



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

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## Lesson Four : Symbols in opposition to one another.

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We have now made a start at training ourselves to identify the symbols of which an alchemical emblem is composed and separating these out from the background decoration. We have also looked at the geometry that underlies some alchemical emblems.

Now we must begin to look at the ways in which various symbols relate to one another. The first and most important relationship of symbols we have to explore is that of their being opposites.

We are not here concerned with the geometrical relationships we examined in lesson two, where we looked at the horizontal and vertical placement of symbols in the space of the emblem, though the symbols occupying these polarities are almost always opposites. For the purposes of this lesson we will just abandon all thought of the geometry and just look at symbols which bear an opposition to each other. Later we will bring the geometry and the inner nature of the symbols together.

The obvious first candidates are Sun and Moon, found on so many emblems. Followed closely by male and female, another pair of almost universal symbolic opposites.



So it should not prove too difficult to identify the main two sets of opposites. These can be more subtly hidden of course, and there are often other facets overlaid, especially on the male - female opposition.

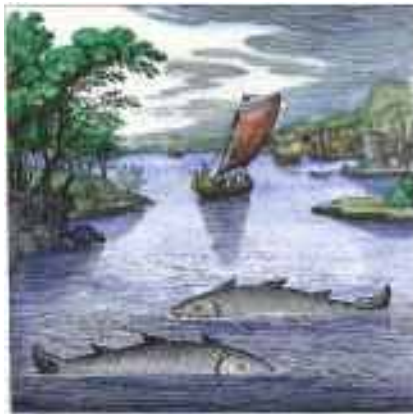
Thus male - female can appear in different guises.

King - Queen

Knight - Maiden (also Mars the soldier and Venus the young woman).

Male animal - female animal (lion and lioness for example).

The first eight emblems from the book of Lamspring work with these opposites.



We will look at this series in the exercises.

Other common opposites are the four elements. Fire and water are seen as one set of opposites, while air and earth are the other. This is pictured in the alchemical symbols for the elements. Thus

△ Fire - ▽ Water

△ Air - ▽ Earth

We can see this in emblem 1 of Mylius *Philosophia reformata*.



Other oppositions can be more difficult to identify. What we are looking for are pairs of symbols that bear some kind of opposite relationship to one another. I will just here present a list, some of which you can find in the examples. This list is obviously not exhaustive and as part of the exercises you should add to this list and try and find other more subtle and obscure examples.

Red Rose - White Rose

Rose - Lily

Red - White

Black - White

Interior of flask - Exterior space

Left hand - Right hand

Mars - Venus

Saturn - Jupiter

Winged - not winged

Head - Tail

Orb - Sceptre

Earthy dragon (sometimes toad) - Flying eagle

Birds flying up to heaven - birds flying down to earth

Alembic - Receiver (the alembic is the flask with a beak within which the materia is actively heated - the receiver is the cold vessel that passively receives the distillate).

You will find some of these in the examples but you should try to find other opposites there.

