Volume 8 — Number 1 **THE NEW MAGIC LANTERN JOURNAL** *October 1996*

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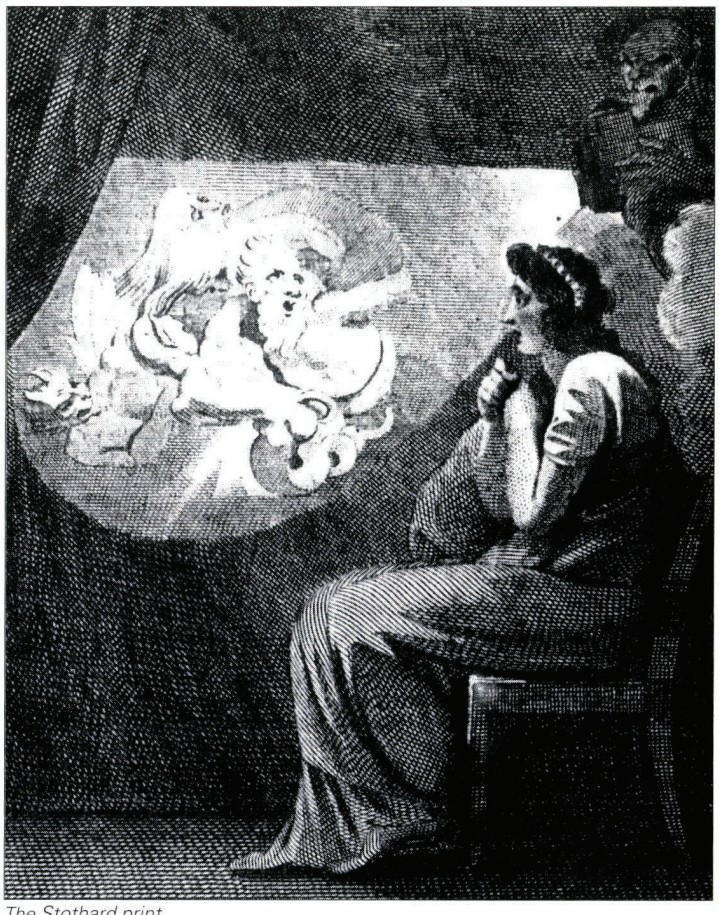
AN UNRECORDED IMAGE AND AN EARLY POETIC LANTERN REFERENCE



The Stothard print

This rather shadowy image of a demonic creature (representing 'Spleen') projecting with a magic lantern, appears as a tiny illustration in a 1795 edition of *The Spleen* and other poems, by Matthew Green. The picture is by Thomas Stothard (1755–1834), one of the best and most prolific book illustrators of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and is engraved by James Heath (1757–1834) who regularly collaborated with him.

The passage which accompanies the illustration reads,

When by its magic lantern Spleen
With frightful figures spread life's scene,
And threatn'ing prospects urg'd my fears,
A stranger to the luck of heirs;
Reason, some quiet to restore,
Showed part was substance, shadow more...

What makes the poem especially interesting is that it was first published in 1737 – almost 60 years before Stothard's illustration – and so must be one of the earliest poetic references to the magic lantern in English. The Spleen was generally considered (by Alexander Pope among others) the best poem of the short-lived Green, who died in 1737 at the age of 44: the poem appeared posthumously. Green was considered a wit: one day he was swimming in the Thames when an impertinent waterman yelled at him 'Quaker!' His friends asked 'How could he suppose you are a quaker when you have no clothes on'. By my swimming against the tide' he replied.

Thomas Stothard was to have another significant connection with pre-cinematic optical shows, when he designed several of the large-size illuminated transparencies which were in vogue in the early nineteenth century. One designed to celebrate the Jubilee of George III in 1810 was made for the goldsmiths Rundle and Bridge, for whom the versatile Stothard also designed silverware. Two others, for the peace celebrations of 1814, were exhibited at Carlton House and outside the famous Temple of Concorde erected in Hyde Park, and commemorated in a number of contemporary prints.