

Animals and Monsters in Woodcuts of the German Reformation

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Abstract: This article examines the propaganda woodcuts of the German Protestant Reformation, which drew heavily from biblical representations of animals. In fact, the German Reformation was reinforced by a mass of these powerful images. The paper studies some of the woodcuts of Martin Luther, with special emphasis on the radical nature of his ideas, thus presenting a new interpretation of the period. It also looks at those elements of popular culture and belief which are now seen to have played a central role in shaping the development and outcome of the 16th Century reform movements. The author concludes that what came to be called “the original written source” was but one of a broad range of oral and visual sources, all equally valid, referring to matters of religious and social reform. The author also suggests that Luther was more radical than has traditionally been claimed. If the written documentation did not paint a complete picture of the Reformation in that country, then the visual images of that period allow us to plug that gap.

Key Words: Protestant Propaganda, woodcuts of the German Reformation, images of Luther, Animals and Monsters

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Throughout the history of Christianity, artists have had the strongest desire to represent God and His creations via material images. Animals and monsters played unique roles in allegorical Bible stories, while the images combined Christian and vernacular culture. Their meanings were clearly delineated by the Catholic Church to stand for remembrance and to reinforce piety. However, Protestant propagandists discovered that those images were useful as powerful visual weapons to attack their enemies in Reformation Germany.

Numerous broadsheets and woodcuts conflated the images of the Antichrist and the Devil with those of the Pope and Martin Luther. The Pope appeared as a monster and Luther was given seven grotesque heads. This motif was typical in 16th century woodcuts. The impact of these works was enormous; it resulted in shaping the form and direction of Protestant propaganda and bolstered Protestant reforms.

Printing as a new reproduction technique also had a unique place in this period, as it was the first time in human history that images and knowledge were effectively combined. They channelled a growing movement for change. As Caroline Donnellan notes, “It was cheaper and more effective as a way of disseminating

images...prints could reach a larger audience outside the court.”^[1] It was only with the expressive and novel animal imagery represented in the woodcuts that the evangelical movement rapidly developed into a social movement with the active participation of the common man. Protestant artists were aware of the fact that their images were a means to opening the gate to the sacred door, reinforcing doctrines that had been sealed for thousands of years. Even Martin Luther said that “simple folk...are more easily moved by pictures and images to recall divine history than by mere words or doctrines.”

The capacity of visual images to convey spiritual and textual messages was fully developed by the Protestant propagandists and used in the battle with Rome. Since the aim of Protestant propaganda was to spread the tenets of reform to the broadest possible audience, they filled the broadsheets and pamphlets with easy-to-understand texts and compelling pictures. The authors of these works were mostly Protestant reformers, folk priests or common people. Woodcuts with simple and expressive lines, created by top artists, adorned the covers. Illustrated books were extremely abundant, comprising discussions of (1) religious faith; (2) church malpractice and public complaints; (3) living conditions of the various social classes; (4) matters of marriage and family, explaining for example, how even monks could get married; (5) adjusting the relations between the government and the Church; (6) propaganda about the 1525 German peasant war; (7) guidance for the Christian life. Through such pamphlets, the public found answers to many of their questions. Religious reform was closely linked to the common people in their daily lives, as well as their political, social and economical demands. Thus the Reformation developed into a hugely popular, mass social reform campaign.

They translated the Word of God into a new language of images and symbols. Luther advocated a belief in the Bible above all else. All baptized Christians were priests, he wrote, attracting a large number of intellectuals and common men to join his movement. People wandered the streets and lanes, giving him vocal support by a variety of means. Abandoning outmoded, conservative means of knowledge dissemination, they adopted more flexible and creative means of propagandizing. Broadsheets, pamphlets and woodcuts were used as introductory materials. In this sense, as Robert Scribner has written, it could “work on several levels at once, sometimes simply denoting a message, but also building up layers of allusion, even teasing the reader to enter into a game with the artist.”^[2] With a forceful combination of text and visual materials, the reformers interacted closely with the masses. Their advocacy of profound struggle enabled the Reformation to evolve from a theological debate into an extensive populist revolution of great significance.

