Chariots to Heaven: Memorial Portraits of Children in the Guise of Venus

During the 1670's and 1680's, Nicolaes Maes was one of the most sought after portraitists working in Amsterdam. It was during this period that he painted two very curious portraits of little girls (figs. 1 and 2). In each image, a small girl assumes an affected pose and gazes directly out at the viewer as she rides through a cloud-filled sky in a small chariot that is being drawn by a pair of white doves. While dressed all'antica, contemporary features have also been incorporated, such as the pearl necklaces and earrings and the fanciful ostrich-plumed headpiece worn by the young lady in figure 1. Based on her unconventional mode of transportation, as well as her fantasy costume, Rose Wishnevsky, in her study of the portrait historié in the Netherlands, concluded that the youngster in the first of the two paintings had been portrayed in the guise of Venus, the goddess of love, whose triumphal chariot was traditionally drawn by two doves. Maes's images, then, are examples of the portrait historié, a particular subgenre of portraiture in which sitters are shown dressed as characters from the Bible, mythology, history, or literature. Such role-playing allowed the sitter to transcend his/her everyday situation while also asserting certain virtues or noble ideals associated with the original protagonist. While I do not dispute Wishnevsky's conclusions regarding this portrait type, I will argue that Maes's little girls can be more specifically identified with what Marsilio Ficino defines as the celestial Venus in his discussion of the philosophy of the “Twin Venuses”. I will further assert that these portraits were not simply role-portraits, but that they served to memorialize children who died at a young age.

Maes's Venus portraits can be tied both formally and iconographically to another portrait historié type exclusive to the artist's oeuvre, the Ganymede portrait (fig. 3). A total of fourteen examples of this subject have been documented, each showing, with some variation, an outdoor scene in which a full-length, semi-nude child swathed in a classical drapery sits astride a large eagle which will carry him to the heavens. The simple setting, consisting of little more than a cloud-filled sky above a distant landscape further ties the two types together as does the modish ostrich-feather headpiece worn by several of the Ganymede babies. Both the Ganymede and Venus portraits also share the theme of children embarking on a skyward journey. While Maes's Venus portraits have received very little attention from scholars, his Ganymede portraits have been convincingly shown to have been painted to commemorate the premature death of a child. In order to establish a parallel function for the Venus portraits, it is necessary to first explain the rationale behind the memorializing thesis of the Ganymede portraits.

The identification of the youngsters in Maes' Ganymede portraits as deceased children has its basis in the transformation that the Ganymede myth underwent between its origins in antiquity and its utilization by Maes in the seventeenth cen-
Nicolaes Maes, *Young Girl in a Chariot*, signed lower left corner, 61 x 52.7 cm. London (Christie's), 11-6-1937, nr. 149. Photo: Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), The Hague.

According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (10:155-161), Jupiter fell in love with the handsome Trojan youth, Ganymede. Transforming himself into an eagle, Jupiter snatched the boy from his earthly existence and carried him to Olympus where he was given immortality and made the cupbearer to the gods.6

The amorous overtones of the myth hardly make Ganymede an appropriate subject for a portrait of a child. However, an explication of the carnal desires of the king of the gods is but one interpretation of the story. Xenophon, in his *Symposium* (8:28-30), viewed Ganymede's elevation to the heavens in a more spiritual sense. He explains that it is the beauty and purity of the youth's soul that Jupiter desires. As further evidence that such was the motivation for Jupiter's action, Xenophon explains that even the name Ganymede (meaning 'to enjoy intelligence') is testimony to the fact that intellectual superiority rather than physical beauty is what is desired by the gods.7 Ganymede's abduction is thus to be understood as an allegory representing the pure soul seeking knowledge of the divine. The spiritualized interpretation of the myth was later adopted by Renaissance humanists who were instrumental in propagating a Neoplatonic meaning for the Ganymede story. In Alciati's *Emblemata*, the most widely influential of the Renaissance emblem books, Ganymede is identified with the pure soul that finds its joy in God. In early editions of Alciati, the emblem is illustrated with a rather