

Edited by
Christine Göttler and
Wolfgang Neuber

Spirits Unseen

The Representation of Subtle Bodies
in Early Modern European Culture



~~Intersections~~

Yearbook
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BRILL

Spirits Unseen

Intersections

Yearbook for Early Modern Studies

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*Illustration on the cover: A magic lantern (detail), *Apparentia nocturna ad terrorem videntium* ('Nocturnal appearance for the fright of the spectators'). From Giovanni Fontana, *Bellicorum instrumentorum liber*, Cod. Icon. 242, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, ca. 1420–1440, fol. 70r.
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The idea for this collection of essays originated in two separate book projects that address specific shapes and kinds of 'spirits'. Christine Göttler has been studying the imagery and imagination of the other world and as well as the artistic media, materials and techniques employed to depict such virtual and immaterial worlds. Wolfgang Neuber has done extensive research in the field of early modern spectres and the ways in which they displayed themselves, were perceived, described and recognised. Both book projects are scheduled for publication in 2008.

It has been a particularly rewarding experience to share our interest in the still unexplored realms of spirits, spectres and subtle substances with scholars working in related fields. We would like to express our gratitude to Karl Enenkel (Leiden), general editor of *Intersections*, for his encouragement and to the editorial board for accepting the collection of essays for publication. The book could not have been completed in a timely fashion without the help and assistance of Sina Nikolajew (Berlin) in the final preparation of the manuscript. It has been our good fortune to work with Boris van Gool and Gera van Bedaf (Leiden); their patience, support and commitment have benefited the book through all stages of the production. Our very special thanks are, however, due to the authors of this anthology who, through their contributions and ideas, have made this project an insightful and 'spirited' experience.

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PREFACE

VAPOURS AND VEILS: THE EDGE OF THE UNSEEN

Christine Göttler

In medieval and early modern culture ‘spirits’ (*spiritus*) or ‘subtle bodies’ (*corpora subtilia*) were frequently pictured as vapours or gaseous substances as indeed the words ‘spirits’ and ‘vapours’ (*vapores*) were used interchangeably in physiological and medical language. The imagery of vapours and fumes indicated both – the airy, volatile, highly refined and subtle quality of ‘spirits’ in distinction to ordinary matter and the liminal place of ‘subtle bodies’, at the threshold of the incorporeal and immaterial realms, at the very edge of the visible, perceptible and tangible.

The images and attributes suggested for *spiritus* in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* – a reference book ‘about how to form and explain symbolic concepts’, first published in Rome in 1593 and then in an augmented and illustrated version in 1603 – may shed some light on problems linked with this in-between state around 1600. Ripa mentions the vapours and spirits performing vital functions in man in his allegory of sleep. He suggests representing *sonno* in various ways, among others as a young man ‘with wings at the shoulders holding with his right hand a cornucopia from which vapour rises’. The horn of plenty ‘demonstrates that sleep is caused by vapours which, rising to the brain, change it and by that means disperse’, while ‘the wings and the youthful age show the swiftness of sleep and the delight of the hours spent sleeping’.¹

Ripa expands here on a passage in Vincenzo Cartari’s *Imagini degli dei*, first published in Venice in 1556. The illustrated versions of this handbook about the ancient gods and myths include, in the section on night

¹ Ripa C., *Iconologia ovvero descrizione di diverse imagini cavate dall’antichità, e di propria inventionione* (Hildesheim-New York: 1970) 464f.: ‘Un Giovane con l’ali alle spalle, che con la destra mano tenghi un Cornucopia, onde esca fumo [...] Il cornucopia di cui esce di fumo, dimostra la cagione del sonno essere i vapori, i quali salendo alla testa, lo cangiano, & per mezzo di esso si risolvano [...] L’ali, & l’età giovenile dimostrano la velocità del sonno, & la piacevolezza dell’hore, che dormendo si spendono.’

and sleep, a woodcut depicting the young Morpheus with a horn from which smoke rises, denoting the variety of dreams.² While the chapter on sleep in the 1603 edition of Ripa's *Iconologica* is not illustrated, a drawing by Karel van Mander (1548–1606), now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes, employs Ripa's iconography of vapour and smoke for a complex allegory of night closely based on Ovid's description of the cavern of Sleep (Somnus) in the eleventh chapter of the *Metamorphoses* [Fig. 1].³ The composition is dominated by the youthful winged figure of Morpheus – one of Somnus's 1000 children – reclining on a cloudy bank and holding two horns of plenty from which vapours of smoke escape; winged putti or airy 'spiritelli' emerge in between the clouds, some of them preoccupied in producing – with brush and palette – the evanescent images of dreams. In his *Ovids Metamorphosis Englished*, the author and traveller George Sandys speaks of 'images which are formed in our sleepes by the various discursion of the spirits in the braine [...] which follow concoction, when the blood is least troubled, and the phantasy uninterrupted by ascending vapors'.⁴ Dispersed by the personification of Morpheus's two horns, the vapours emanate, in the first instance, from the head of an old bearded man characterised by the bent elbow of his left arm as Saturnian or melancholic. This is Somnus – the father of Morpheus – who, as van Mander himself mentions in his *Schilder-Boeck*, first published in Harlem in 1604, sleeps soundly in a cavern deep in the earth.⁵ The three poppies in his left

² I have been using the following edition: Cartari V., *Le imagini [...] degli dei* [Venice: 1571] (New York-London: 1976) 336, 339–344.