1. Animals in the Bible and Their Implications

Animals were frequently used in religious art to explain complex texts. They helped to transform complicated doctrines into simple imagery, thereby reaching a wide range of minimally-educated readers. As early as the 6th Century, Pope Gregory the Great had condoned the use of images as Bibles for people “who

[1] Caroline Donnellan, “Patrons and propaganda” in *Prints as Propaganda: The German Reformation* (London: University College London, 1999), 14.

[2] R. W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), xiv.

by looking at the walls read what they cannot read in books.”^[3] Thomas Aquinas agreed with and expanded upon Gregory’s theory. In order to instruct the illiterate and stimulate their religious emotions, he wrote, images could be more effective than words.^[4] Images, especially beautiful and grotesque ones, often provided striking viewing experiences that endured in the memory. For example, Protestant reformers would give unclean animals the crown and clothes of the Pope and his officers.

The differentiation between clean and unclean animals was outlined in the Bible. It first appeared in Genesis 7:2, when God ordered Noah to take with him “seven of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and two of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate.” Here, God did not mention which animal is clean and which one is unclean. Then in Genesis 8:20, after the flood, Noah emerged from his ark and built an altar to God. This time he took only “clean animals and birds. He made of them burnt offerings.” In this case, the distinction between “clean” and “unclean” was solely for the purpose of sacrifice. Later, in Leviticus 11:1-47 and Deuteronomy 14:3-20, it became clear that the distinction was also intended to prevent man from eating the wrong food. Apart from sanitation, animals that were worshipped by pagans were also forbidden, such as the Egyptian cat.

In Leviticus, for religious reasons, Israelites were permitted to eat only clean animals, in order to differentiate them from Gentiles. Those animals classified by Moses as unclean became negative symbols, and carried repulsive connotations in art and literature. According to the food rules, unclean animals were classified into four groups based on their physical characteristics and eating gestures. The first group were those animals who “only chewed the cud or had split hooves. You must not eat them,” the Bible instructed. “People must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses.”^[5] These animals included the camel, the coney,^[6] the rabbit, the pig and the rat. The second group includes fish without “fins and scales.”^[7] They were detestable. God did not list the fish belonging to this category, but cuttlefish, eel and whale would fit his description. The third group was birds. God provided a lengthy list of unclean birds, such as “the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, and kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, the little owl, the desert owl, the osprey, the stock, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.”^[8] Finally, the last group consisted of “winged, creeping animals,” those “flying insects that walk on all fours. They are to be detestable to you.” All the creeping animals were also unclean, includes “the weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon.”^[9]

The representation of animals as positive and negative symbols can be found in many early modern artifacts, with detailed descriptions in medieval bestiaries. The Book of Beasts, for instance, contains short, allegorical verses for each one, that serves as the bases for moral lessons. It combines knowledge of the Bible

[3] Vego Castro, “The problem of images: vision and spiritually” in *Prints as Propaganda: The German Reformation* (London: University College London, 1999), 21.

[4] *Ibid.*, 21.

[5] Leviticus 11:4-8.

[6] Small, herbivorous mammal resembling a rodent with hooflike toes.

[7] Leviticus 11:9-12.

[8] Leviticus 11:13-19.

