CHAPTER EIGHT

Darkness and Enlightenment

How did Europeans understand darkness and the night, real and symbolic, as the rhythms of daily time shifted? This chapter examines several key controversies of the early Enlightenment in the context of daily experiences and popular beliefs associated with the night and its shadows. The imprint of nocturnalization on these controversies reveals the unevenness of nocturnalization *and* of the universal claims made by the New Philosophy. Claims to dispel darkness, literal or figurative, lead us to darkness relocated or recreated elsewhere. The tension between the universalism of light and the selective use of the night refigures our understanding of the origins of the Enlightenment and the special place of its early or radical phase.

The study of nocturnalization in the preceding chapters has revealed two contrasting but ultimately complementary responses to darkness and the night in the seventeenth century. Two sets of discourses and practices arose: one which sought to dispel darkness and transform the night, and another focused on creating and manipulating darkness, whether in devotion or spectacle. These two faces of nocturnalization left their imprint on the form and content of the early Enlightenment. In the first set of discourses and practices, the new street lighting was often described as vanquishing the darkness by transforming night into day: "The night will be lit up as bright as day, in every street," as a 1667 report on the new street lighting of Paris exclaimed.[1] This sense of triumph over darkness is reflected on an intellectual level by Spinoza, for example, who defined darkness as a nonentity in a 1663 treatise, arguing that "We imagine nonentities positively, as beings … we imagine as if they were beings all those modes which the mind uses for negating, such as blindness,

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

extremity, or … darkness, etc."[2] In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke made clear that the association of the night with frightening supernatural beings was entirely contingent: "The ideas of goblins and sprites have really no more to do with darkness than light," he explained. The problem was a false association created by young women:

> yet let but a foolish maid inculcate these often on the mind of a child, and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives, but darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful ideas, and they shall be so joined, that he can no more bear the one than the other.[3]

Darkness itself has no innate qualities for Locke. In similar terms the readers of London's popular *Athenian Mercury* were told in an article on darkness published in the 1690s that darkness was "a mere Privation of light."[4]

In contrast to the proclaimed elimination of darkness, baroque piety and the perspective stage used darkness as a real presence to create visual and emotional effects, as did the fireworks and illuminations that crowned court celebrations and political displays. Nocturnalization thus describes a dual relationship to darkness, encompassing the discourses and practices that dispelled or denied darkness as well as those that created, maintained, and manipulated it. This chapter examines the influence of both sides of nocturnalization on European culture at the start of what Herder called "our enlightened century."[5] The seemingly straightforward connection between lighting and the Enlightenment becomes more complex and revealing when we examine both aspects of nocturnalization in the milieu, intellectual content, and controversies of the early Enlightenment.[6] I do this by tracing the cultural and intellectual fates of ghosts, witches, and Hell – three intertwined aspects of medieval and early modern culture deeply associated with darkness and the night – in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[7] These manifestations of nocturnal fear, now separated from their basis in the darkness of everyday life, became weak links in the chain of traditional belief. But the discourses which challenged traditional ideas about ghosts, witches, and Hell all used

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or evoked darkness and the night to supplement their claims. In the same terms, I examine the imprint of nocturnalization on two key texts of the early Enlightenment: Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (*Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*) of 1686 and Balthasar Bekker's *De betoverde weereld* (*The World Bewitched*, 1691–94). Both of these self-consciously "global" works redrew intellectual and cultural boundaries, creating new zones of insight and darkness.

8.1 GHOSTS

In early modern Europe, ghosts made eschatology apparent to the senses. They revealed the meaning of death and the reality of the afterlife in physical reality: ghosts could be seen, heard, or felt. Their place in early modern European culture (learned and popular) was especially sharply debated across the period from the Reformation through the Enlightenment.

The association of ghosts with the night was axiomatic. Across the Western cultural tradition, the night has long served as a fundamental symbol of death and the afterlife,[8] and the experience of the night shaped descriptions of death, purgatory, Hell, and ghosts in popular and learned accounts alike. In 1643 a baker in the Bavarian town of Altomünster reported to his confessor that he had been visited by a ghost from Purgatory. The spirit asked the baker to fulfill a vow so that it could rest in peace. As David Lederer observed in his valuable 2002 article on ghosts in early modern Bavaria, the baker seems to have understood the apparition as a true purgatorial spirit in orthodox Catholic terms, but the Ecclesiastical Council in Freising did not agree. When the confessor reported the baker's experience to the Ecclesiastical Council, the learned clerics of the Council responded with a list of ten problems with the account. Among them, "the baker claimed that the spirit appeared brightly lit and joyous during the day as well as at night. Ghosts from Purgatory, the Council reminded the father confessor, were spirits of the dark, tending to sadness and usually showing themselves around midnight."[9] The leading Protestant denunciation of ghosts from Purgatory, Ludwig Lavater's 1570

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

treatise *De Spectris*, argued that any seeming ghost was in reality the Devil or a demon assuming the form of deceased person to deceive the living.[10] As described above in chapter 2, Lavater agreed that such apparitions "do appear still in these days both day & night, but especially in the night … For he who is the author of these things, is called in the holy Scriptures the Prince of darkness, and therefore he shunneth the light of Gods word."[11] Lavater warned that "Spirits and other strange sights, be not the Souls of Men, but be either good or evil Angels," or else some human trickery.[12] In other words, Lavater and most sixteenth-century Protestants agreed that the Devil could visit the living in any guise, including that of a familiar deceased person; some persons might also fake an apparition of some kind, but the souls of the dead could not leave the afterlife and appear to the living: "neither the souls of the faithful, nor of infidels, do walk upon the earth after they are once parted from their bodies." The meaning of ghosts and other nocturnal apparitions became the focus of fierce Protestant–Catholic debate in the second half of the sixteenth century with the publication of Pierre Le Loyer's Catholic response to Lavater, the 1586 *IIII. livres des spectres, ou apparitions et visions d'espirits, anges et démons* (*Four Books on Specters or Apparitions and Visions of Spirits, Angels, and Demons*). Despite the controversy surrounding the issue, Protestants and Catholics agreed that apparitions (whether ghosts from Purgatory or devils from Hell) were most likely to walk the earth at night.[13]

The deep association of ghosts with the night across the confessional divisions of early modern culture linked the new ghost controversies that arose in the late seventeenth century with nocturnalization. The ideas and values of the early Enlightenment, whether inspired by Descartes, Hobbes, or by general skepticism, found ready expression in debates over ghosts and spirits. In comparison with discussions about the reality of witchcraft and the existence of Hell, the stakes were a bit lower when expressing skepticism about spirits or their abilities, and queries about the reality of ghosts and the abilities of spirits could be aired in a broader forum. At the same time, as we will see, skepticism about the "nature, power, administration, and operation" of spirits could serve as the thin end of the wedge of unbelief.[14]

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The rise of skeptical, Cartesian, and empiricist views challenged ghost beliefs in new ways, and the beliefs found new defenders in Protestant Europe. Two new positions on the reality of specters and ghosts, running parallel to the nocturnalization examined above, emerged in the second half of the seventeenth century. Skepticism about the existence or physical abilities of spirits might arise from even a superficial brush with Hobbes or Descartes; defenders of the spirit world associated this skepticism with libertines like the English "town-gallant," who "Till Noon … lies a Bed to digest his over-nights Debaucht" – a night spent in brothels, playhouses, coffeehouses, and taverns. Denounced as a blasphemous skeptic in the 1675 pamphlet *The Character of a town-gallant*, the gallant's "religion (for now and then he will be prattling of that too) is pretendedly Hobbian." He actually understands nothing of the New Philosophy, our critic explains, but "the rattle of it at Coffee-houses has taught him to Laugh at Spirits, and maintain there are no Angels, but those in Petticoats. And therefore he defies Heaven … imagines Hell, only a Hot-house to Flux in for a Clap, and calls the Devil, the Parsons Bug-Bear."[15] Often associated with the worst of debauchery and unbelief, the denial of spirits by free-thinkers and "esprits forts" in taverns and coffeehouses led to broader and more sophisticated forms of unbelief. To counter this position, conservatives began to emphasize the reality of spirits as evidence of the reality of Heaven, Hell, and the entire "invisible world." As we will see, the café at night was a key site for these debates over the implications of the New Philosophy for belief in ghosts and spirits across Northern Europe.

In 1701 the clandestine Leipzig newsletter *Geheime Briefe, So zwischen curieusen Personen über notable Sachen … gewechselt worden* (*Secret Letters, Exchanged among Curious Persons on Notable Issues*) defended the existence of ghosts to a broader public, providing us with an extraordinary visual overview of the issues in the form of an illustration of a ghost appearing to three men at night (Figure 8.1).