³ Van Mander's *Allegory of Night* was engraved by Jacob Matham as part of a series of *The Four Times of the Day*: Leesberg M., *Karel van Mander*, ed. H. Leeftang and C. Schuckman, *The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700* (Rotterdam: 1999) cix, no. 34 (van Mander's drawing), 179–81, no. 159 (Matham's print). Van Mander's drawing and the woodcut depicting 'Night' and 'Sleep' in Cartari's *Imagini degli dei* are discussed in Cole M., "The Demonic Arts and the Origin of the Medium", *Art Bulletin* 84 (2002) 621–640, here 627–29.

⁴ Sandys G., *Ovids Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd And Represented in Figures. An Essay to the Translation of Virgil's Aeneis* (Oxford: 1632) 396.

⁵ Mander K. van, *Den grondt der edel vry schilder-const*, ed. H. Miedema, 2 vols. (Utrecht: 1973) I 180–181 (VI.70): 'Om veel meer te doen/tot deser matery/Mochtmen wel dalen ter dieper speloncken/| Seer wijdt van hier/ergens by den Cymery;| Daer Morphei Vader heeft zijn impery/| En met zijn droomen pleeght te ligghen roncken [...]'. The *Grondt* is the first part of the *Schilder-Boeck*. Van Mander also refers to the cave of Somnus in the last part of the *Schilder-Boeck*: *Wileghhingh op den Metamorphosis Pub. Ovidij Nasonis* (Harlem: 1604) f. 97v (chapter XI): 'Des Slaep Godts aerdt en wooninghe/zijn oock van onsen Poet seer aerdigh beschreven: daer nae gheeft hy hem duysent kinderen/waer by een goet ghetal is te verstaen: maer hy en noemter maer dry van



Fig. 1. Karel van Mander, *Allegory of Night*, ca. 1610, pen and brown ink, blue wash, 18.3 x 28.9 cm. Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. 794-1-2550.

hand reference the narcotic qualities of sleep. Resting in a cave-like structure, tended by spirits and watched by two owls, he is set apart from the other sleepers not haunted or comforted by dreams.⁶

Now Ripa suggests using a different iconography in representations of other kinds of spirits connected with the divine rather than medical-physiological spheres. The rational soul as well as the souls separated from their bodies and residing in heaven or hell, respectively, should be portrayed with their faces covered by ‘very fine’ (*finissimo*), ‘very subtle’ (*sottilissimo*) and transparent (*trasparente*) veils [Fig. 2]; in the case of the ‘damned soul’ the colour of the veil should be black. Ripa puts forward the views of ‘the theologians’, especially Augustine’s treatise *On the Soul* (*De anima*), to explain that both the embodied and disembodied souls are ‘pure incorporeal’ and ‘immortal substances’, comparable to the substances of God and the angels. The veil signifies that the rational soul is ‘invisible to corporeal eyes and the substantial form [or informing substance] of the body’.⁷ However, while unseen by our eyes, pure spirits should be represented ‘in that best way that a human being dependent on the corporeal senses can understand [them] by means of the imagination’. The motif of the ‘very subtle veil’ is particularly appropriate since ‘subtlety’ (*subtilitas*) – the quality that distinguishes spiritual substance from ordinary matter – means in the literal sense, as the scholar and rhetorician Julius Caesar Scaliger asserts in his 1557 *Esoteric Exercises on Subtlety* (*Exercitationes exotericae de*

de besonderste/te weten/*Morpheus*, welcken beteeckent ghedaent/ofte beeldt: *Icelus*, oft *Phobator*, schricklijcke ghelijcknis: en *Phantusus*, oft inbeeldinghe.’ For the cavern of Sleep, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XI 593–616. As far as I know the reference to van Mander’s texts has not yet been made.

⁶ Van Mander’s invention seems to be partially based on another image of sleep suggested by Ripa C., *Iconologia* 464: ‘Huomo corpolento, & grave, vestito di pelle di Tasso, stando sopra un letto di papavero, & una vita carica d’uva matura gli farà ombra, & haverà una grotta vicina, ove si veda un zambollo d’acqua.’

⁷ Ripa C., *Iconologia* 21–22: ‘Anima ragionevole e beata. Donzella gratiosissima, haverà il volto coperto con un finissimo, e trasparente velo, il vestimento chiaro, & lucente, à gl’homeri un paro d’ale, & nella cima del capo una stella. Benche l’anima, come si dice da’ Teologi, sia sustanza incorporea, & immortale, si rappresenta nondimeno in quel miglior modo, che l’huomo legato à quei sensi corporei con l’imaginatione, la può comprendere, & non altrimenti, che si sogli rappresentare Iddio, & gl’Angeli, ancorche siano pure sustanze incorporee [...]. Se gli fa velato il viso per dinotare, che ella è, come dice S. Agostino nel lib. de definit. anim. sustanza invisibile à gl’occhi humani, e forma sustanziale del corpo, nel quale ella non è evidente, salvo che per certe attioni esteriori se comprende.’



Fig. 2. *The Rational or Blessed Soul*, woodcut, in Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Rome: 1603) 22.