[9] Leviticus 11:26-30.

with a variety of other sources. Many of them are imaginary creatures like unicorns, dragons and griffins. They were classified into four categories, beasts, birds, reptiles and fish. Christ, for example, was described by Solomon as being “symbolized by the panther being and animal of so many colors that by the wisdom of God the Father. . . and because it is a beautiful animal, the Lord God says of Christ, ‘He is beautiful in form among the sons of men.’”^[10] Meanwhile, according to Physiologus, the Panther-Christ had but one enemy, the Dragon.^[11] “When a Panther has dined and is full up...there comes a very sweet smell from its mouth, like the smell of allspice. When the other animals have heard its noise, they follow wherever it goes, because of the sweetness of this smell. Only the dragon, hearing the sound, flees into the caves of the earth... Then Panther-Christ “snatched us from the power of the Dragon-Devil on descending from the heaven.”^[12] Therefore, as an enemy of Christ, the dragon was deemed as the worst kind of animal, often likened to the Devil. Just as the Devil tried to deceive Jesus in Matthew 4:1, so the dragon would also deceive people. Later when it appeared in Reformation woodcuts, dragons carried a connotation equivalent to that of the Antichrist, often used to describe the Pope who was disseminating false Christian teachings.

When it came to a scenario full of animals gathering in one painting, the illustrator would have to decide carefully each animal’s location, position and meaning attributed to the theme. The Garden of Eden is the best example in this category. Martin Luther’s close friend, Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472—1553), who served as court painter to Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, depicted the Garden of Eden in 1526 (ill. 1). He caught the moment when Adam was about to receive the fruit from Eve in disobedience of God’s command.



Surrounding Adam and Eve are 13 animals, including the serpent. Obviously, the serpent was the vilest creature in the garden. It is said in Genesis 3:1 that it “was craftier than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made.” The two animals standing to each side of Adam and Eve are identified as symbols of Christ and the Christians, the lion and the sheep. The lion, according to medieval bestiaries is the “Prince of All Animals,” the symbol of the “Tribe of Judah.”^[13] Christ also belong to this line. The sheep signifies true and faithful Christians, for God has said in Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Behind the lion is a vicious boar. It could refer to the Antichrist, which possessed the opposite characters of the lamb. It was wild and rude in contrast with the modest and humble sheep. The placement of four stags around Adam and Eve is significant, for stags are “the serpent’s enemies.” They can “suck snakes from their holes with a snort of the nostrils and even survive the danger of their venom.”^[14] Moreover, they appeared in different ages, which would coincide with another of the stag’s features, people of different periods who are devoted to the Holy

[10] T. H. White ed., *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* (Capricorn Books, 1960), 15.

[11] *Ibid.*, 14.

[12] *Ibid.*, 14-15.

[13] *Ibid.*, 8.

[14] *Ibid.*, 37.

Church. At the bottom stands a stork, another “enemy of serpents,”^[15] while next to the stork stands a pair of partridges, signifying Adam and Eve. The female is always the wicked one. The female partridge “will go and steal the eggs of another female... Yet, in spite of her cheating, she derives no good from it.”^[16] After fall into temptation, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden. The most sacred creature in the painting is the white unicorn. That animal signifies Christ. Its posture of moving out of the picture suggests the expulsion of Adam and Eve resulting from original sin.

2. Pope Depicted as Evil Monsters

With the rapid development of printing techniques, German woodcuts were the most extensively produced and disseminated in 16th Century Europe. Animals and monsters as biblical symbols were used by artists in pamphlets and broadsheets describing the characters and doctrines of Protestant reformers and Catholic clergies. The Pope, as the leader of the Roman papacy, encountered extensive attacks from a Protestant campaign associating him with negative images. While promoting visual propaganda against each other, Protestant artists creatively combined Bible text with images as new instructional and powerful weapons. The intent was clear-to create and influence the attitudes and opinions of both their readers as well as their opponents. The creation of stereotypes by linking imaginary figures with special people would succeed only if the meaning of the images were familiar, with biblical foundations, giving them justification and legal standing.