The unnamed author of the *Secret Letters* insisted that ghosts and spirits were real, and that the denial of their existence was pernicious: "The denial of ghosts is the subtle profession of atheism" ("Spectrorum negatio est subtilis Atheismi professio") is the title of

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 8.1 Facing-page illustration, *Geheime Briefe, So zwischen curieusen Personen über notable Sachen … gewechselt worden* (Freystadt [i.e. Leipzig], 1701), after p. 829.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

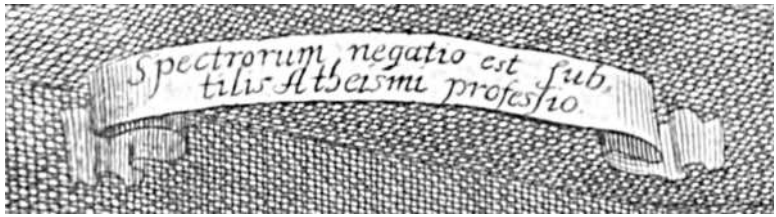


Figure 8.2 Detail: illustration title, *Geheime Briefe, So zwischen curieusen Personen über notable Sachen … gewechselt worden* (Freystadt [i.e. Leipzig], 1701), after p. 829.

the illustration (Figure 8.2). The illustration offers a unique visualization of the ghost controversy. As the three men drink and smoke their pipes by candlelight, a libertine raises a toast, unaware of the headless apparition just seen by the companion on his left. The dark time of drink, sin, and atheism becomes a moment when the reality of spirits (and of God) is revealed: the libertine night becomes a mystic time. The corresponding text in the 1701 *Secret Letters* asks "What we should think of those Christians who do not believe in ghosts and the appearance of spirits and deny their physical actions?"[16] The response denounces such Christians as a "disturbing and dangerous swarm," and attacks the "ghost-busters" ("Gespenst-Stürmer") who deny the appearance and effects of spirits. Such persons

> are not really subtle but in fact truly crude atheists, who must either deny the witness of the Holy Scripture, Old and New Testaments, or twist [Scripture] in an unreasonable and scurrilous way.[17]

The author emphasizes the evidence in the Christian Scriptures:

> accounts of ghosts appear in the Old Testament (such as the appearance of the prophet Samuel and similar, etc.), not to speak of the New Testament … which must be mere fables to such a "ghost-buster" if he wants to deny the appearance of spirits.[18]

The association of late-night conversation with the debate over ghosts and spirits extends beyond this image, appearing in several diaries of the period. Far from the intellectual centers of Leipzig or London, for example, the West Country physician Claver Morris of Wells in Somerset noted a similar exchange in his diary on September 6,

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1709: "At the [weekly Tuesday night] Music-Meeting there happened to be Captain James Coward; And his asking how a Spirit could throw a Bed-Staff gave me an occasion to prove beyond his denying, & I hope to his satisfaction, that the World was not eternal and that there were future rewards & Punishments after Death."[19] The conversation recorded in Morris's terse entry starts with Coward posing a question raised by Descartes and Spinoza: how could an immaterial spirit interact with the physical world? We do not know exactly what followed this question, but one way or another, the conversation led to Morris shoring up several pillars of Christian doctrine by asserting the last judgment and the reality of *post mortem* punishments, including Hell. As the *Secret Letters* article warned, there seemed to be a slippery slope from skepticism about ghosts to the outright denial of Christian verities.

Only one "ghost-buster" was mentioned by name in the *Secret Letters* article: the Amsterdam Reformed minister Balthasar Bekker (1634–98), who had unleashed an enormous controversy with the publication of his *De betoverde weereld* (*The World Bewitched*, 1691–94).[20] Across the four volumes of this work Bekker argued that "the apparitions of Evil Spirits are contrary to true Reason, and that the Holy Scripture affords no proofs of it."[21] Bekker's work was immediately translated into German, French, and English and was read and discussed widely in the 1690s.[22] Bekker was an orthodox Reformed minister, but the intellectual basis of *The World Bewitched* was an explosive combination of Cartesian pneumatology and Spinoza's accomodationalist biblical exegesis. On Cartesian grounds he questioned whether "a Spirit, as a Spirit, and so much the more as it is a Spirit, can without Body act upon all sorts of Bodies, and upon other Spirits," concluding that "the operations of such Spirits, as are not joined to a Body; either Angels or Devils" cannot "act upon other Bodies, either of Men, or other matter."[23] Denounced as a "Spinozist" and atheist for the claims in *The World Bewitched*, which we will examine below, Bekker was permanently suspended from his post in Amsterdam in 1692.[24] The contrast between Bekker and his predecessor Lavater is especially revealing: these two Reformed pastors and theologians, separated by a century of concentrated intellectual

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ferment, held completely opposed views of the existence and effects of demons and spirits in this world.

The denunciations of Bekker's work in the Netherlands, England, and Germany were intense. His claim that neither reason nor Scripture could prove "that Men have any commerce with Spirits"[25] deeply disturbed Protestant authors who saw in such spirits proof of all things spiritual, and in their denial the prelude to atheism. Some argued for guilt by association: in 1692 the Amsterdam Reformed minister Jacobus Koelman claimed that ideas in *The World Bewitched* "have a lot in common with atheists, Sadducees, Epicureans, Libertines, and other Scripture despisers, and especially with Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, Adrian Koerbach, David Joris, and the like."[26]

Indeed, in the 1690s conservative English Protestants were responding to the same intellectual threats generated by "atheists, Sadducees, Epicureans, [and] Libertines" homegrown and imported. The number of ghost publications in Britain surged and the *Athenian Mercury* (an English periodical similar to the *Secret Letters*) began trading in ghost stories. But the English ghost controversy had its origins a generation earlier. As ghost-story collector John Aubrey (1626–97) explained:

> When I was a child … before the Civil Wars … the fashion was for old women and maids to tell fabulous stories nighttimes, of Sprites and walking of Ghosts, etc. … When the wars came, and with them Liberty of Conscience and Liberty of inquisition [inquiry], the phantoms vanished. Now children fear no such things, having heard not of them.[27]

The Interregnum unleashed a torrent of heterodox ideas from Thomas Hobbes, the Ranters, other antinomians, and Christian mortalists like Richard Overton and John Milton – all in one way or another denied the existence of ghosts, spirits, demons, the afterlife, or the immortality of the soul. Responding to the "Liberty of Conscience and Liberty of inquisition" that had begun in the 1640s, the Cambridge theologian Henry More (1614–87) began promoting ghost belief in his 1653 *An antidote against atheisme, or, An appeal to the natural faculties of the minde of man*. This was the first Protestant defense of the belief in ghosts and spirits:

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I thought fit to fortify and strengthen the Faith of others as much as I could; being well assured that a contemptuous misbelief of such like Narrations concerning *Spirits*, and an endeavour of making them all ridiculous and incredible, is a dangerous Prelude to *Atheisme* it self, or else a more close and crafty Profession or Insinuation of it.[28]

For writers like More, the night took on a new value as the time of the appearance of ghosts and spirits. Among the defenders of established Christianity in the latter half of the seventeenth century, the spirits of the night held a new meaning. No longer seen as diabolical illusions or as bearers of messages of repentance, justice, or vengeance, now the specters were seen as proof of the immortality of the soul, and of the existence of God and the afterlife as well. As penitential spirits or diabolic apparitions, they drew their meaning from a larger system of belief; now, in an ominous reversal of signification, these apparitions had to serve as evidence of that larger invisible reality.

For many Protestant authors in Britain, the Netherlands, and the Empire, the threat of popery that once surrounded such apparitions was utterly overshadowed by the Christian mortalism of Milton or the "atheism" of Hobbes, Spinoza, or even Bekker. The utility of the ghost to preserve faith in God – and in divine mystery and majesty – became paramount. This utility was initially supported by hopes that the circulation of enough "well-attested" ghost stories would prove their reality *within* the empiricism on the rise at the end of the century.

In this debate, both positions reflected fundamental changes in everyday life for the learned and urbane. As noted earlier, nocturnalization encompassed two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand the conquest of the darkness and the night through vastly improved street and domestic lighting, and on the other the creation and manipulation of darkness at royal spectacles, on baroque perspective stages, and in absolutist political display in general. The ghost literature of the seventeenth century presents a similar contrast between dispellers and promoters of the shadowy spirit world. The "ghost-busters" (such as Spinoza and Bekker) claimed to shine the light of Cartesian analysis or rational Scriptural exegesis onto the shadowy existence of ghosts and reveal them to be, in the words of

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Spinoza "but dreams, which differ from God as totally, as that which *is not* differs from that which *is*."[29] Whether materialist, rationalist, or empiricist, the radical Enlightenment promised the elimination of the shadowy world of ghosts, demons, and spirits. The discourses which denied the existence of ghosts circulated in the most nocturnalized spaces of this period. Many issued from the cities of the Netherlands, which enjoyed the oldest and most effective street lighting in Europe. (See Map 5.2.) From this dense concentration of nocturnalized daily life, the ideas of the radical Enlightenment radiated through the night, from the genteel evening gatherings of Claver Morris in Somerset to the coffeehouses and taverns of London, Paris, and Leipzig.

