



Fantastical Creatures

Fantastic beasts, monsters and hybrid beings like the half-human, half-beast chimera have always figured in writers' and artists' representations of the natural world and their relationship with it.

In the Romantic era, a preoccupation with the power of the imagination in all its forms led to these mythological beings reappearing in new guises. The myth of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and was punished by imprisonment and torment was re-imagined by Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein* (1818), producing in Frankenstein's murderous, tortured creature an iconic figure whose cultural force endures to the present day. Other manifestations of transformed humanity, such as Blake's 'Chimera',

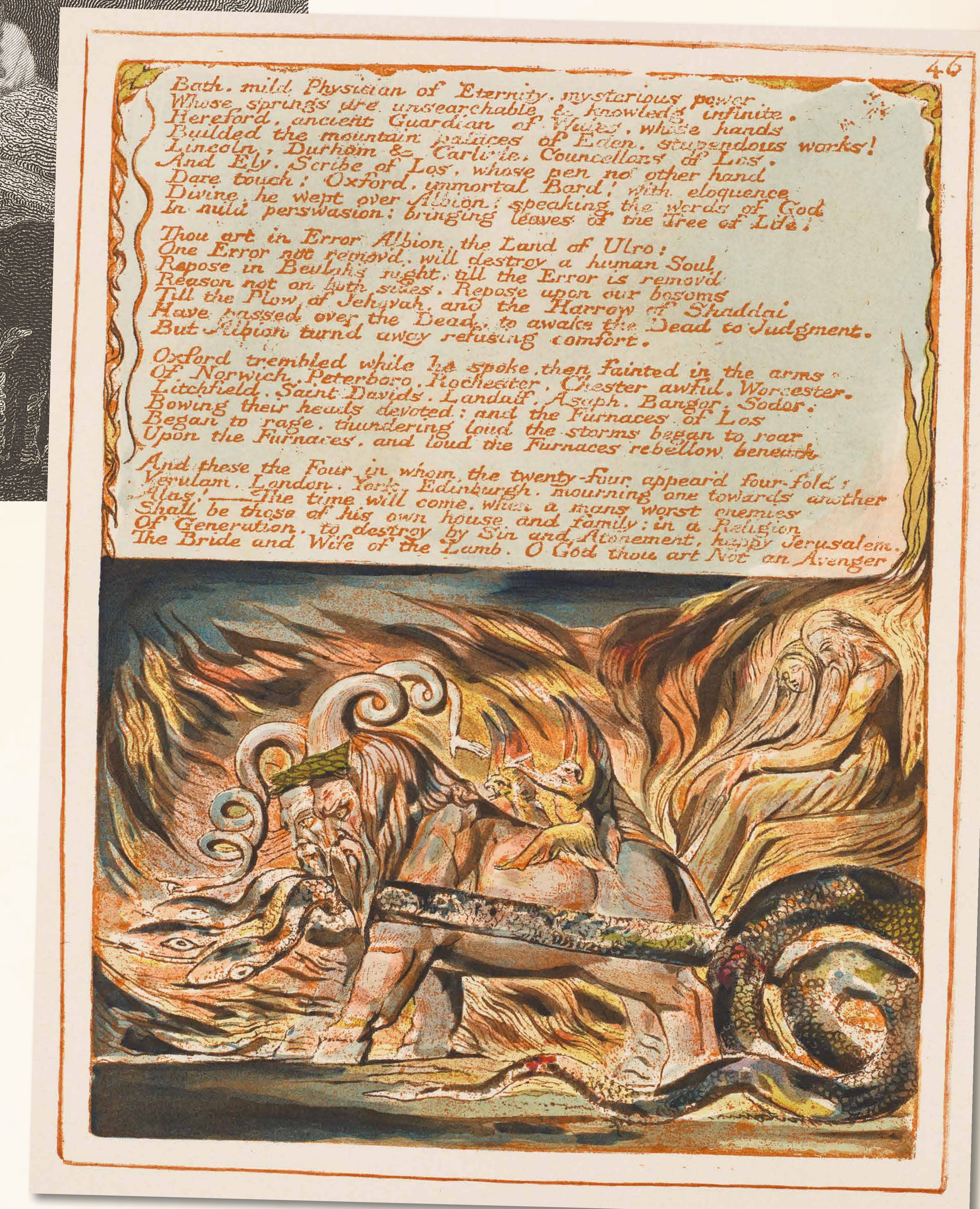


Above the title: The Dragon of Wantley illustrated for the opera by Henry Carey in *The London stage*, Volume 2 (1825). Cambridge Drama Collection, PR1243.L6

reveal Romantic awareness of both the power and the danger attendant upon human creativity and ability to intervene in the natural world. These figures also indicate other ways in which the world was changing in this period. Many years before Charles Darwin's landmark *Origin of Species* (1859), theories of the relationship between animals and humans were already positing the idea of an evolutionary relationship between them. The appearance of the chimera in the art and literature of this period suggests another form of Romantic revolution: the breaching of the crucial boundary between humanity and other animals.



Left: View on the Banks of the Tacazze. Engraving by Charles Heath in *A voyage to Abyssinia* by Henry Salt (1814). Travel Collection. Oversize X, DT377.S2



Chimera. William Blake's Plate 46 in *Jerusalem*, A facsimile of the illuminated book (1951). Special Collection Oversize X, PR4144.J4