

Adam McLean's Study Course on the Ripley Scroll

Lesson 5 : Final Conjunction and Projection

We will now deal with the third and fourth panels. These have much simpler components than the first two panels, and are entirely tied together reflecting each other's imagery, so much so that they must really be considered together. The first shows a bird eating its wings, while the second presents us with the image of a dragon biting its own tail and the Moon's crescent.

The Bird of Hermes

In the sea without lees
Stands the bird of Hermes
Eating his wings variable
And making himself yet full stable
When all his feathers be from him gone
He stands still here as a stone

Here is now both white and red
And all so the stone to quicken the dead
All and some without fable
Both hard and soft and malleable,
Understand now well and right
And thank you God for this sight.

In the clear sea (lees are the sediment that can make beers or wines cloudy) we see the bird of Hermes eating its own wings. (You will remember there were three seas in the earlier two panels – the black sea, the white and the red sea.) The bird is here devouring the very thing that makes it fly. This indicates the alchemical process of fixing the volatile, or bringing that which is able to rise and fly into the spiritual, down into an earthly form. Thus we have here the incorporation or fixing of the spiritual into a material form. When the process is complete the bird of Hermes will stand in the form of a stone. It is now both white and red. We note the heading of this third panel :

Here is the last of the Red, and the beginning to put away the dead. The Elixir Vitae.

In the second panel we saw the two seas, the white and the red, in their respective vessels. The resulting white and red stones have now, through the continuing alchemical process become merged into this bird of Hermes. We note another link with the second panel. There, golden feathers descended from the Sun and silver ones from the Moon. Here, these feathers have become merged, the left sides being coloured golden and their right sides being silver. The Solar and the lunar, the red and the white, the golden and the silver are beginning to conjoin into one integrated matter. The bird itself is twofold, its body/breast being silver while its wings are golden. This is alchemically, a stage of conjunction, a uniting of opposites. It is happening underneath the Sun, from whom golden drops descend. The verses beside the Sun say :

Take the father that Phoebus so high
That sit so high in majesty
With his beams that shines so bright
In all places wherever that he be.

For he is father to all things
Maintainer of life to crop and root
And causes Nature for to spring,
With the wife beginning sothe,

For he is salve to every sore
To bring about this prosperous work
Take good heed unto this lore
I say to learned and to clerk

And Homogenie is his name
Which God made with his own hand
And Magnesia is his dame
You shall verily understand.

Now I shall here begin,
for to teach you a ready way
Or else little shall thou win
Take good heed what I say.

Divide thou Phoebus in many parts
With his beams that be so bright

And this with Nature him convert
The which is mirror of all light.

This Phoebus have full many a name
Which that is full hard to know
And but you take the very same,
The philosophers' stone ye shall not know

Therefore I counsel ere you begin
Know it well what it should be
And that which is thick make it thin
for then it shall full well like thee

Now understand what I mean
And take good heed thereto
Our work else shall little be seen
And turn you to much woe

As I have said this our lore
Many a name I wish he hath
Some behind and some before
As philosophers doth him give.

The alchemist is here encouraged to take the essence of the Sun. This is Homogenie, “born out of the same or uniform thing”, or made by the hand of the God. His wife is Magnesia. (Magnesia to the alchemists was a white stone that shone like silver, and not necessarily a compound of magnesium.) The alchemist must divide him into many parts, here pictured by the many golden drops that descend. These must be converted by contact with Nature, which is the mirror of light. Phoebus has many a name in alchemy, and it is hard to know which is the one that is necessary for the alchemical work. Unless you take the correct ‘Phoebus’ you will never be able to make the philosophers’ stone. One clue only is given, “that which is thick make it thin”, that is, follow the process of spiritualising the material, making the gross into a subtle form. The bird of Hermes stands on an earthly globe or sphere, in some manuscripts coloured an earthly brown. This is like a great egg, incorporating and uniting all the energies of the previous stages.

The text below sums up the message of this panel “The bird of Hermes is my name, eating my wings to make me tame”. The primal power of Phoebus, the spiritual energy of the sun, must be tamed, tied down, or reduced from a volatile flying form into a fixed earthly one.

The Serpent of Arabi

The fourth panel shows us a great dragon or serpent, standing on a winged globe, biting at its own tail. The serpent dragon is depicted in green in some manuscripts, and below it are similarly coloured wings. This can be seen as a transformation of the previously winged bird, but the wings here are bat or dragon-like and not feathered. It has now lost its wings to become the serpent, and the wings have become attached to the sphere or globe beneath its feet, like the feathers were to the globe or egg at the bottom of the third panel.