In contrast, sovereigns who used darkness and the night to enhance their displays of light and power – such as Charles I, Louis XIV, Augustus the Strong of Saxony, or even Frederick William I of Prussia – mirror those anxious Protestants who assessed the dangers of "atheism" as much greater than those of popery and so emphasized the reports of ghosts and spirits in their own times as "sensible proof of spirits" and therefore of God. In a 1678 treatise on angels Benjamin Camfield referred to "the Supreme Spirit, and Father of Spirits":

> 'tis to be observed, among our modern Atheists and Sadducees especially, that their antipathy and aversation, as to the notion and being of Spirits universally, hath carried them on (and naturally doth so) to the dethroning of God, the Supreme Spirit, and Father of Spirits.[30]

Terrified by the dethroning of kings and heavenly king alike, apologists for monarchy and revealed Christianity praised darkness as fundamental to divine and earthly majesty. Dryden's "Astraea Redux" of 1660 presented the night as a time when the truth of monarchy was revealed ("Well might the Ancient Poets then confer / On Night the honour'd name of *Counseller*"), rehabilitating the Stuarts, "In such adversities to Scepters train'd," by claiming that "We light alone in dark afflictions find." Rachel Jevon's poem in celebration of the restoration of Charles II pairs darkness and splendor by proclaiming Charles "More Splendid made by dark Afflictions Night; / Live ever Monarch in Coelestial Light." The royal spectacles of Louis XIV, beginning with the *Ballet de la Nuit* of 1653, used darkness to enhance

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the brilliance of the Sun King.[31] The parallel between the importance of darkness to baroque royal spectacle and the importance of ghosts and spirits to Christian faith was first made explicit by Henry More in his 1653 *Antidote against atheisme*. More chose to end his 160-page treatise with a ringing simile:

> For assuredly that Saying was nothing [i.e., never] so true in Politicks, *No Bishop*, *no King*; as this is in Metaphysics, *No Spirit*, *no God*.[32]

Countless Protestant divines had denounced all apparitions as human or diabolical trickery, but More, Camfield, Koelman and other Protestants writing in response to the New Philosophy saw these specters as heaven-sent evidence of the Divine. By the end of the seventeenth century, Protestant supporters of monarchy and the divine monarch had embraced the night and its ghosts in terms that would have been unthinkable a half-century earlier.

8.2 WITCHES

The debate over ghosts and spirits shaded into the more weighty issue of witchcraft. This is no surprise: for early modern people the ghost and the witch were "not merely allied beliefs, but intrinsic parts of the same system."[33] The Devil might appear in the form of a ghost, or directly to a witch; witches might summon the spirits of the dead (as the witch of Endor did) – all were manifestations of the same metaphysical order, sharing deep associations with the night.

Though closely associated in popular and learned belief, the stakes were higher when witchcraft was at issue. Ghost belief could have serious theological and political implications, but there were no major legal issues tied to it. Witchcraft, in contrast, was a crime described and denounced in every body of Western law. Its ties to the political order were explicit. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Protestants and Catholics alike had created a stable context for witchcraft that demanded its persecution, despite the publications of skeptics from several confessions. This context framed witches as the Devil's servants on earth, with their *maleficia*, gatherings, and rituals recognized as inverted reflections of the legitimate servants and

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proper worship of God. Imagined nocturnal gatherings were a key part of this inversion. In these terms Stuart Clark has elucidated the political logic behind the persecution of witches, which helps account for the violence of both the persecutions and the flare-ups of debate over it. In response to criticism of the execution of several witches in Scotland in 1697, minister Robert Wylie argued that "unless a man hath so far renounced humanity as well as religion as to deny invisible Spirits, and the being of witches," the actions of the Scots authorities were irreproachable.[34] The legal and practical context of witchcraft persecution, as well as its theoretical underpinnings in learned demonology, all emphasized the night as the time of diabolical temptation and the witches' sabbath. The tie between witchcraft and the night intensified at the end the sixteenth century as the learned demonization of the night made its way into popular culture through witch trials and publications.

After 1650, the stable framework of learned demonology and legal persecution was shaken by new challenges that went beyond the humane skepticism of Montaigne, Scot, Wier, or Spee. On an intellectual level, these challenges arose from Cartesian or materialist thought; on a quotidian level, increasing use of the night for respectable sociability undercut its demonization. Spinoza provides some of the most striking expressions, arguing in his *Korte Verhandeling* (*c.* 1660) that "devils cannot possibly exist" and refuting arguments about the existence of spirits in series of letters in 1674.[35] Such authors challenged the possibility of witchcraft on an abstract level, and they presented their arguments as light overcoming the darkness of superstition.

In response to these new challenges, witchcraft took on new meanings in the law and learned discourse.[36] More and more, stories about witches became assertions of the reality of witchcraft. As with ghosts and spirits, supporters of traditional, revealed Christianity saw witchcraft itself as evidence of the reality of their faith and their God. The nocturnal crimes and gatherings of witches were inverted testimony to the divine order preached by the established churches. To preface accounts of witchcraft and witch trials in New England and Sweden *The Compleat Library, or, News for the Ingenious* (December, 1692) explained the stakes:

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As we are troubled in this Age by a great many Atheists, or pretenders to Atheism, so we are no less pestered with a multitude of Pretenders to Reason and Christianity both, which yet against both Reason and Scripture … do strangely *Sadducise*, and dogmatically, and confidently maintain, there are no witches.[37]

By publishing these accounts of sorcery, "being attested in the most Authentic manner that is possible," the author hoped to "satisfy them [i.e., the skeptics] of the Reality of the Being of such wicked Creatures, and of the lamentable Effects of their horrid Confederacy with wicked Spirits." Despite this author's reference to "the lamentable Effects" of human alliance with evil spirits, these alliances served an important new purpose by generating accounts of witchcraft which could now be used in the name of established Christianity to support a system of beliefs that seemed (to traditional defenders at least) to be challenged on all sides. As a Scots author explained in a 1698 account of witchcraft, after "Seeing Devils take so much pains to contract for the Souls of Witches; the Saducee's tho' judicially blinded in their Reason, are hereby rendred inexcusable by very sense."[38]

Conversations with free-thinkers confirmed the fear that denial of the reality of ghosts and witches was a slippery slope to graver errors. This was the conclusion of Ralph Thoresby, the nonconformist antiquary of Leeds, who noted in his diary on June 13, 1712 that he was "troubled." Visiting London, he had spent that evening and the one before at a coffeehouse in the company of learned men like himself, including one Obadiah Oddy (a classicist), a "Mr. Gale," and Edmond Halley, Savilian Professor at Oxford. Halley had a reputation as a free-thinker, but the trouble came from Oddy. Thoresby wrote that Oddy, who had been "very zealous in opposing even the best attested narratives of apparitions, witchcraft, etc." on the previous evening, "now confessed he believed there was no Devil." Thoresby responded in his diary: "the Lord enlighten him!"[39] Could accounts of devils and witches counter this unbelief? In conversation with the free-thinker Oddy, Thoresby (and perhaps other interlocutors) presented "the best attested narratives of apparitions, witchcraft, etc." as proof of the invisible world of God and spirits, but to no avail.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Apparently concerned by his nocturnal encounter with skepticism, Thoresby began *the next day* to read "Mr. Beaumont of Genii," a reference to John Beaumont's *An historical, physiological and theological treatise of spirits, apparitions, witchcrafts, and other magical practices … With a refutation of Dr. Bekker's World bewitch'd; and other authors that have opposed the belief of them* of 1705.[40] Ten days later he noted that he had "Finished the perusal of Mr. Beaumont's History of Genii, or spirits, presented to me, and recommended by the pious Bishop of Gloucester, from whom I had also an account of that very remarkable apparition mentioned in the postscript. His Lordship says this curious treatise has done much good in this skeptical age."[41]

Beaumont's treatise began with an engraving of divination by night (Figure 8.3, "Jews Going Out in the Moonshine to Know their Fortune" by Michael van der Gucht) which reinforced the traditional association of the night with the reality of magic and divination. Here Beaumont cited a Jewish tradition of nocturnal divination during Sukkoth after repeating accounts of contemporary "second-sighted persons" about whom he had been "credibly informed."[42] Thoresby would have found in Beaumont many accounts of spirits and witches, including detailed reports of the Essex witch trials of 1645. The treatise spoke in the empirical tone of the time with many well-attested narratives, including an account of the author's own experience with spirits and a report from the bishop of Gloucester, with whom Thoresby had spoken personally about "that very remarkable apparition mentioned in the postscript."