Through centuries of image formation, talented and gifted artists, such as Lucas Cranach the Elder, acquired the ability to manipulated viewers’ attitudes and thoughts by delicately linking images with their reputations. They would dress the person in certain costumes or give them masks signifying their identities. Without pointing to any person in particular, they could avoid severe backlash. Meanwhile, people who had encountered the Reformation could understand the meaning and the person they were aiming at. Animals such as wolves, serpents and dragons which had been “established” by the Words of God as the antitheses of Christ would have been chosen as the most frequently used symbols. They could convey clear messages. Such animals in the Bible were instruments of the Devil and used to seduce or damage Christians. Each of them carried distinctive evil characters and could be found in differing circumstances. For instance, the wolf was greedy and always stalking the “sheep,” i. e. good Christians. Therefore, their appearances were often accompanied by a flock of sheep and their shepherd.

As early as 1522, animal and monster allegories were used in Augsburgas Protestant propaganda. In a pamphlet named *Das Wolffgesang*, Luther’s adversaries emerge on the title page. They appear in a cluster to create the astonishing effect that everyone is involved in the evil deeds. The Pope, cardinals and priests are depicted as wolves, dressed in their robes and hats but wearing wolf masks. They catch geese by seducing them with beads and a net. Their positions in the picture are exactly the same as in the papal hierarchy. The Pope sits on his throne, ordering the priests to catch the geese. When the geese are caught, they’re hung over

[15] *Ibid.* ,117.

[16] *Ibid.* ,136.

him, depicting him as a monk, a doctor, a devout Biblical professor and a great leader in the reform movement.



Luther was also aware of the significance of religious imagery. The Bible translated by Luther included 500 illustrations. Not only did they offer explanations of the Scriptures, but they helped defame the enemy. In the story of “A Lady and a Dragon,” in Chapter 11 of The Revelation, a vicious dragon wears a seven-layered crown, a winking reference to the Pope as Antichrist.

The idealized portraits-as monk, learned scholar, professor and leader of the reform movement-were shaped by Cranach for Luther to meet the demands of various social groups. They provoked a fierce reaction from the Roman Catholic Church. Johannes Cochlaeus, a Catholic theologian, worked hand-in-hand with Hans Brosmer, a painter, to create an image of Luther with seven heads. In this picture, “Seven-Headed Luther,” the subject became a monster. His identity was marked at the side of each head-Doctor, Martin, Luther, Ecclesiast, Enthusiast, “Visitor” and Barabbas. The title “Doctor” referred to his PhD degree in theology, but the hat is too big, implying that Luther was unworthy of the title. He also wears a Turkish hat, indentifying him as a pagan. “Ecclesiast” was located at the middle of the seven heads, mocks Luther as an Augustine friar who had been excommunicated by the Pope on 15 June 1520. It refers to his later missionary activity as illegal. The title “Enthusiast” was a term of abuse, usually reserved by the Catholic Church for Anabaptists and radical reformers. The “Visitor” image aimed to mock the Protestant clergy visiting parishes to enforce Christian discipline. The last was “Barabbas,” a notorious prisoner who was presented to the Jewish masses by Roman soldiers, together with Jesus in the Gospel. The public chose to release Barabbas and his place at the Crucifixion was taken by Jesus. It says that “Barabbas Luther” was an Antichrist. The seven-heads image shows how Luther went astray, toppling from respectable doctor to sinful rebel, and that he believed and worshipped not Jesus Christ but the Devil. This picture of the Seven-Headed Luther could be deemed as a counter attack by the Roman Catholic Church to Cranach’s idealized portrait.

4. Printing and Protestant Propaganda

In Protestant propaganda, amongst all propaganda, woodcuts were what attracted people the most. In those years, the literacy rate in Germany was only 5%, so the pictures were much more easily accepted. As Robert W. Scribner, a professor at University of Cambridge pointed out, “printed propaganda was addressed to the entire German people, but few of them were able to read it, for the Reformation emerged in a society

