by the hollow voices and cold touch of apparitions. . . . At one moment he may have the consciousness of the malignant being at his side . . . its icy breath is felt diffusing itself over his visage, and he knows he is face-to-face with a fiend. . . . Or, he may have the idea of a monstrous hag squatted upon his breast—mute, motionless and malignant . . . whose intolerable weight crushes the breath out of his body. (1834, 123–124)

MacNish recognized that people can be fully conscious during the experience but paralyzed and mute—though sometimes they are able to produce moaning or groaning sounds. Attempting to cry out, a person may hallucinate that he or she is actually shouting and wonder "that the household are not alarmed by his noise" (1834, 126). The inhibition of speech is described clearly: "his voice is half-choked by impending suffocation, and . . . any exertion of it, farther than a deep sigh or groan, is impossible" (126). Noting that, during a night-mare, the individual is "more or less awake," MacNish describes the accompanying sense of terror as so great that the experience of it is "one of the most distressing to which human nature is subject" (123).

While the night-mare was thus subjected to the medical gaze, it managed once more to excite the supernatural imagination by leaping into the realm of art and fiction. We have already seen that the theological elaboration of the erotic night-mare reanimated the belief that the partner in a sexual dream was an actual being. Now again, when medicine had almost completely vanquished the demonic night-mare, "the romantics revitalized it in a sort of backlash against the tyranny of reason" (Stewart 2002, 300).

A mid-eighteenth-century painting, *The Nightmare*, was an enormously influential inspiration to writers and artists. More than fifty-five thousand people attended the London exhibition of the work (out of a city population totaling fewer than seven hundred and fifty thousand) (McNamara 2008). The artist, Henry Fuseli, first exhibited his painting at the Royal Academy, where it prompted reactions of shock and fascination.[11] (The 1751 version is reproduced on the cover of this book.) *The Nightmare* depicts a supine, possibly sleeping woman whose head and arms hang over the edge of a bed as she is assaulted by a demonic creature who squats heavily on her stomach. A horse head with

wildly staring eyes peers through curtains in the background, and a bedside table holds a mirror that does not reflect the demon's image (Baumann, Lentzsch, Regard, and Bassetti 2007). (The equine figure is most likely a consequence of the common misconception that night-*mare* is etymologically related to a female horse.) There is no record of Fuseli's inspiration for this subject (it is also the focus of some of his other paintings), but, perhaps, as is the case with so many writers and scientists who engage the night-mare, he himself suffered from sleep paralysis.[12] Regardless of the immediate source of Fuseli's image, it "impressed itself so firmly on the mind of the public that caricaturists were immediately able to make use of it for personal or political satires, and went on using it for decades afterwards" (Powell 1973, 17) (see illustration 2.2).

Artistic representations of the night-mare in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England often featured a female victim. The reason for this may be that the supine position was viewed as too passive for men. Consider, for example, Mercutio's joking comment in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,/That presses them, and learns them first to bear,/Making them women of good carriage" (I.iv.97–99). The image of the passive female night-mare victim is captured by Erasmus Darwin (a physician,

2.2. "The Night Mare" shows John Bull in bed, William Pitt as the incubus, and a French Jacobin looking through the window in place of Fuseli's horse. (Caricature of William Pitt. Attributed to Temple Webb, August 13, 1795. London, British Museum.)

naturalist, and poet, as well as the grandfather of Charles) in a poem inspired by Fuseli's painting:

> The Night-mare . . .
> Seeks some love-wilder'd Maid with sleep oppress'd,
> Alights, and grinning sits upon her breast . . .
> Back o'er her pillow sinks her blushing head,
> Her snow-white limbs hang helpless from the bed;
> While with quick sighs and suffocative breath
> Her interrupted heart-pulse swims in death . . .
> O'er her fair limbs convulsive tremors fleet;
> Start in her hands, and struggle in her feet;
> In vain to scream with quivering lips she tries,
> And strains in palsy'd lids her tremulous eyes;
> In vain she *wills* to run, fly, swim, walk, creep;
> The WILL presides not in the bower of SLEEP.
> (1791, lines 53–74)