Accounts like these were nothing new, but now they bore the additional function of affirming an entire system of belief in spirits, witches, the Devil, and God. Thoresby's conversation with Oddy suggests that these nocturnal accounts would never persuade Cartesians or materialists, however. As Jean Le Clerc explained in the first French review of Bekker's *World Bewitched*, several scholars were preparing to answer Bekker, but "one would wish that in order to refute him, they would not adopt all the stories that have been made and are made every day regarding Sorcerers & Magicians … They will not persuade our *Esprits forts* by this path."[43] Instead, Le Clerc argued that

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 8.3 Illustration of "Jews going out in the Moonshine to know their Fortune" in John Beaumont, *An historical, physiological and theological treatise of spirits, apparitions, witchcrafts, and other magical practices … With a refutation of Dr. Bekker's World bewitch'd; and other authors that have opposed the belief of them* (London, 1705), frontispiece. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

"to answer Mr. Becker solidly, they must … prove that the nature of a spirit is such, that it necessarily has a certain power over bodies, though limited; or that, at least, God has established, with regard to pure spirits and their relation to the body, a law much like that of the human spirit's relationship to the body with which it is united."[44] This was a tall order.

As in the debate over ghosts and spirits, supporters *and* deniers of witchcraft reflected fundamental changes in everyday life. The intellectual conquest of the night defined darkness and witchcraft alike as nonentities, and no amount of empirical evidence could change this definition. Supporters of traditional Christianity turned to the terrors of the night for "proofs" of their understanding of God and the invisible world, but the landscape of darkness was beginning to shift beneath them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

8.3 HELL

In early modern Christian doctrine, Hell was suspended in a thick network of concepts and connotations. The immortality of the soul, divine judgment, *post mortem* punishment, the resurrection of the body, revealed doctrine, and a morally static afterlife – all these concepts were woven together in the traditional teaching on Hell. And all these concepts and connotations were questioned as never before in the seventeenth century – first by radical Christians, then by the radical Enlightenment. A challenge to any one of the concepts could have seismic effects on the entire concept of Hell, and the stakes were high. Unlike the belief in ghosts or witches, the doctrine of Hell was preached quite deliberately to deter sin, stir consciences, and maintain the social order. In a 1686 letter the devotional author Matthew Henry presented the accepted view that "Heaven and Hell are great things indeed, and should be much upon our hearts, and improved by us as a spur of constraint to put us upon duty, and a bridle of restraint to keep us from sin."[45] The famously dissolute free-thinker Matthew Tindal said the same in his 1697 tract on religious toleration, though with less straightforward conviction.[46] He placed atheists and deists outside the bounds of toleration because they denied "the Existence of a God, or that he concerns himself with Humane Affairs; it being the belief of these things that preserveth them in Peace and Quiet, and more effectually obliges them to be true to their Promises and Oaths, and to perform all their Covenants and Contracts."[47] Denying the efficacy of ghosts, spirits, and witches was already dangerous – witness the career of Balthasar Bekker – but denying openly the existence of divine *post mortem* punishment in Hell went beyond the limits of even radical Enlightenment discourse. Confounding Hell's dark existence meant unleashing on an already troubled world all the crime, excess, lust, and deceit kept in check by fear of eternal punishment. Was Hell a nocturnal illusion that even the most enlightened had to maintain?

We are accustomed to think of the challenges to Hell in the seventeenth century as theological and intellectual, originating in extra-confessional Christianity and in the radical Enlightenment. But

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

traditional Christian Hell as understood and preached by the established churches of early modern Europe was built from the raw materials of daily life, not merely from Christian doctrine and Scripture. When Christians described Hell, they spoke to all five senses, creating a *bricolage* of experiences. Early modern authors, following a long tradition, distinguished between the *poena damni* (internal suffering) and the *poena sensi* (external sensual suffering) that would be experienced in Hell.[48] Some of the most significant challenges to Hell in this period arose from the same realms of experience used to make traditional Hell real.

The constitution of Hell through the senses and through lived experience has already been discussed by scholars of early modern culture and belief. Carlos Eire has argued that early modern Christians might "relate experiences in this world to what they had seen and heard about the infernal regions, thereby receiving a foretaste of what might await the five senses after death."[49] As Eire has suggested, the moans and wails of criminals punished in the town square, the smell of the burnt flesh of a heretic, the pain of passing a kidney stone (or of giving birth), the bitterness of an herbal remedy – all could be part of the experience of Hell.[50] Eire and other scholars have suggested that early modern people imagined Hell in terms of extreme experiences of torture, pain, and suffering. Using daily life as a category of analysis broadens this approach by considering Hell in terms of mundane early modern experience rather than focusing on the extreme experiences.

Early modern descriptions of Hell drew their force from the often terrifying experience of darkness and the night in everyday life. How did shifts in attitudes toward darkness and the night relate to changing beliefs in Hell? I argue that the "dark foundations"[51] of Hell in daily life and experience were shifting in the second half of the seventeenth century – with profound implications for Hell itself.

Darkness and the night evoked many emotions in early modern Europe, but fear was assumed to be foremost. It was an easy leap from fear to Hell. The Scottish Presbyterian Elizabeth Nimmo (née Brodie, d. 1717) fused everyday darkness with Hell in an incident recounted in her journal or "spiritual narrative":

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I was afraid I had sinned the sin unto death. One Sabbath night when my trouble was very great … I was immediately challenged, though the challenge seemed to come from the Devil: "O," says the enemy, "you have now sinned the sin unto death." I knew not how to go alone … and after I had lighted my candle, and had read half a side of a book in octavo, then the temptation came in sorely upon me that the room was full of devils to carry me to Hell. I thought I had no comfort but the burning candle, and out it went without any visible cause, whereupon I thought I should have dropt down to the pit.[52]

Nimmo's account of a solitary nocturnal encounter with diabolical temptation resembles both the confessions of accused witches and La Tour's penitent Magdalene (Figure 3.5). Nocturnal Hell was still very real to Nimmo in rural Scotland in the late seventeenth century, but for some of her learned and urbane contemporaries, the night was now associated with the freedom to question the very existence of the Hell she so feared.[53]

From Milton to Spinoza, seventeenth-century Europe produced both vivid evocations of Hell and the first truly resonant denials of its existence. Europeans challenged the orthodox doctrine of Hell in the seventeenth century as never before. Denunciations of eternal torment issued from both radical Christian and secular pens. Positions ranged from the annihilationist argument (represented, for example, by Thomas Hobbes) that the wicked would be destroyed (usually after some time in Hell) and only the saved would enjoy eternal life, to the universalist claim (first advanced by Origen) that eventually all souls would be saved.[54]

But these denials of Hell present a strange paradox. After assessing the range of denials in his masterful study of *The Decline of Hell*, D.P. Walker examines the early modern understanding of the social function of the orthodox doctrine. Aside from a few millenarian Christians, all agreed that without the fear of Hell, society would collapse. As a deterrent to sin and crime, eternal damnation was too important to be questioned publicly. As Henry Dodwell put it in 1698: "in this age of licentiousness, there is hardly any doctrine … of more pernicious consequence than that … concerning *the finiteness of hell torments*."[55] Learned doubts about the duration or existence of Hell were too dangerous to be shared with the common people. The conflict between

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

learned disbelief and the social function of eternal punishment led to a "double doctrine" of Hell in which those who denied its existence privately affirmed it publicly.

Authors were quite clear about the double doctrine of Hell. The English Platonist and clergyman Thomas Burnet (1635?–1715) printed his universalist treatise *De Statu Mortuorum et Resurgentium* (*Of the State of the Dead and of Those who are to Rise*) privately and in Latin.[56] Translated and published in English, Dutch, and French after his death, in its pages readers found this warning:

> whatever you decide, in your own mind, about these punishments being eternal or not, the received doctrine and words must be used for the people and when preaching to the populace, which is inclined to vice and can be deterred from evil only by the fear of punishment.

Burnet's attempt to limit access to his writings about Hell failed, despite his warning that "if anyone translates these things, which are addressed to the learned, into the vulgar tongue, I shall consider it done with ill will and evil intent."[57] Even Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, who denied *post mortem* rewards and punishments alike as contrary to disinterested virtue practiced for its own sake, admitted that "the principle of fear of future punishment, and the hope of future reward … is yet in many circumstances a great advantage, and support to virtue" for those too impulsive or weak to strive for virtue for its own sake.[58] The issue also figured in debates between French Protestants and Catholics in the second half of the seventeenth century. When confronted with Pierre Jurieu's publication of Origen's denial of eternal torment, the French Protestant pastor Elie Saurin agreed with Bossuet, bishop of Meaux:

> The crime, or rather the imprudence, consists in M. Jurieu's having informed the people of a thing which could only scandalize and could not in any way edify.[59]

A range of seventeenth-century writers agreed that the denial of the orthodox doctrine of Hell should be presented in terms either intellectual or esoteric, so that "none of the Wicked shall understand, but the Wise shall understand."[60]

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rare were men like F.M. Van Helmont, who in 1684 denounced this secrecy, asking:

> Is it sufficient ground for preaching this Doctrine [of eternal damnation], to concede that it will terrify and affright people from sin? Does God need any Lie of man's making, to deter people from sin? Or shall we lie for God?[61]

In similar terms Pierre Bayle denounced the self-interest which led Arminian theologians like Jean Le Clerc and Issac Jaquelot to conceal their belief in universal salvation. If they revealed that they agreed with Origen and would "exclude no one from the bliss of paradise," they would be driven from the Netherlands by the "Ministers of the Flemish and Walloon Churches … [because] the dogma of eternal torment seems too precious and too important to allow it to be attacked."[62] Bayle then rehearses the social defense of the orthodox Hell, which "restrains vice by the fear of eternal damnation"; denial of eternal punishment "opens the door to all crimes [and] encourages all criminals."[63] Of course, Bayle did not believe that the denial of divine punishment necessarily led to immorality and vice, but his challenges to the theological foundations of Hell were always concealed or indirect.