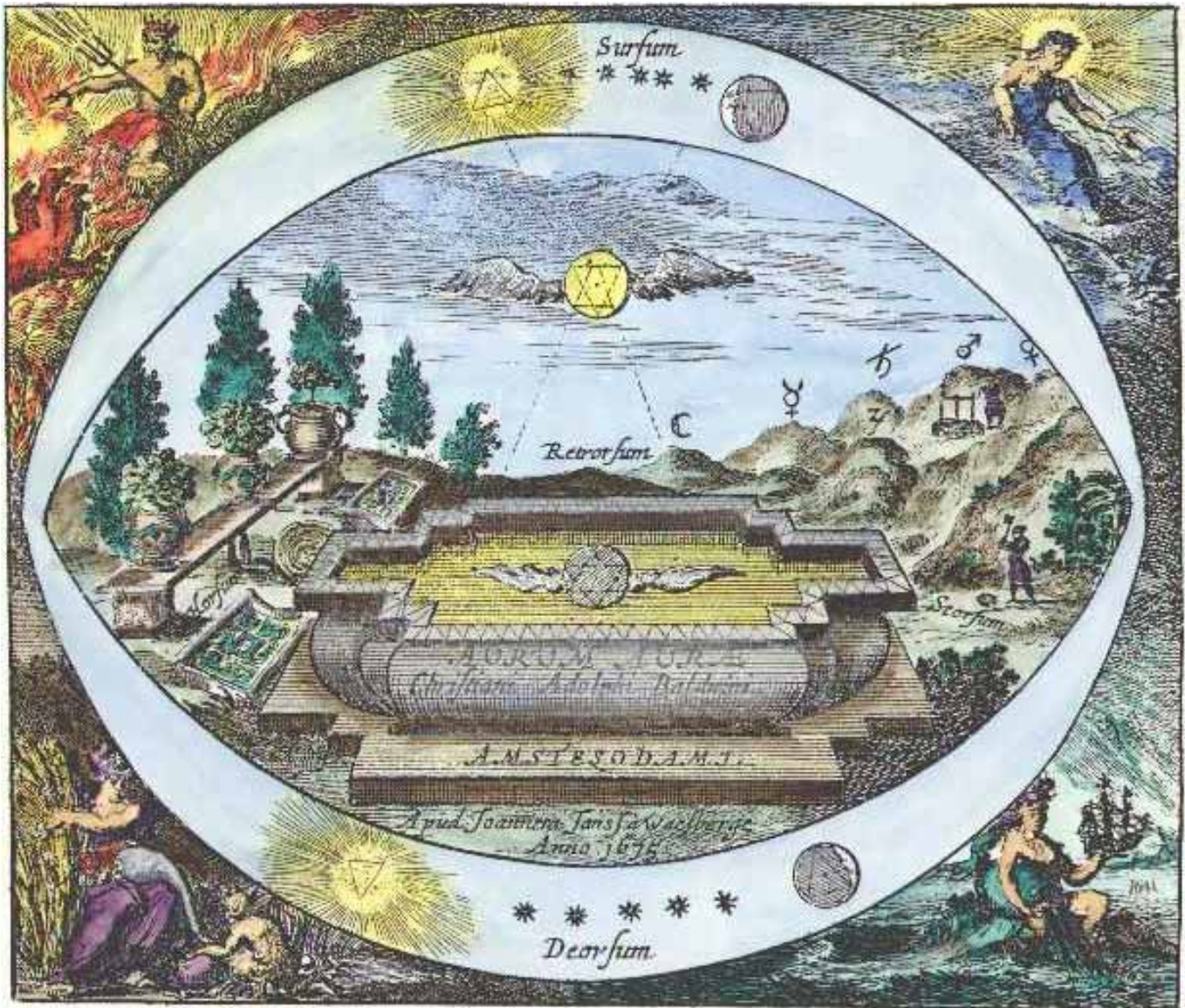
## Exercises

Please try and identify the symbols in the examples that form pairs of opposites. Some of these will be in the list above, but others I leave for you to discover for yourself. For those keen to make progress in developing their abilities to analyse alchemical symbolism, once you have completed these exercises apply the methods you have learnt in the first three lessons to the new emblems presented here.

Example 1. The first eight figures from the book of Lambspring.



Example 2. Frontispiece from Balduin's *Aureum superius et inferius*.