Fuseli's painting also influenced a much better known literary work, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.[13] Shelley was familiar with the painting, and her description of the dead Elizabeth appears to be modeled on Fuseli's depiction: "She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair" (Shelley 1831). In the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley writes that her inspiration for the book came while she was vacationing in Switzerland with an illustrious group that included Lord Byron and her soon-to-be husband, Percy. In order to stave off the boredom of being confined indoors because of stormy weather, the group decided to compose horror stories.[14] Shelley was unable to come up with an idea until, late one night, she experienced what she called a "waking dream," elements of which resemble a nightmare experience:

> When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. . . . I see them still; the very room, the dark parquet, the closed shutters, with the moonlight struggling through. . . . I could not so easily get rid of my hideous phantom; still it haunted me. I must try to think of something else. I recurred to my ghost story,—my tiresome unlucky ghost story! O! if I could only contrive one which would frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night! Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. I have found it!

> What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow. On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story. I began that day with the words, It was on a dreary night of November, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream. (Shelley 1831, 9)

Despite the view of one late nineteenth-century scholar that the "subject . . . is of such gross and revolting a nature that it should willingly be passed over in silence" (Spalding 1880, 118), there were a number of night-mare sightings in contemporary fiction. The night-mare made a variety of appearances in literary works, from a simile in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*—"There was that tightness on my chest that I could hardly breathe; the thought of the two men I had shot sat upon me like a nightmare" (Stevenson 1886, 92)—to a leading role in Thomas Hardy's *Wessex Tales*:

> Rhoda Brook dreamed—since her assertion that she really saw, before falling asleep, was not to be believed—that the young wife, in the pale silk dress and white bonnet, but with features shockingly distorted, and wrinkled as by age, was sitting upon her chest as she lay. The pressure of Mrs. Lodge's person grew heavier; the blue eyes peered cruelly into her face; and then the figure thrust forward its left hand mockingly, so as to make the wedding-ring it wore glitter in Rhoda's eyes. Maddened mentally, and nearly suffocated by pressure, the sleeper struggled; the incubus, still regarding her, withdrew to the foot of the bed, only, however, to come forward by degrees, resume her seat, and flash her left hand as before. (Hardy 1896, 73)

Efforts at night-mare spotting yield results in American literature, as well. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" includes a reference to Fuseli's art, as well as this passage recounted by the short story's unnamed, increasingly unsettled narrator:

> Sleep came not near my couch—while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavored to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room—of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows. (Poe 1845, 77)

A few years later, Herman Melville's description of sleep paralysis was articulated through Ishmael in *Moby Dick*:

> Slowly waking from it—half steeped in dreams—I opened my eyes and the before sunlit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. (Melville 1851, 31)

There is also an extended description of a night-mare in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* and an allusion in Ernest Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*.

The night-mare is not restricted to fiction, however, but also appears in other works.[15] In describing the constraints of history-making, Karl Marx writes that the "tradition of all the generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx 1852, 289). Marx's simile retains the sense of oppressive weight, but in the late nineteenth century, the term *night-mare* had already begun a process of gradual generalization, first referring to "any bad dream," and then "a frightening experience or thing" (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). Over the last century, the term has been slowly drained of its original meaning. Memories of the ancient encounters have all but faded and the narratives are now rarely discussed. North Americans, with very few exceptions, are no longer familiar with names for the night-mare spirit. In 1997, the *New York Times* reported:

> Since last year, Reebok has been selling a women's running shoe dubbed the "Incubus." Trouble was, as an Arizona newspaper reader pointed out, an incubus is an evil spirit that in medieval times was thought to prey on sleeping women, having sex with them. A red-faced Reebok asked retailers to black out the name on the shoe boxes; the name fortunately does not appear on the shoe. (Vickers 1997)

More than 50,000 pairs of shoes were sold over the period of a year before someone realized that a demon that attacked women in their sleep was a poor choice of namesake for women's athletic apparel. Instead of disappearing along with the night-mare's original denotation, however, episodes of nocturnal assault have persisted. Despite the fact that the night-mare experience can no longer be easily described in some contemporary contexts, there continue to be encounters in widely scattered cultural settings around the world.