Working with anonymous, posthumous, and unpublished works, Walker carefully exposes a variety of intellectuals who concealed or obscured their disbelief in orthodox Hell. In England personal ties connected Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), John Locke, and Isaac Newton in shared disbelief in orthodox Hell.[64] On the Continent debates and denunciations shed light on the disbelief of Spinoza, Bayle, and many Arminian theologians. Walker argues that "probably many disbelieved in eternal punishment, but none of them published against it in his lifetime and under his own name."[65] In 1730 William Whiston quoted Samuel Clarke as having said that "few or no thinking men" affirmed the doctrine of eternal torment.[66] Many followed Burnet's advice and publicly affirmed the traditional doctrine while privately denying it.[67] For the learned, this "double doctrine" of Hell – one for the enlightened, another for the common people – presented to the vulgar a simulated inferno designed to deter them from sin.[68]

The "double doctrine" reveals the imprint of nocturnalization on the intellectuals' loss of faith in Hell during the seventeenth and early

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

eighteenth centuries. For men such as Spinoza, Burnet, or Newton, Hell, like darkness, had become a nonentity, with no existence of its own. But the double doctrine unearthed by Walker reveals that Hell, if not real, was still important for its social functions. Like darkness on the baroque perspective stage, Hell was created and dispelled to produce specific effects. When men who did not believe in Hell encouraged preaching and teaching about Hell as if it were real, they staged eternal damnation.

Threats of eternal damnation functioned like stage effects, reliant on the manipulation of darkness in the night. The utility of darkness in baroque theater merged with the utility of the fear of Hell in the comments of the master theater designer Joseph Furttenbach. In a guide to theater techniques published in 1663, he described how "Lucifer would be brought on quickly from Hell and let down again amidst flames and smoke. Especially when the lights are dimmed for night, this gives quite a terrifying effect."[69] The double doctrine of useful lies about Hell simulated the realm of the prince of darkness for an audience of the ignorant and undisciplined, like a flash of fire from a staged Hell, to produce "a terrifying effect."

Hell had become a theatrical display, a simulation based on darkness and illusion. This was clear to someone like Burnet. Writing against the orthodox teaching on Hell (but in Latin), Burnet was especially angered by the orthodox claim that the elect will take pleasure in viewing the eternal torment of the damned. Burnet cast this whole scene – the saved looking down on the torments of the damned in Hell – as a "spectacle on the stage." Driven to irony, he asks:

> Consider a little … what a theatre of providence this is: by far the greatest part of the human race burning in flames for ever and ever. Oh what a spectacle on the stage, worthy of an audience of God and angels! And then to delight the ear, while this unhappy crowd fills heaven and earth with wailing and howling, you have a truly divine harmony.

Of course, the double doctrine itself was ironic, affirming Hell on one level while denying it on another. Hell had become a useful artifice or a necessary evil – much like the darkness of which it was made.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

8.4 DARKNESS AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Nocturnalization promoted the expression of key concepts of the early Enlightenment. Many of these ideas could be traced back to the New Philosophy of Descartes, Hobbes, or Spinoza. But the abstract, complex, and contradictory arguments of these authors could challenge just about everything in the traditional learned culture of their time. Why did issues such as ghosts, witches, and Hell emerge, among others, as key controversies?[70] A specific aspect of Hell's "dark foundations," resting on an ancient bedrock of fear, looked a little less frightening to all who experienced nocturnalization – a significant minority of Europeans in 1700. A primordial feature of daily life was now pushed back, however slightly, by the new street lighting and by improved domestic lighting. In this new era of the history of the night, women accused of witchcraft evoked pity rather than Satan's dark powers, and one could now "laugh at spirits."[71] The "esprits forts," libertines, and skeptics who challenged the reality of ghosts, witches, Hell, and the Devil were at home in the night when these conversations flourished.

Contemporaries understood the effects of nocturnalization on the religious and philosophical debates of the time. As Lewis Theobald, editor of the London journal the *Censor* complained in 1717:

> It is too frequent a provocation to a Man of my Gravity … to be obliged to sit up with a Mixture of Company, who, when the *Watchman* has gone his Round, and the Sparks are entering on their *Third* Bottle, will trouble the Board with Debates of Religion, and the Power of Faith.

At this late hour serious topics arose: "How unfit a Time is it, when either Reason nods, or is bewildered, to launch out into Subjects of such a Nature; and play the Skeptics, when Notions must be so confused." Theobald saw the clear effects of these conversations:

> I doubt not but this Custom of trifling with Immortality and Themes above the Sphere of common Reason, when the Powers of Wine have made the Tongue licentious, has been the Cause of many a Free-thinker among the alert and sanguine.[72]

He did not, however, suggest reversing the nocturnalization of London's cultured life: he goes on to explain that late hours per se are

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not the issue. Instead the late-night conversations on "themes above the sphere of common reason" have helped change the intellectual tone of the times, creating free-thinkers and "bigots" alike: the former are too emboldened, and the latter too frightened, by late-night "trifling with Immortality."[73] His French contemporary, the abbé Jean Terrasson (1670–1750), claimed that street lighting had led to the decline of letters: "Before this age … everyone returned home early for fear of being murdered on the street, which redounded in favor of one's work. Now, one stays out at night and works no more."[74] Social banter was replacing solitary reflection in the learned night.

The association of the night with free-thinking was widespread. The guide to Paris published in 1718 by the German Nemeitz advised young men to visit the city's "infinite number of cafés" in the afternoon or evening.[75] In particular, he noted that "the widow Lawrence in the rue Dauphine keeps a café, called the 'café des beaux esprits' where assemble certain persons who discuss all sorts of curious and spiritual matters."[76] A police report of August 1729 described such café conversations in a more alarmed tone:

> There are in Paris self-proclaimed wits who talk in cafés and elsewhere of religion as a chimera … and if order is not restored, the number of atheists or deists will increase, and many people will make a religion according to their own fashion, as in England.[77]

Like the night print from the *Secret Letters* and the accounts of Morris and Thoresby examined above, these authors testify to effects of nocturnalization on the form and content of the debates of the early Enlightenment.

The magnitude of this change is revealed by comparison with a 1629 sermon of John Donne (cited in chapter 3). Preaching "in the evening" at St. Paul's in London, Donne called on the power of midnight, solitary and profound, to strip away the vanity of the day. Addressing an "atheist," Donne asked him to look ahead "but a few hours, but six hours, but until midnight." Donne assumed that at midnight his listener would be asleep, "dark and alone" in an ascetic or penitential night. Donne taunted: "Wake then; and then dark and alone, Hear God ask thee then, remember that I asked thee now, Is there a God?

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and if thou darest, say No."[78] By the end of the seventeenth century, nocturnalization had transformed the scene imagined by Donne. In London midnight was precisely the time when the society of gallants, free-thinkers, and "atheists" thrived. They confronted not God, but one another in drink and conversation. Worldly banter replaced sacred introspection as a key nocturnal activity, and the late hour was more likely to strengthen their free-thinking than to challenge it. For Donne and his listeners, it was "an occasional mercy" when "A man wakes at midnight full of unclean thoughts, and hears a passing bell."[79] But by the end of the century, the social din of the coffeehouse had drowned out the lonely sound of the passing bell.[80]

The imprint of nocturnalization upon the discussions of ghosts, witchcraft, and Hell also appears in the framing concepts and rhetorical strategies of important works of the early Enlightenment. Here I examine early Enlightenment thought in terms of nocturnalization through two popular texts, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (*Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*) of 1686 and Balthasar Bekker's *De betoverde weereld* (*The World Bewitched*, 1691–94). These works, which reached especially wide audiences, present the same tension between the two aspects of nocturnalization – the discourses and practices that dispelled or denied darkness and those that created, maintained, and manipulated it – seen in the discussions of witchcraft, ghosts, and Hell above. Fontenelle presents an intellectual seduction by night, lifting the veils of nature but counseling secrecy from "les esprits ordinaires." To refute accounts of spirits, ghosts, and witches, Bekker emphasizes repeatedly that these encounters often take place "at night and in nightmares" when reason is obscured.[81] Both authors created hierarchies of perception, understanding, and enlightenment that shifted the darkness of ignorance onto differences of region and race.

