



Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

Lesson One : How to recognise alchemical symbols.

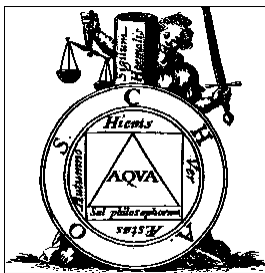
The term 'alchemical symbol' is used in various ways and has been applied to a number of different aspects of alchemy. First, we have the symbols for alchemical substances, apparatus, and processes, such as



Saturn or Lead Aqua regia Powder

While it is important for us to get to know these symbols, they have a simple one dimensional meaning, and one cannot build a study course on just this facet of alchemical symbolism. You should make yourself aware of the common occurring symbols, as they will occasionally turn up in our work. I will devote a future lesson to the most important of these symbols.

The second facet of alchemical symbolism are the emblematic figures which



adorn many alchemy books and manuscripts. These are for the most part what we will be investigating in this course.

The third facet of alchemical symbolism is the imagery contained in alchemical texts, mostly in the form of allegories. An example from George Ripley's *Song*:

Meanwhile the Peacocks Flesh she kindly Eate,
And Dranke Greene-Lyons Blood (with that fine Meate)
Which Mercury (although in Passion:)
Brought in a Golden Cupp of Babilon.

Some of the symbolic imagery we find in texts is based on actual drawings or figures, but many alchemical allegories do not have any reference to external symbolic material. We will leave investigating the text based allegorical material till much later in this study course when we have familiarised ourselves with the material found in pictorial emblems.

Emblems and symbols

An alchemical emblem, here I use the term loosely to refer to a drawing or picture from an alchemical manuscript, or a woodcut or engraving from an alchemical book, is generally composed of a number of different symbols. These symbols are brought together in a particular arrangement, often in a geometric scheme, in which they bear some relationship to one another through their positioning within the space of the emblem. So we have two things to consider when looking at an emblem, two questions we must ask ourselves -

1. What symbols does it contain?
2. How do these relate to one another?
3. How do we read the symbols within the emblem?

The second and third questions we leave to later lessons, but we shall begin here by developing our abilities to identify the symbols of which alchemical emblems are composed. There is no point at the moment of trying to interpret these symbols. We must realise that few symbols have an absolute meaning independent of the emblem in which they appear. Usually the precise interpretation of a symbol depends on the emblem and context in which it appears. Thus a 'lion' means different things in different emblems. One cannot build up a precise dictionary of alchemical symbols, as the meaning is dependent on the context. We will see this very often in later lessons in this course.

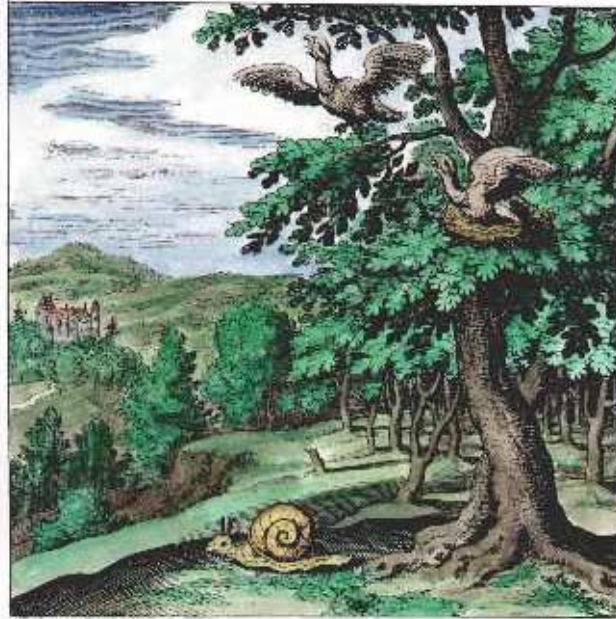
At the beginning of this course we want just to begin training ourselves to recognise the symbols that appear in alchemical emblems. This may seem rather trivial, but it is not so. Few people, in my experience, can easily see the symbols that are found in alchemical emblems. There are some reasons why it can be difficult to identify these.

1. Symbols are often interwoven with each other, integrated in some way. It is rare find the individual symbols in an alchemical emblem laid out with clear demarcation lines or zones. Usually they flow and interpenetrate one another's space. So it can be difficult to see where one symbol begins and another ends.



