



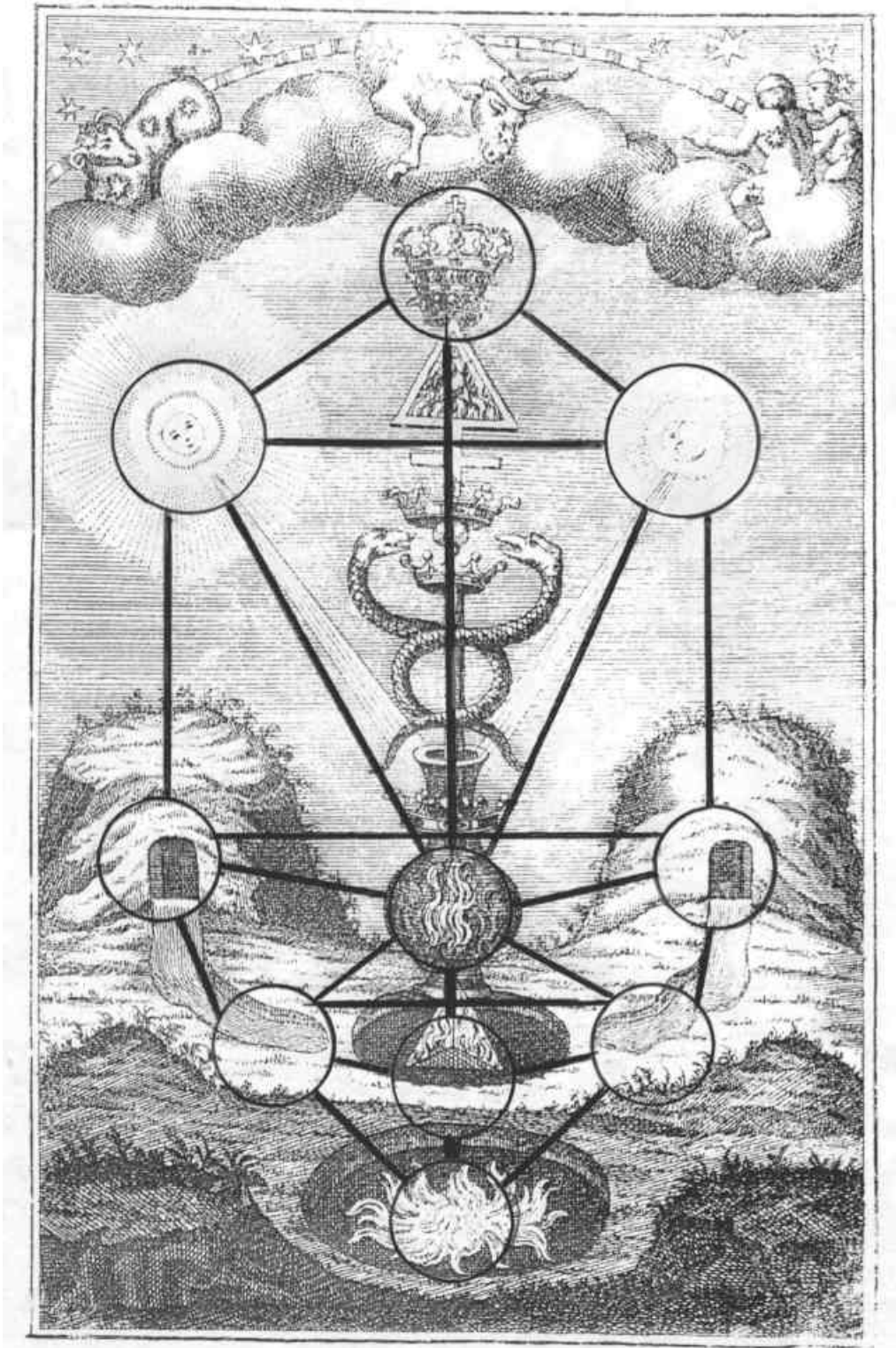
Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