8.4.1 Nature: Fontenelle's Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds

Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757) combined talents and connections in literature (he was the nephew of the brothers Corneille)

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with interests in astronomy, geometry, and physics. The *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* was his first major success when published in 1686. In 1691 he was elected to the Académie française and in 1697 appointed permanent secretary of the Académie des Sciences – a testament to his skill as an elucidator of science. He published widely as a moralist, advocate of *les modernes*, Cartesian, and biographer of science. Voltaire and Diderot hailed him as a true pioneer of the Enlightenment.

Fontenelle's extraordinarily popular *Conversations* went through thirty-two editions during the author's long lifetime; translations appeared in every major European language throughout the eighteenth century. In the year following its publication, the book was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books, and in this year Fontenelle added a sixth chapter that reinforced the book's enlightened-aristocratic tone.[82] This work and his other writings of the 1680s – some clandestine, some popular – marked "the gateway to the French Enlightenment."[83] Like the larger intellectual movement of which it is emblematic, *Conversations* engages with darkness, the night, and nocturnalization on several levels.

Consisting of six conversations at night between an unnamed marquise and a scientifically informed narrator, Fontenelle's work teaches the fundamentals of a Copernican–Cartesian universe, infinite and dynamic. Fontenelle explained astronomy through his narrator's intellectual seduction of the marquise, who is untutored in natural philosophy but possesses a keen intellect and ready curiosity. (Fontenelle's narrator describes her as "a blond … the most beautiful woman I know.") In his Preface Fontenelle explains that "the ideas of this book are less familiar to most women than those of *The Princess of Cleves*, but they're no more obscure." His narrator then leads the marquise from ignorance and disbelief to a clear understanding of the heliocentric solar system, the movement of the earth, geographic features on the moon, eclipses, the six known planets, and the possibility of life in other solar systems. Fontenelle's conversations between the amiable narrator and his bright pupil reveal a clear parallel between the darkness deployed in the theater and the use of darkness in the presentation and transmission of natural philosophy in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Enlightenment. As in the theater and in court culture in general, the relationship between the creation of darkness and the illumination of darkness is central to the project, yet carefully hidden.

The text opens with a letter from the narrator to a "Monsieur L***" describing the narrator's conversations with the marquise. "I'll divide them for you by evenings," the narrator explains, "because in fact we had these conversations only at night."[84] The nocturnal setting evokes the expansion of legitimate nocturnal activity in the period, as well as nightly pursuits ranging from astronomy and the theater to court life. The use of darkness – intellectual, metaphoric, and represented – to create the *Conversations* shows the text to be an intellectual expression of *both* aspects of nocturnalization. Like the nocturnal spectacles of the opera or the court, Fontenelle's nocturnal *Conversations* depict the triumph of light over darkness on one level, while on other levels fostering, maintaining, and manipulating darkness. Indeed, in the first of these nightly conversations, the narrator uses an analogy with theater to persuade the marquise to accept a new epistemology based on darkness and obscurity. Before he can explain anything about the movement of the earth or the position of the sun, he must convince the marquise to leave her "common-sense" views behind. He does this by comparing the natural world to the theater:

> I have always thought that nature is very much like an opera house. From where you are at the opera you don't see the stages exactly as they are; they're arranged to give the most pleasing effect from a distance, and the wheels and counter-weights that make everything move are hidden out of sight. You don't worry, either, about how they work. Only some engineer in the pit, perhaps, may be struck by some extraordinary effect and be determined to figure out for himself how it was done. That engineer is like the philosophers. But what makes it harder for the philosophers is that, in the machinery that Nature shows us, the wires are better hidden.[85]

Fontenelle summarizes the central insight that underwrites his text: "'Whoever sees nature as it truly is simply sees the backstage area of the theater.'"[86] His frame of reference is the baroque perspective stage, with its reliance on darkness and illusion.

With the help of Fontenelle's narrator the young marquise comes to understand that there is more to nature than meets the eye. But the

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

analogy "nature–theater" also incorporated a hierarchy of perception. As a guide to the opera published in Hamburg in 1702 explained:

> Nowadays all persons of distinction seek entertainment from the opera, but among the thousands found in the boxes and seats one would scarcely meet ten who understand what happens there and how to evaluate it. Indeed, a great many in the audience do not understand one bit of it. The most important things to note at an opera are … the sets, which no one can rightly assess unless he understands painting and perspective … Above all the machines [must be] considered, as they are the best thing about the opera, filling the spirits of all members of the audience with wonder.[87]

One had to learn how to see the opera, just as Fontenelle's narrator teaches the marquise (and his many readers) how to see the natural world.

But this learning is not meant to be shared widely. When the marquise reports on the sixth evening that two "men of wit" ridiculed her knowledge of astronomy, the narrator advises her to do as he does and keep their insights secret from the ignorant: "Let us content ourselves with being a little select party who believe and not divulge our mysteries to the common people."[88] The artificial illusions of the theater, dependent on darkness, become in the *Conversations* a model for nature in a discussion that dispels intellectual darkness for the marquise while maintaining it for "the vulgar."

The hierarchy of perception presented by Fontenelle was perhaps most fully expressed in the darkness of the baroque theater. The influential guide to the baroque stage, Nicola Sabbatini's *Practica di Fabricar Scene e Machine ne'Teatri* (*Manual for Constructing Theatrical Scenes and Machines*) of 1638 makes this hierarchy explicit in practical terms:

> the common or less cultivated persons are set on the tiers and at the sides, since the machines give a less perfect appearance in these places, and because such people do not observe them minutely. The persons of culture and taste should be seated on the floor of the hall, as near the middle as possible, in the second or third rows. They will have the greatest pleasure there, since … all parts of the scenery and the machines are displayed in their perfection.[89]

Sabbatini's advice maps a political and cultural hierarchy onto the perception of the stage or the world. The "cultured" see beyond the surface when they view the sets and special effects of the opera or

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theater. They appreciate what is concealed as well as what is visible. In the same terms, many scholars have noted Fontenelle's oblique style, discretion, and use of irony. The author expected his proper audience of *raisonneurs* to be able to read between the lines. Those at the top of the hierarchy of perception would see the more radical scope of Fontenelle's views.[90] His clandestine philosophical writings of the 1680s reveal his anticlericalism and deep skepticism regarding all systems of metaphysical thought, including revealed Christianity.[91]

8.4.2 Scripture: Bekker's The World Bewitched

The Amsterdam Reformed minister Balthasar Bekker (1634–98) unleashed an extraordinary controversy with the 1691–94 publication of his *De betoverde weereld* (*The World Bewitched*). Bekker, son of a Friesian village pastor, studied at the universities of Groningen and Franeker. He became a Cartesian but was also strongly influenced by the biblical philology of Cocceius. He earned a doctorate and served as pastor in Franeker before taking a position in Amsterdam in 1678.

When Bekker published the first two books of *The World Bewitched* in 1691, he was an experienced author with several catechisms and a work on comets to his credit. Nothing prepared him, however, for the extraordinary popularity or violent responses generated by *The World Bewitched*.[92] Across the four books of *The World Bewitched* Bekker argued "upon the same foundation of Scripture and Reason" that "the Empire of the Devil is but a Chimera, and that he has neither such a Power, nor such an Administration as is ordinarily ascribed to him."[93] As Bekker's work was translated into German, French, and English, dozens of refutations were published, as well as a few defenses of Bekker from authors more radical than he. Another edition published in England in 1700 as *The world turn'd upside down, or, A plain detection of errors, in the common or vulgar belief, relating to spirits, spectres or ghosts, daemons, witches, &c.* kept the controversy going, with an important response published by John Beaumont in 1705 (the book to which Ralph Thoresby turned for reassurance in 1712).

In *The World Bewitched* Bekker sought to make "an exact enquiry after whatever is falsely believed in the World, and the Erroneous

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Opinions that are entertained without any other ground than that they are every day told and heard of."[94] Specifically, Bekker intended to deny the supposed effects of Satan and evil spirits in the world. He saw this work as a continuation of the Protestant Reformation, "a new and perhaps final phase in the perfection of Christianity."[95] As with the *Conversations*, Bekker's *World Bewitched* engages with darkness, the night, and nocturnalization on several levels. Bekker proposes to illuminate "the frightful Darkness of Paganism" while creating darkness in new hierarchies of interpretation, perception, and revelation. His attitude toward the common people, his approach to Scripture, and his understanding of the night all reveal the imprint of nocturnalization, as does the place of "pagans" in this work.