Thus in this emblem from the Basil Valentine 'Azoth' series, we can see a number of symbols. Sun and Moon, then the lion-head and the eagle, and with a little experience we realise that the lion head is on a snake-like body devouring its tail, the eagle-head, so we have a further symbol, that of the ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail. So we have five symbols composing this emblem, with perhaps another - the figure 8.

2. It is sometimes difficult to isolate the symbol from the background or merely decorative elements of the composition. It was easy for the 'Azoth' emblem above, as there was no additional decorative material added to the composition. But this is not often the case, and it can be quite difficult to see what is symbolically relevant in an emblem and what has been added to give some artistic merit to the composition.



Thus with the seventh figure from the Book of Lambspring we can ask - just how many symbols are depicted here? There are, obviously, the birds and the snail, but do we include the castle in the background? It seems unlikely that this is a symbolic component of the emblem. But what do we make of the tree. Is this is symbol in this emblem? Only by looking at the other emblems in this sequence do we realise that the tree and forest are common to all in the opening part of the sequence and that the tree is here not to be seen as a symbol within this emblem but merely as an artistic embellishment. So there are two symbols we can see in this emblem - the birds and the snail.

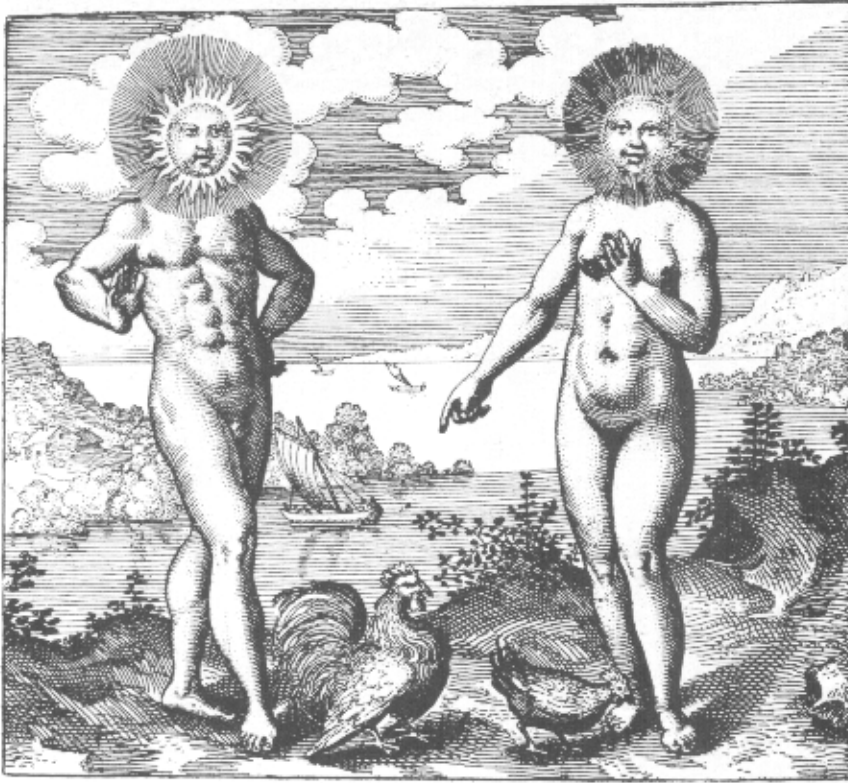
3. Often symbols appearing in an emblem must be considered together. An obvious example is that of a man with a crown on his head. This should, of course, be seen as single symbol of a king. Crowns often appear in other symbolic contexts and then should be seen as an individual symbol. Although this is obvious, there are other constellations of symbols that are not so easy to identify. You will gradually build up a vocabulary as your experience of analysing emblems grows.