with limited literacy. . . listening or looking would have been the major means of acquiring their knowledge of the Reformation.”^[19] In the 15th Century, woodcut pictures were still a new technique, generally used for making paper cards and other small, printed objects. Beginning in the second half of that century, technical improvements in the making of woodcuts and the presses used in book publishing led to a much faster means of transmitting religious texts. The advantages of woodcuts combined with printing was immediately evident. First, they were easier to transport than paintings and altarpieces. Secondly, they were less expensive, such that the artists were able to decide their own topics, rather than relying on their patrons. They had more freedom and more room for creation and expression. Thirdly, they could be published in large quantities, thus serving as illustrations and covers of propaganda materials, and published at rapid speed. Reformers such as Luther especially favored printed works and woodcuts. When several hundred publications poured onto the markets, the Roman Catholic Church censors would be hard put to respond. The publishers could increase the number of printings based on the sales condition of the pamphlets in the market. Only a few days were needed from placing a new order to the appearance of the printed works on the market.

Passional Christi und



The revelation by Protestant reformers of malpractice by the Roman Catholic Church was even more penetrating. In May, 1521, Cranach created a series of illustrated polemical pamphlets comprised of twenty-six woodcuts. The *Passion of Christ and Antichrist*. Each carried a brief commentary by Phillip Melancthon and gave a narration of great conflict between Jesus Christ and the Antichrist Pope. Pictures were paired side-by-side, with a total of thirteen contrasting pairs. They depicted scenes from the lives of Christ and the Pope. The Pope wore costumes and was accompanied by a retinue lusting for power and extorting money from the people. Jesus was dressed in common clothes and humbled in the dust, suffering for the people, cleansing the temple. By comparing the two pictures, the readers could see for themselves who was the Antichrist and who was the Savior. Finally, in the last pair of woodcuts, Cranach arranged quite different fates for them: Jesus ascended to Heaven and returned to the Father; the Pope, aka the Antichrist, descended into Hell and joined the ranks of the Devil.

In *Luther's Five Enemies*, the Pope and Luther's enemies were excoriated in a series of witty, satirical and bawdy portraits. Pope Leo X is a Lion, Dr. Eck is a pig, Dr. Murner is a cat, Dr. Emster is a goat and Dr. Lemp is a dog.

Lucas Cranach's *The Passion of Christ and Antichrist* was the most successful work of visual propaganda produced by the Reformation. It had a profound and far-reaching conception worthy of extensive analysis. To begin with, it displayed true Christian virtues—modesty and humility, simplicity and unworldliness—and contrasted them with the pride, vanity and desire for worldly things that characterized bad Christians. Then,

[19] Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk, Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-3.

with visual and printed text combined for a more vivid impact, it showed how human law was contrary to the Word of God in Scripture. Thirdly, its comparison of the Pope and Jesus Christ aimed to attack anticlericalism and oppose the privileged position of the clergy. Finally, the series showed the power struggle between the Pope and secular authority. Cranach and Melanchthon pressed forward step by step, and at last the Pope was identified as the Antichrist. The impact of the work was enormous; there were no less than one Latin and ten German editions produced within a few years.



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In addition to painting works for propaganda, the distribution of these works of Protestant reformers was spectacular. According to statistics, from the year 1500 to 1530, the total amount of publishing and distribution multiplied 10,000 times with a variation of over 3,000, while the total printing ran to as much as a million volumes. Martin Luther's works account for 20% of all those publications, about 2000 editions. Other works included those of Philip Melanchthon, Carlstadt, Zwingli as well as hundreds of pamphlets produced during the Peasant War of 1525. It's worth noting that almost 85% of these works were in German.^[20] In the early 16th century, there were a mere 40 varieties of German language works available. By 1523, that number had risen to 498 varieties, of which one-third were penned by Luther. Among these, the contents of 413 varieties correlated with religious reform.^[21] Along with the growth of the reform movement, more and more people started buying and reading the works in German. Sales volumes jumped by a huge margin, and Luther became a best-selling author. From 1516 to 1546, the distribution amount of Luther's works was up to 3.1 million volumes, not counting a pirated German Bible translated by him and other unofficial works. If one were to add the publications other Protestant reformers, the total amount could be more than 6 million volumes. By contrast, Roman Church publications opposing religious reform was a mere 600,000 volumes, one-tenth of the total. Most of these publications were in Latin, while 39% were in German.^[22] It shows that either in quantity or in variety of publicity means, the Roman Church lagged far behind the Protestant reformers.