Bekker's challenge to belief in witchcraft, evil spirits, and the power of the Devil has been depicted as reflecting growing popular skepticism and disbelief in the Netherlands. But Bekker himself complained of the credulity of his congregants and the cases of supposed possession and bewitchment they brought to him. He made clear in *World Bewitched* that he was "rejecting the Opinion commonly received amongst the Vulgar, concerning the Craft and Power of the Devil." In his survey of belief in witches and demons, past and present, he noted that "for as to the common People, either Papists, Jews, or Pagans, they know nothing for the most part, but a little by hear-say; so that there is no relying upon them." Even among Protestants, "it is sure without mistake, that for the most part, what the most illiterate believe and practice, is contrary to the sense of Divines, and of all those that understand any thing in the Holy Scripture." He sounds a resigned tone: "I will have nothing to do with them [the common people] upon this subject, having often tried my self how many follies our own People say and believe, upon this account."[96] Despite the popular response to *World Bewitched*, he sought an audience among the learned – as the four detailed volumes of his study suggest. He addressed "our Doctors and our Men of letters [among whom] … there are none so credulous as the Vulgar; however there is a very considerable difference to be seen in their Opinions, some believing almost every thing, and others almost nothing at all" about ghosts and witches.[97] Even among the most free-thinking Christians in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Netherlands, the Collegiants, belief in spirits and diabolic possession was widespread and vigorously defended.[98]

Bekker's frustration with the credulity of the common people echoes in his sense that his own tradition has utterly misunderstood the biblical testimony regarding spirits and the Devil: "But to our great shame, most ... of us, as well as of other Sects, that pretend a Veneration for the Holy Writ, search not in it after its Sense, being satisfied with the vulgar Interpretations, and such as they have received from others." To correct this misinterpretation, Bekker proposed, like Fontenelle, to look beyond the deceptive surface of his object of study to a deeper understanding of Scripture heretofore obscured from view. This is the work of books II and III of *World Bewitched*.

From the first, Bekker's critics noted that he used an extreme accomodationist hermeneutic associated with Spinoza or Cocceius to radically reinterpret all scriptural references to angels, the Devil, and evil spirits.[99] It was this approach to Scripture, rather than his Cartesian pneumatology, that most provoked Bekker's fellow divines. As Le Clerc noted in the first French review of Bekker, "to answer Mr. Bekker solidly, they must ... prove ... that according to the rules of criticism, and the spirit of the Hebrew and Greek Languages, it is impossible to give the Scripture the sense which our author gives it."[100] A battalion of theologians proceeded to do just that. The intensity and extent of their responses made Bekker a target of attack decades after his death in 1698. A satire of 1730–31 imagined a conversation with his ghost, illustrated with a visual lampoon showing what was wrong with Bekker's approach to demons and Scripture. In Figure 8.4 Bekker is shown sieving or sifting demons out of the Christian Scriptures. Below the sieve are a series of terms used by Bekker to interpret away apparent references to evil spirits, possession, demons, etc. in the Bible: "frenzy," "melancholy," "lunacy," "enthusiasm," and "epilepsy" are among them. In this lampoon of Bekker, he is unaware that the real Devil and demons are hovering just above him. The caption reads "So Becker sorts out the devils by his art; / But the spirit of lies alone makes more doubt." This remarkable representation of Bekker's

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 8.4 Balthasar Bekker sieving devils, from *Curieuse Gespräche im Reiche derer Todten. Zweyte Unterredung oder Gespräche im Reiche derer Todten* (Leipzig and Braunschweig: s.n., 1731), frontispiece to part 2. Wellcome Library, London.

approach to Scripture directly challenges the accomodationist hermeneutic of Spinoza and Cocceius, denying the esoteric knowledge hidden from the vulgar and the hierarchy of perception on which it was based.

More broadly, Bekker's insistence on natural or physical explanations for all supposed encounters with spirits, angels, and devils led him to emphasize the power of the night and sleep to cloud the mind. Dark times and places became the antipode to the Cartesian rationality

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

he took as his method. The accounts of Jacob wrestling with an angel (Genesis 32; Hosea 12) "occurred, as in every case before and after, in a divine night-vision," Bekker explained.[101] Likewise "the Devil … does not have the freedom to haunt the world or appear to people, except in sleep or in a dream." In books II–IV of *The World Bewitched* he explains dozens of biblical, historical, and contemporary encounters with angels, devils, or spirits as nocturnal dreams, visions, or misperceptions. Examining an account from the early church, Bekker asks "At what time" did the Devil appear to Theodoretus? "At night. He was perhaps sleeping or dreaming." One must consider the time of day when examining any account of a ghost or demon, Bekker insists.

In his refutation of dozens of ghost stories in book IV, Bekker articulates the role of the night in his analysis:

> For example, when the will-o'-the-wisp sometimes pops and crackles and gives off a strange and unpleasant noise, like the whimpering or sighing of a person, it seems to some, because man's fearfulness is greater at night than by day and hinders him from using his judgment and reason properly (so that the true cause is not recognized) that all these … are the antics of Satan.

Bekker follows this observation with a series of accounts concerning ghosts and specters, emphasizing that each occurred "in the evening, while lying in bed," "in the evening hours," "in the evening twilight," or "at night in front of the bed."[102] Signaling a key theme in the later Enlightenment understanding of the night, Bekker demonstrates in example after example that the dreams and fears of the night check the use of reason. Night became the shadowy supplement to the light of reason, always dispelled but ever-present.

8.5 DARKNESS AND RACE IN THE EARLY ENLIGHTENMENT

Fontenelle and Bekker shared a mission to reorient their world by placing the familiar in a startling new contexts. The secularizing, disenchanting force of their works redrew lines of intellectual and cultural division between men and women, between Europeans and

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the wider world, and between the enlightened and the superstitious. Questions of human difference by gender, region, and culture play a key role in *The Conversations* and in *The World Bewitched*. Fontenelle and Bekker figure very differently in the early Enlightenment, but in their projects of education and enlightenment they both propose new zones of ignorance and new boundaries between light and darkness. Both rely on a hierarchy of perception to break down old barriers and create new divisions.

References to region and race set the stage for the last lesson in Fontenelle's explication of astronomy. At the end of the final evening, the marquise asks "'haven't I always heard that the Chinese were very great astronomers?'" The narrator agrees as to their reputation, but corrects the marquise. He explains:

> In truth, I am more and more persuaded there is a certain Genius which has hitherto been confined within our Europe, or which at least has extended very little beyond it.[103]

Here the fundamental distinction between the *raisonneurs* and the vulgar is generalized across the earth. Among the Europeans some few would be enlightened; among other peoples, likely none. The Europeans stand in the same relationship to other peoples as the *raisonneurs* to the vulgar, at the summit of a hierarchy of perception and understanding. This European claim on enlightenment is underscored throughout the *Conversations* by reference to the astrological and cosmological "fallacies" of other peoples, for example in the discussion of the fear caused by eclipses or comets. Indeed, Fontenelle describes the earth itself demarcated by "complexions." Looking down from the height of understanding, Fontenelle explained:

> I sometimes imagine that I'm suspended in the air, motionless while the Earth turns under me for twenty-four hours, and that I see passing under my gaze all the different faces: white, black, tawny, and olive complexions. At first there are hats, then turbans; wooly heads, then shaved heads.

The text brings the "certain Genius" of the Europeans together with the visible contrast between "societies." Trying to imagine what inhabitants of other worlds would look like, Fontenelle's narrator generalizes about human variety, observing that "'All faces in general are

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

made on the same model, but those of two large societies – European, if you like, and African – seem to have been made on two specific models'."[104] Visible difference and intellectual superiority coincide in the construction of race.

In Fontenelle's most popular work the intellectual darkness of "the vulgar" serves as a backdrop to the glittering intellects of the marquise and the narrator, who agree not to even address the irrational masses. On a larger scale, the absurd beliefs, barbaric practices, and scientific ignorance of the "Africans and Tartars," "Iroquois," and Chinese which decorate the *Conversations* reveal the new hierarchies of race and region built into this fundamental Enlightenment text.

The relationship between gender and race in the *Conversations* is mirrored in the contemporary *Code noir* regulating slavery in France's American colonies, also published in 1687.[105] The gender inclusion of the *Conversations*, in which the beautiful blond marquise becomes the intellectual superior of the waggish noblemen who fail to understand the solar system, is consolidated as the marquise takes her place in the European superiority asserted by Fontenelle. The inclusion of enlightened women takes place in a new hierarchy which is based on European knowledge of the natural world and marked by race. The authors of the *Code noir* sought to consolidate difference through gender in similar terms by decreeing that slave status followed the maternal line. Articles 8–13 of the code asserted that all persons born in the French Caribbean colonies "will follow the condition of their mother." The maternal transmission of status in the *Code noir* contrasted sharply with French practice and noble ideology, which relentlessly emphasized the male line of descent.[106] In the colonies, however, concubinage with female slaves was an overriding factor. The *Code noir* punished such "free men who will have one or several children from their concubinage with their slaves," fining them heavily. "Beyond the fine, they [would] be deprived of the slave and the children, and … she and they be confiscated for the profit of the [royal] hospital, without ever being manumitted." Creating race as a category of division shifted the transmission of civil status from men to women in the *Code noir*. In practice, racial separation in the French Caribbean hardened in the following years, making the *Code*

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

noir appear relatively liberal in its tolerance for mixed-race marriages, for example. The *Conversations* and the *Code noir* use gender in similar ways to draw new boundaries between learning and ignorance, or between freedom and slavery, in order to consolidate the category "European" or "French," defined in opposition to extra-European ignorance, superstition, dark skin, and servility.