Example 3: Woodcut 3 from Pandora series



Example 4. Tree from Mylius *Philosophia reformata*

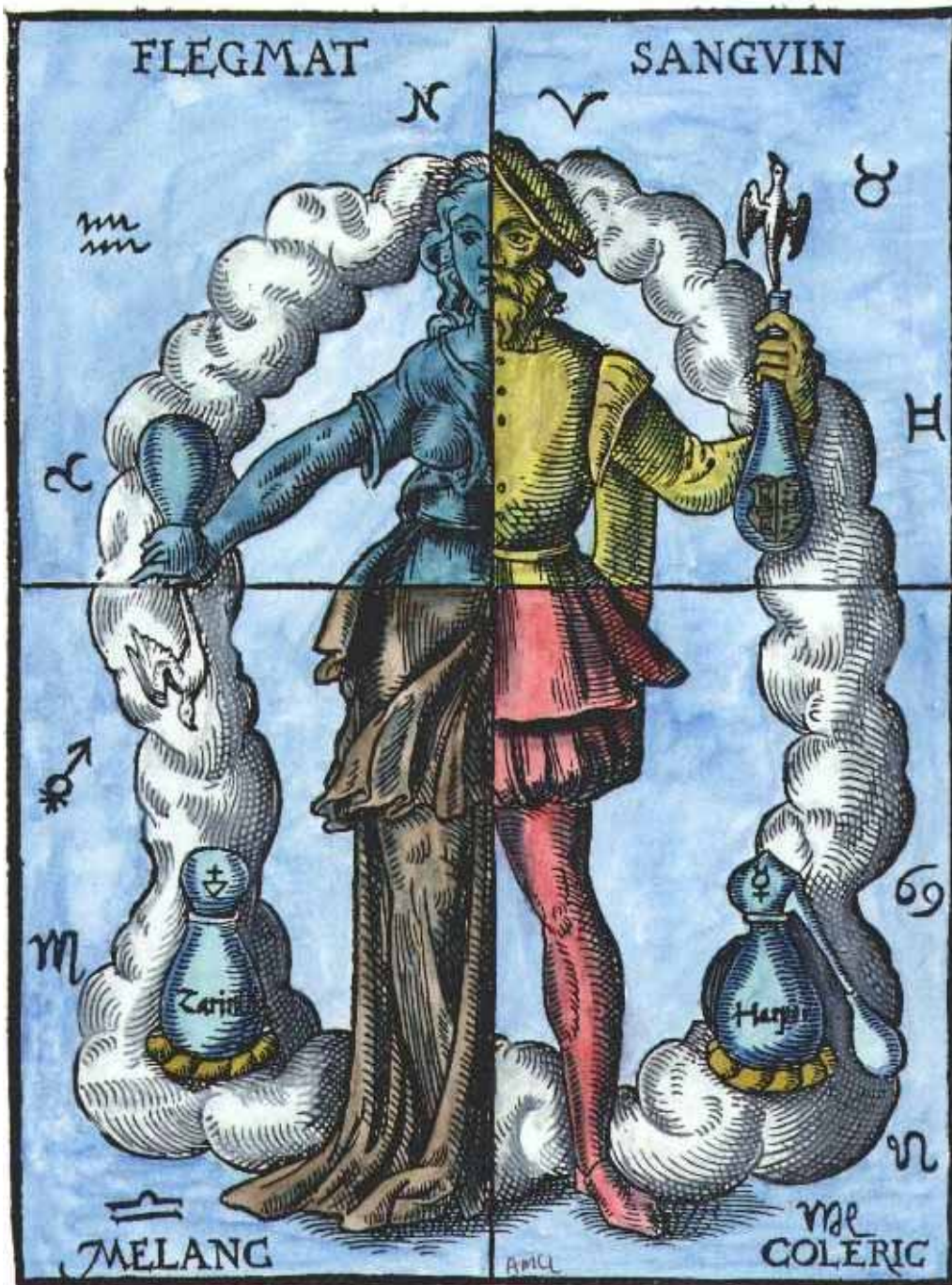


Example 5. Bonacina manuscript illustration 4

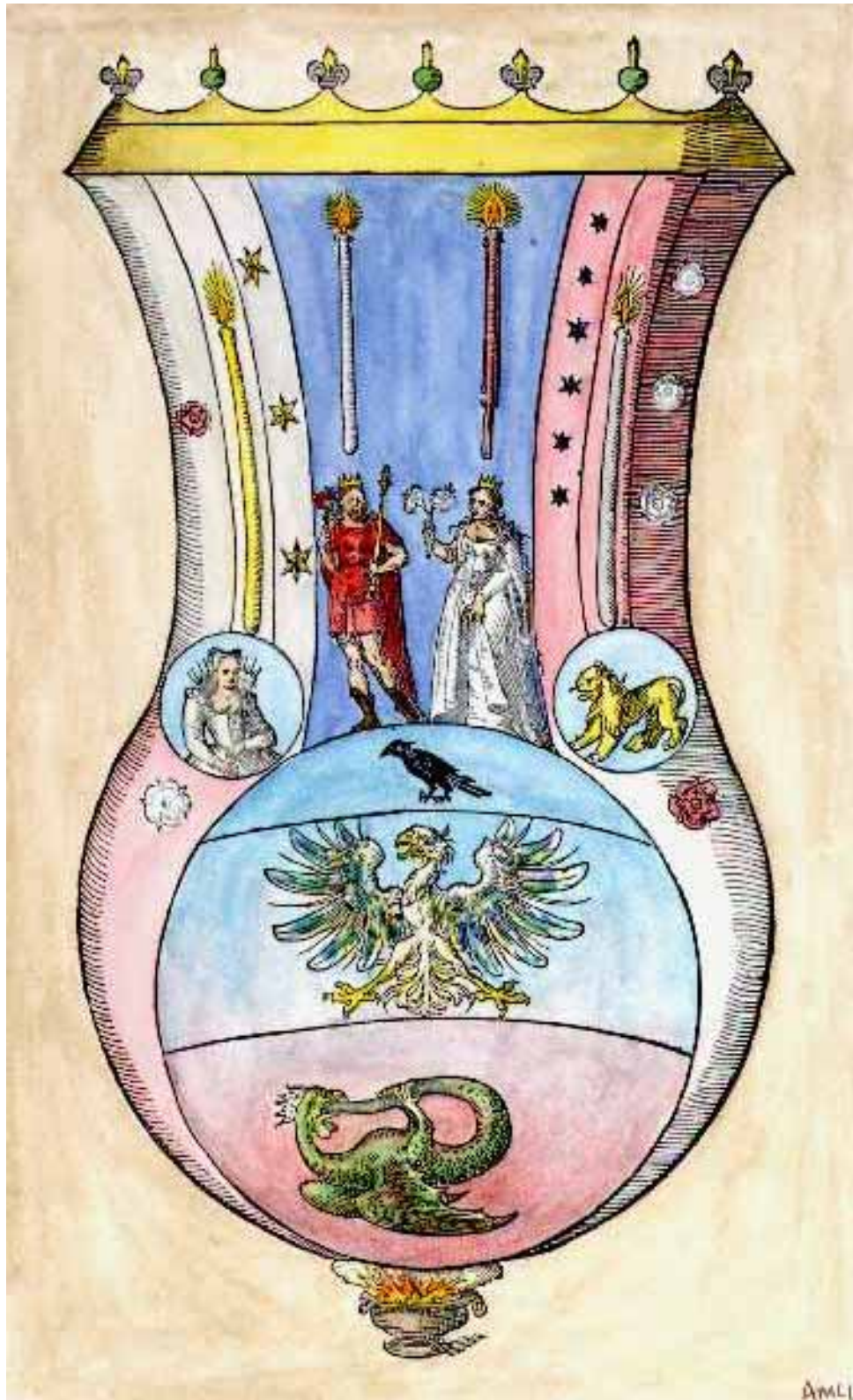




Example 6. Engraving of the humours from Thurneisser *Quinta Essentia*



Example 7. Engraving from Libavius.



Example 8. Two woodcuts from the *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Though these may appear superficially similar there is an important difference expressed in opposites.