[20] Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 14-26.

[21] Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk, Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2.

[22] Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 39.

Under those circumstances, the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor had to adopt administrative means to combat the transmission of the Protestant propaganda. Since the Diet of Worms in 1521 (ill. 14), the Pope had declared Luther's works officially banned, and required that all his works be seized and destroyed. On 20 June 1522, Charles V issued an order prohibiting all city authorities from supporting the Reformation, under threat of harsh punishment. Upon the issuance of that edict, all cities, superficially at least, obeyed the orders of the Pope and Emperor. Still, this appeared to have little impact on the brisk sales of Luther's work. On the contrary, it was spreading everywhere like a plague. In Nuremberg, an imperial city in Germany, the Municipal Council had issued three separate decrees—April 9, 1521, March 13, 1522 and August 7, 1522—banning the publication of Luther's works.^[23] Viewing the sales of Luther works during the periods 1516—1520 and 1521—1526, the variety rose from 39 to 89 different volumes.^[24] The increasing margin was remarkable. It was same in other German cities. The variety of Luther works in Strasbourg increased from 31 to 150; in Erfurt, from four to 161. In all of Germany, the total publications of Luther's works increased from 508 to 1060.^[25] All these indicated that public support for Luther was booming. In Leipzig, college students called the Pope's teachings balloons, and threw them into the river...to see if the books would float or not.

In the contest of visual propaganda during the first half-century of the Reformation in Germany (ill. 15), the Protestants clearly held the upper hand. As Elizabethan Eisenstein has pointed out, printing established many of the foundations on which the movement of religious reform was built. As a consequence, public opinion overwhelmingly favored Luther. Besides his stance on reforms being closer to the common man's demands, it was also an important reason for the Catholic Church's failure to participate in the debate, instead hiding behind official language and administrative means. Viewed from the angle of the visual and textual debate of both parties in Protestant Propaganda, it is clear that the Reformation was an extensive social movement consisting of broad masses of the people in 16th Century Germany and a matter of great interest.

[23] "9. April 1521, Nürnberg, Nürnberger Ratsverlässe, Auszüge, Hampe, Miscellen, S. 261" in Ruth Kastner (Hrsg.), *Quellen zur Reformation 1517-1555*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, p. 83. "13. März 1522, Nürnberg, Nürnberger Ratsverlässe, Auszüge" in Ruth Kastner (Hrsg.), *Quellen zur Reformation 1517-1555* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 86. "7. August 1522, Nürnberg, Nürnberger Ratsverlässe, Auszüge, Hampe, Miscellen, S. 261" in Ruth Kastner (Hrsg.), *Quellen zur Reformation 1517—1555, Quellen zur Reformation 1517—1555* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 86.

[24] Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 22-23.

[25] *Ibid.*, 24-25.

中文题目:

德国宗教改革木刻版画中的动物和怪兽

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提要:根据圣经中对动物的评论,本文考察了德意志宗教改革时期新教宣传品木刻版画。事实上,宗教改革正是通过视觉的宣传而得到发展的。通过分析木刻版画,本文揭示了路德思想中的激进成分,做出了对路德的新诠释。本文肯定大众文化在 16 世纪宗教改革中所发挥的核心作用。宗教改革不仅应当通过文献来研究,而且还应当根据图像材料来研究。文献材料具有自身的局限性,不能完整提供宗教改革的画面,视觉图像却有可能为我们弥补这个缺陷。

关键词:新教宣传、宗教改革使其的木刻版画、路德形象、动物和怪兽