Exercises

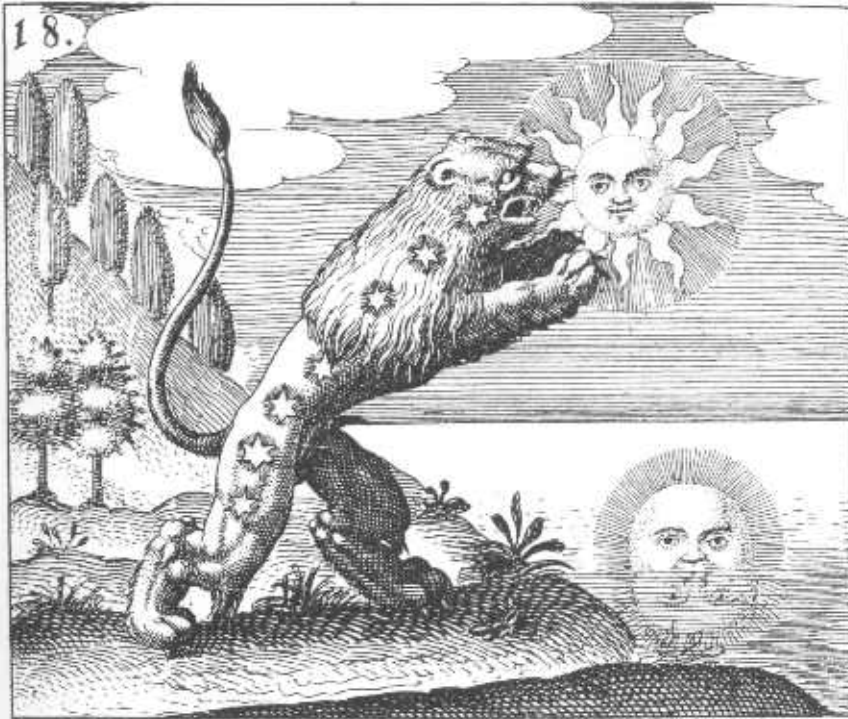
Now you must try to apply what I have outlined above and look at some emblems and identify the symbols of which they are composed. Some will be quite easy and others more challenging. I will not make things easy for you by listing the symbols, but I will tell you how many I can see in the emblem. If you consistently find more than I do then you are probably seeing elements of the composition which are not really symbols. If you find less than I do you are not separating out complex symbols. Look at the symbols you have identified and you may come to see that they have sub-components. For the purpose of this exercise let us count multiple occurrences of the same symbol as a single item. So if an emblem has six stars, then for this exercise let us count this as one item. Avoid any kind of interpretation or adopting an emotional or idea driven approach to these symbols. Thus, a cross is not always a Christian cross, an emotionally charged scene of death is not always what it seems on the surface. For the purposes of these exercises you are just identifying and counting symbols not responding to them or attempting to interpret them.

Of course, I can only provide a few examples. It is best if you continue to work on other alchemical emblems available to you in printed books, such as those I mentioned in the introduction to this course. Only by your undertaking this work will you be able to follow future lessons. We start off with a relatively easy task but one which you must become comfortable with, or else you will find your future study of this symbolic material frustrating.

Exercise 1: Emblem 30 from *Atalanta fugiens*.



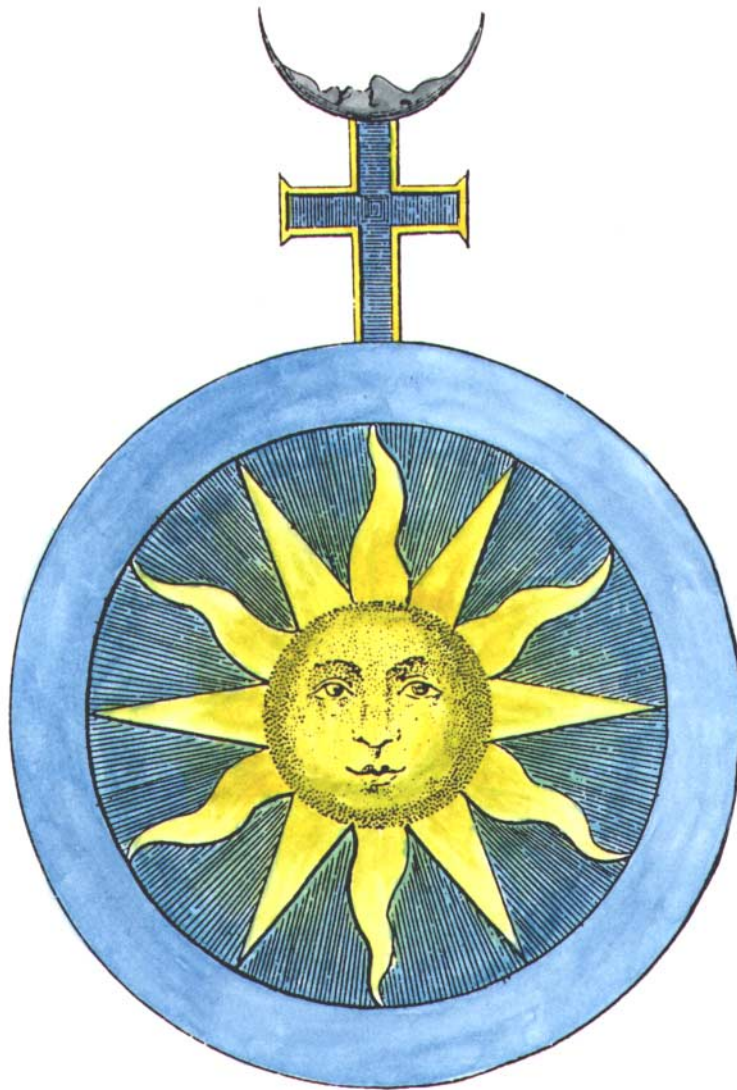
Exercise 2: Emblem 18 from Mylius' version of the *Rosarium Philosophorum*.