In *The World Bewitched* Bekker also redefined the relationship between enlightened Europeans and "all the Pagans in the World … in Asia … in Africa … and at last in America" in far-reaching terms. Bekker considered the place of these "Modern Pagans" in the first book of *The World Bewitched*, described by an English reviewer as "being but a collection of the various Opinions of Men about this Matter."[107] The reviewer thought that this first book of *The World Bewitched* "has not been attended with great Difficulties." Compared to the furor created by the Cartesian and exegetical arguments in books II and III, that was true, and few scholars today have examined the argument Bekker makes in the first book.

Contemporaries *did* respond to his discussion of belief in the Devil by "Pagans as well Ancient as Modern," however. These contemporaries, such as Benjamin Binet and John Beaumont, saw that, far from being a noncommittal survey of beliefs in demons, the Devil, ghosts, and witches in all times and places, this first section makes a bold and startling argument that redraws the dividing lines between knowledge and ignorance, shifting the "the frightful Darkness of Paganism" onto the beliefs of the other peoples of world, ancient and modern.[108]

In the first book of *The World Bewitched* Bekker assembles evidence about pagan beliefs in the Devil, demons, ghosts, witches, and spirits. He argues that "the difference to be found amongst them is not material, and must be accounted as inconsiderable, comparatively to the conformity that is betwixt them all." Bekker interprets the consistent pagan belief in evil spirits in light of his assertion, "certain and undoubted, that every Opinion that proceeds from Paganism as from its Original, cannot at the same time be founded upon the Holy Scripture." Bekker implies here and argues later that pagan belief in spirits is "contrary to true Reason, and … Holy Scripture affords no

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proofs of it."[109] These pagan beliefs are thus entirely false, not merely distorted misperceptions of a Christian reality that includes ghosts, demons, and witches. The overall claim of *The World Bewitched* that spirits and demons can affect nothing material, and that the Devil's reach does not extend to the physical world, is supported in book I by this evidence, leading Bekker to conclude, for example, that "It is … sufficiently proved, by all the quotations of this Book, that there are no Miracles, Oracles, purging Fires, Apparitions of Hobgoblins or Souls, Witchcraft by Letters and Characters, or choice of Days, either in Judaism or Popery; but they draw their Original from Paganism."[110] Rooted in paganism, these beliefs had no place in the further reformation of Christianity Bekker proposed.

The place of the practices and beliefs of modern-day pagans in Bekker's argument presented the strange reversal of the well-known proof of the existence of God "by universal consent." The argument from "universal consent" functioned as a "moral proof" of the existence of God, quite familiar to Protestant and Catholic theologians alike.[111] According to this proof all nations, ancient and modern, demonstrated some belief in a god or gods. However mistaken these pagan conceptions of the Divine might be, taken as a whole they showed an inescapable underlying truth. No reasonable person would conclude that all these peoples were mistaken; therefore, there must be a real God. Among the many proofs of the existence of God taught by early modern theologians, that from universal consent was a widely cited and seen as a meta-proof, a "consequence of the force of all proofs of God."[112] Theologians distinguished, of course, between the proper Christian understanding of God based on revelation, and the misconceived, anthropomorphic pagan gods. Nonetheless, "the abuse which one does to a truth does not destroy it," as the Huguenot theologian Benjamin Binet explained, and pagan beliefs testified indirectly to the reality of the Christian God.[113] This argument for the existence of God underscored, however tentatively, the fundamental unity of humankind. Belief in the Divine was universal and evident – the only partial exceptions were the European "atheists," real or imagined, against whom seventeenth-century theologians sharpened their arguments.[114] A flicker of the true God was visible even in the darkest pagan idolatry.

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Recognition of a common truth united all peoples, however distorted or idolatrous pagan understandings of God might be.

Bekker divided this unity. In his view ancient and modern pagans joined most Christians in the common and false belief in the power of the Devil, spirits, and witches. Bekker opposed himself and an enlightened minority of his readers to the superstitious pagans and Christians of his age. He proposed "to the Reader and myself, the lesson of the Apostle in his first Epistle to Timothy. 4:7: 'Reject prophane, and Old Wives Fables, and exercise thy self to Godliness.'" In the first book or section of *The World Bewitched* Bekker argued from universal error: the age-old and world-wide belief in spirits and the Devil was, according to his Cartesian understanding of spirits, impossible; according to his reading of the Bible it was unscriptural as well. Reason and Scripture showed pagans to be in utter darkness on this issue, and their ignorant belief in ghosts and spirits could only be cleared up from Cartesian and scriptural starting points. Bekker's reliance on these two sources of authority, the New Philosophy and Scripture, led him to forthrightly deny any truth or value in the beliefs of the "Pagans as well Ancient as Modern" he surveyed. This denial distinguished him from the detached but respectful tone of eighteenth-century works which developed the concept of "comparative religion," such as Picart and Bernard's *Religious Ceremonies of the World* (1723–37).[115]

Alongside the outraged responses to Bekker's application of Descartes, Spinoza, and Cocceius to questions of the Devil, ghosts, and spirits, contemporaries noted his transformation of the well-known argument from universal consent into something quite ominous: after all, Bekker's claim that belief in physically active ghosts and spirits was a universal error could be expanded by a skeptic or atheist to argue that the universal belief in a deity was just as erroneous. The most widely circulated clandestine manuscript of the early Enlightenment, the *Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, succinctly made just such a case:

> Those who ignore physical causes have a natural fear born of doubt. Where there exists a power which to them is dark or unseen, from thence comes a desire to pretend the existence of invisible Beings, that is to say their own

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

phantoms which they invoke in adversity, whom they praise in prosperity, and of whom in the end they make Gods. And as the visions of men go to extremes, must we be astonished if there are created an innumerable quantity of Divinities?[116]

The rationalist theologian Benjamin Binet responded to Bekker with a variation on the proof of the existence of God by universal consent, arguing that:

all the peoples of the world are steeped in the opinion of demons. One can infer from this confession that what they know [of demons], however erroneous it might be, must be known to them through the [demons'] operations. And to put this truth in full light, please note the following: It is impossible that one and the same belief universally spread and constantly received may be entirely false in its content.

Following the argument from universal consent, Binet explains "if demons have been universally and constantly accepted by all the peoples of the world, this knowledge must proceed from some solid cause."[117]

Evidence from other peoples was important to Bekker and to those who sought to refute the claims he made in book 1 of *The World Bewitched*. Binet accused Bekker of trying to "evade the entire supernatural order that our travelers tell us regarding the wizardry of the peoples and the operations of the devils who, they report, molest them." Binet notes that Bekker "makes fun everywhere of the credulity of humankind." Indeed, Bekker introduces his work by claiming that only with a proper (Cartesian) perspective can one understand "the inconsistency of the Properties of Bodies with those of Spirits … as I do here … as was necessary … to lay a firm foundation to this work, that is wholly grounded upon that Principle, at least as to those things that are the object of the Light of Reason." This leads Binet to argue for the universality of human experience with the Devil, unconstrained by the claims of European enlightenment. He rebukes Bekker:

Thus Sir, you mean to make us laugh by denying the operations of demons on the Brazilian peoples, for example, because they are not good enough theologians to rise to the knowledge of God and the mysteries that His word

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has revealed us, or because they ignore the true [i.e., Cartesian] doctrine of demons.

Binet refuses to accept the division of the world proposed by Bekker (and in the same terms by Fontenelle) into the few (European) enlightened and the many ignorant on such fundamental issues.[118] But in the course of the following century the divisions Europeans perceived between themselves and the other peoples of the world would be intensified by adding the opposition enlightened–superstitious to the existing dualities based on religion, race, and civilization.

For a few learned Europeans and a wider circle of readers and fellow-travelers, a new relationship with the night put the prince of darkness and his attendant ghosts, spirits, demons, and witches into a new light. All these shadowy figures were linked in a wave of controversy that helped define the first generation of the Enlightenment. Representations of darkness and the night – literal and metaphorical – shaped key works of the early Enlightenment, such as Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* and Bekker's *The World Bewitched*, revealing the imprint of nocturnalization on the new ways of understanding the book of Nature and the book of Scripture at the end of the seventeenth century. Living and working in the most nocturnalized sites on earth, authors like Fontenelle and Bekker depicted themselves as conquerors of darkness, but in their works we see the displacement of darkness characteristic of nocturnalization. They each created hierarchies of perception, understanding, and enlightenment that shifted the darkness of ignorance onto new differences of region and race. And by taking the victory of light over darkness as the very emblem of their heterogeneous movement, the authors of the European Enlightenment invoked both sides of nocturnalization, dispelling and creating darkness in discourses that contrasted the light of reason with the allegedly benighted peoples of the wider world, whose beliefs about ghosts, witches, and spirits were "proof of the obscurity, that is spread over their understanding."[119]

https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511977695.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press