Here the serpent bites or tries to incorporate the crescent moon. Above it stands what could be a Sun, though this is not directly depicted here, as its energies were woven into the alchemical work in the third panel, and it is now time for the lunar forces to be absorbed into the work. Above we see three stones tied together – the Red stone (reddish golden), the White stone (silver) and the Elixir Vitae which is coloured brown. This is a similar brown to the globe at the feet of the Bird of Hermes. This constellation of the three stones must also incorporate the energies of the Sun, though perhaps not in a direct way. The rays which emerge from the three interlinked stones or spheres are similarly coloured and we see these colours again on the crescent moon. Thus we have a conjunction of Sun and Moon, through the medium of the three stones – red, white and elixir.

This serpent forms the ouroboros by biting and eating itself, and incorporating into its body the red and white stones and the elixir vitae. From a pore in its belly drops of blood emerge and drop down onto the globe which is in the form of an orb. The drops run down the orb and collect into a water or sea. Three streams descend into three spheres each bearing the colours, brown on the outside, silver in the middle and red in the centre.

The verses explain this to us :

I shall you tell with plain declaration
Who and what is my generation
Homogenie is my Father
And Magnesia is my Mother.

And Azot truly is my Sister
And Kibrick forsooth is my Brother
The Serpent of Arabia is my name
Which is the leader of all this game.

That sometime was both wood and wild
And now I am both meek and mild.

The Sun and the Moon with their might
Have chastised me that was so light
My wings that me brought
Hither and thither where I thought.

Now with their might they down me pull,
And bring me where they will
The blood of mine heart I wish
Now causeth both joy and bliss.

And dissolveth the very Stone
And knitteth him ere he have done.

Now maketh hard that was lix
And causeth him to be fixed

Of my blood and water I wish
Plenty in all the world there is.

It runneth in every place
Who it findeth he hath grace
In the world it runneth over all
And goes round as a ball.

But thou understand well this
Of the work thou shalt miss.

Therefore know ere thou begin
What he is and all his kin
Many a name he hath full sure
And all is but one nature.

Thou must part him in three
And then knit him as the Trinity
And make them all but one
Lo here is the Philosophers Stone.

This is the Serpent of Arabi, its father is Homogenie, its mother is Magnesia. Homogenie is the name of the solar power of Phoebus in the third panel, and his wife is the bright shining lunar Magnesia, so the serpent here is the child, born out of the alchemical work of the third panel. The Sun and Moon forces have brought the serpent down from flying in the spiritual sphere, removed its wings and anchored it in the material world. The blood of its heart flows out over the world, causing joy and bliss as it dissolves the very Stone, knitting or joining its components together. The serpent wishes its transformative blood and water could run out all over the world, so that everyone that finds it could obtain grace. The verse ends by indicating that the alchemist must part the alchemical work into three, then join them together like the Trinity. This is pictured by the triple streams of blood in the globe below the serpent. The alchemist can only make the philosophers' stone when he can unite these three streams together into one trinity. The three tied together in the star or Sun like form and in the lunar crescent above the serpent, are the spiritual forms of the stone, and this must be made material through the ouroboros serpent. These forces are precipitated from the spirit through this ouroboros serpent and woven into its blood which can then be manifested materially in the globe of the earth on which it stands.

Panels three and four completely mirror one another. They are symbolic statements of the alchemical process of conjunction seen from two different and mirrored perspectives. We cannot really understand one of these panels in isolation. It is only when we study and work with them together that we can grasp the alchemical ideas being presented here. In a similar way we can see panels one and two are also two parts of the same process. The first two panels are more about breaking things down, identifying the different components of the alchemical work, leading them through a process of transformation, involving colour changes in the three seas, and ultimately forming various pure 'stones'. What poured out of the toad in the flask at the beginning of the first panel and led to the

formation of the stones, is now finally digested and transformed in the blood of the dragon/serpent. Thus the last two panels take the products of the first stages further and integrate these into one single alchemical work, the conjunction which can then lead to the ultimate projection of the energies of the alchemical process onto the outer material world. As the verse at the end of the fourth panel states.

Of my blood and water I wish
Plenty in all the world there is.

It runneth in every place
Who it findeth he hath grace
In the world it runneth over all
And goes round as a ball.

But thou understand well this
Of the work thou shalt miss.

The Ripley scroll, though ornate, ideosyncratic and complex, is thus a magnificent summary and statement of the classical alchemical process.