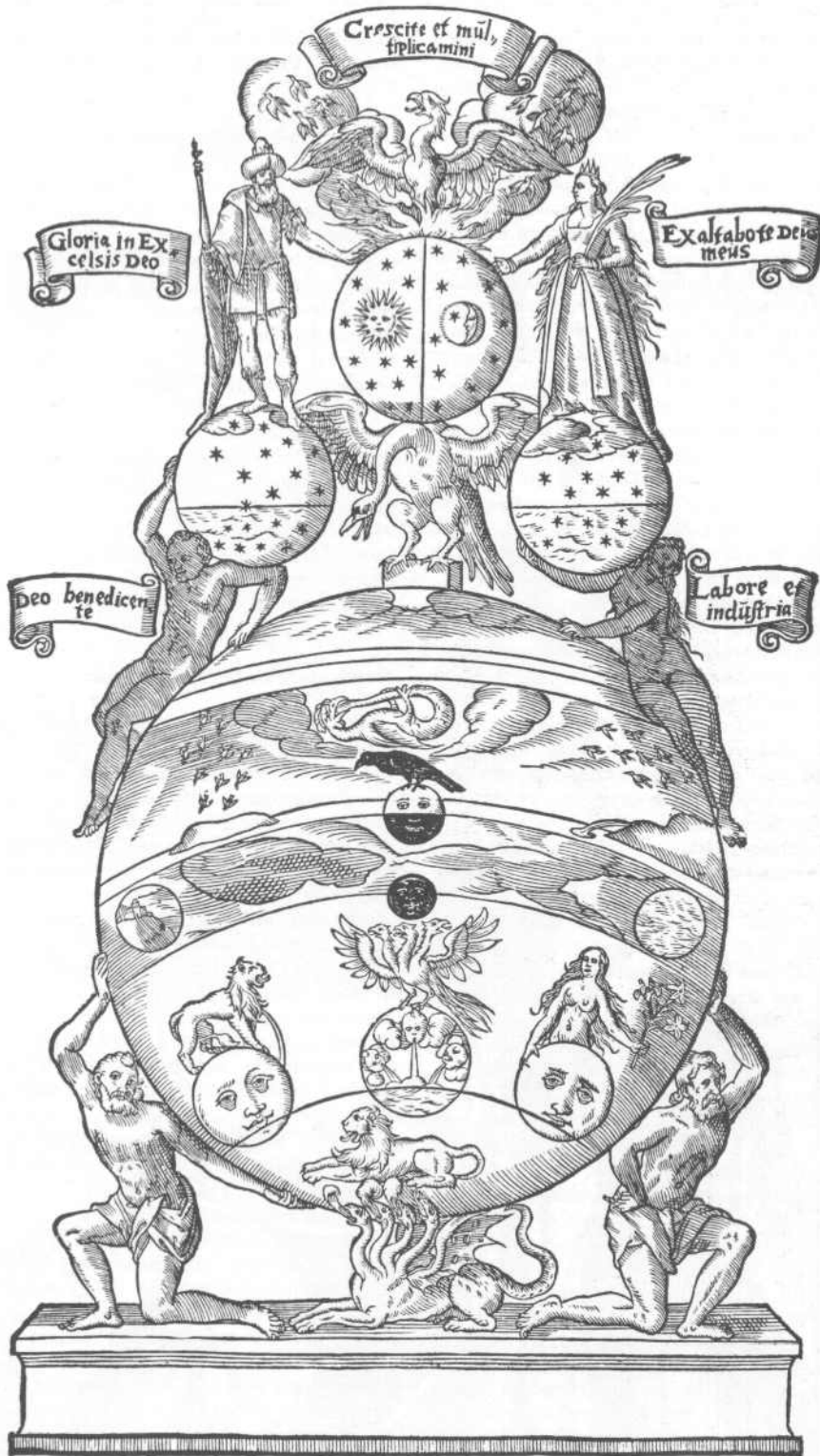
Exercise 3: Image from the *Aurora consurgens* manuscript.



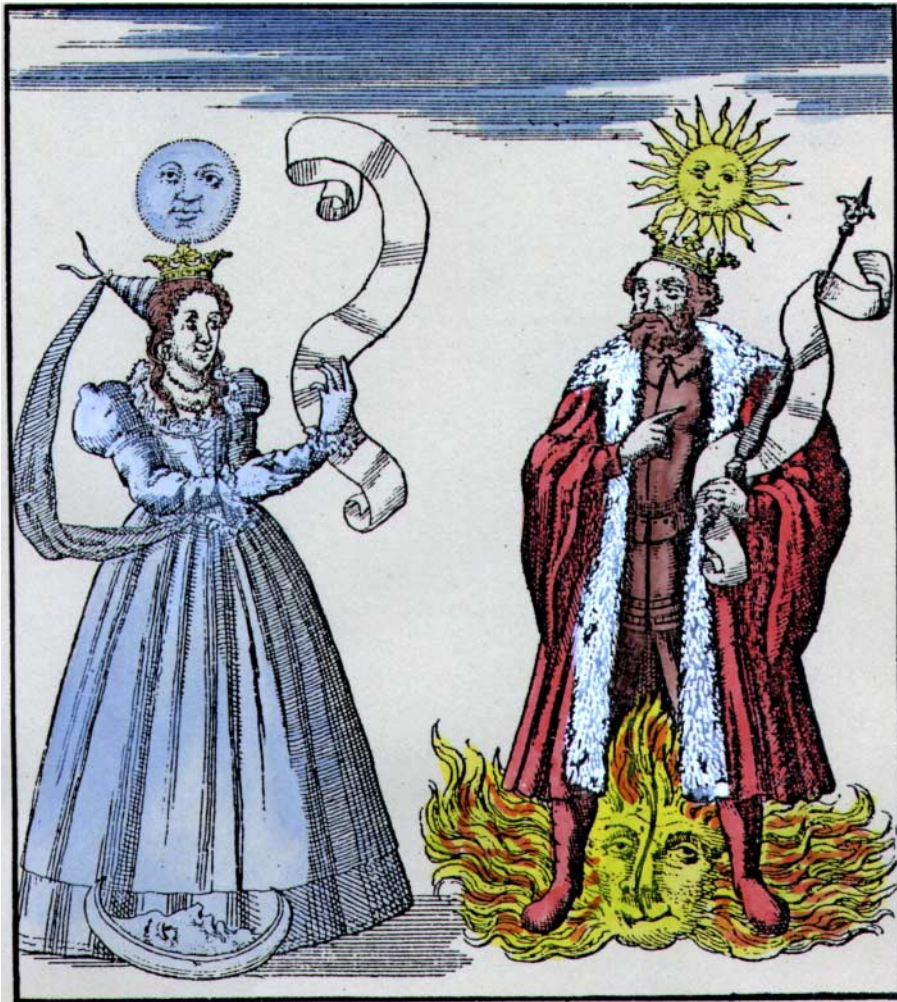
Emblem 4: Figure 7 from the Hermaphrodite Child of the Sun and Moon.



Example 5: Engraving from Libavius, Alchymia.



Example 6: Emblem 4 from the Splendor solis



Example 7: [For the brave] Engraving from Mylius, *Basilica Chémica*.



Some answers.

Example 1 - 6 symbols.

Example 2 - 6 symbols (Sun in air - Moon in water).

Example 3 - 9 symbols.

Example 4 - 3 or perhaps 4 symbols (if you include the circular space or vessel).

Example 5 - At least 30 symbols.

Example 6 - 7 symbols.

Example 7 - If you cannot find 30 symbols perhaps alchemical symbolism is not for you !