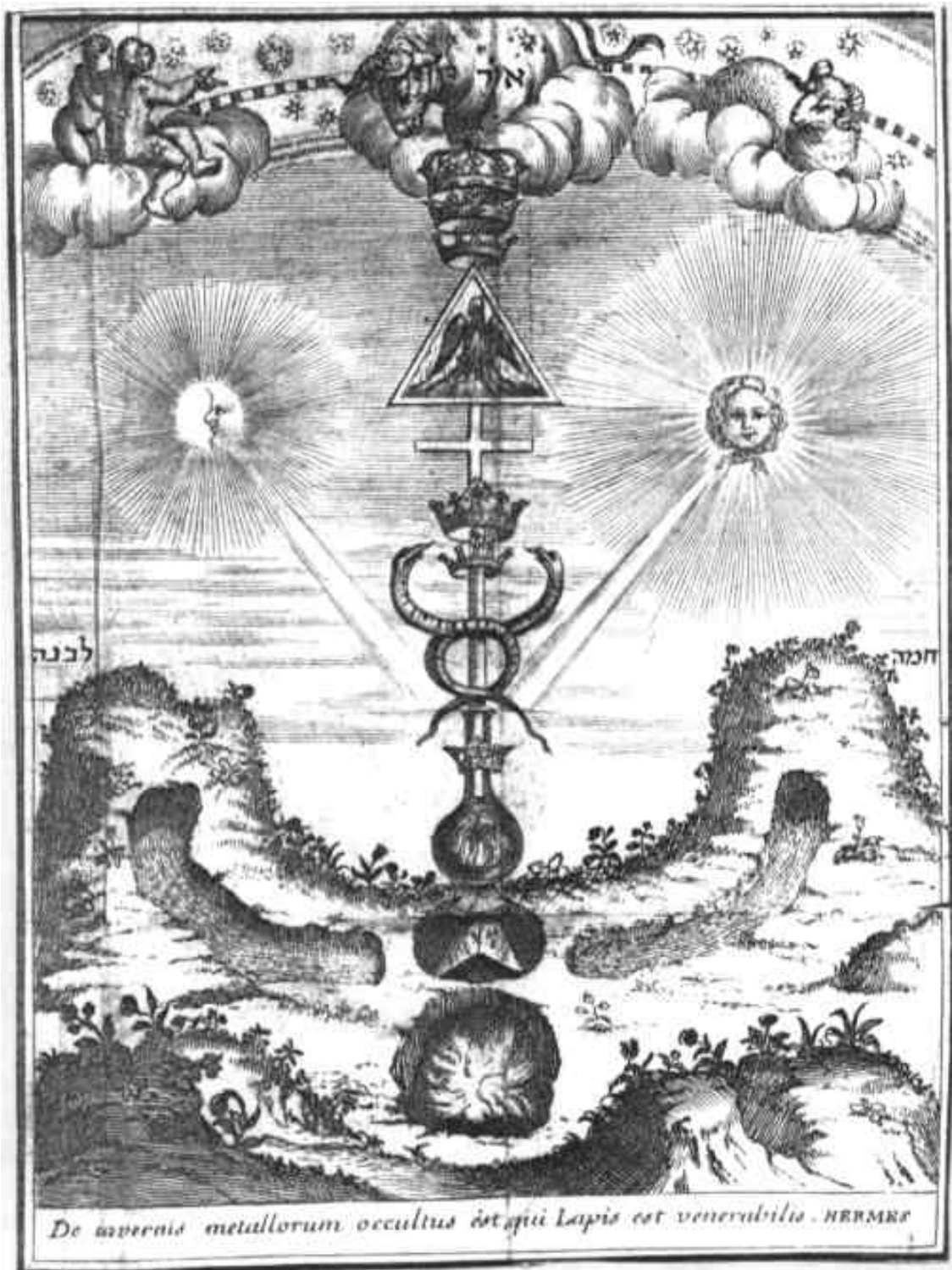
Lesson Seventeen : How not to interpret an alchemical emblem.

Having just shown a few examples of how we can read an alchemical emblem in a way which respects, reflects and resonates with its alchemical content, it may be that some of the course members may still not entirely appreciate the focus I am keeping upon the alchemical context, and may wish to relax this a bit and prefer to import ideas and external systems into their understanding of emblems. To me it seems obvious that alchemical symbolism and emblems must be understood from inside the subject of alchemy, but not everyone will appreciate or understand the importance of this perspective. To many people it seems the most natural thing to interpret alchemical symbolism through the systems with which they are familiar and comfortable. Twenty years ago this I myself took this approach but many years of working deeply with alchemical symbolism has shown me that this was a wrong turning and that alchemical emblems can only be grasped from inside their symbolism, and by keeping clearly to the alchemical context of these symbols.

In this lesson I would like to show the antithesis to the perspective on alchemical symbolism that I am taking in this course, by demonstrating how not to interpret an alchemical emblem.

If we draw ten circles on some of the key features of the emblem from the *Hermetic Triumph* we looked at in the previous lesson and connect them with a number of straight lines, do we not get a familiar pattern? Ah ! Enlightenment at last. Now we are on familiar territory. Now we know just how to interpret alchemical emblems. This guy McLean must be so blinded by years of looking at old alchemical texts that he cannot see what is so obvious to everyone else. He is a cumurdgeony old fool who has become so obsessed by alchemy that he is unable to make such connections. There is Kether the Crown at the top and Assiah the Earth at the bottom - what more proof can he can he ask? It all fits perfectly. There is also an illustration of the *Hermetic Triumph* which he on purpose did not show to us. He withheld it because it has Hebrew writing on it which confirms this picture. He did not want us to see it because it does not 'resonate' with his obsessions.





The Hebrew on the left probably is Labanah (Levanah the Moon).

This seemingly clear mapping of the familiar Kabbalistic tree of life diagram onto the *Hermetic Triumph* engraving may convince many people, but if we actually look at this in detail we will find that it does not seem to throw any light on the emblem. The second version with the Hebrew letters I have thrown in as a red herring. This is the engraving found in a particular copy of the 1699 Amsterdam edition in one of the alchemical collections in Glasgow. The Hebrew letters are actually later additions in pen. They could have been made by any of the owners of the book at any time up until it found its way into a protected collection. It is graffiti which merely reflects an interpretation of the writer. Some one could easily print an engraving with such graffiti in a modern book or distribute it on the internet. It would be impossible for someone looking at such a reproduction to know that this had been altered in this way. This is a problem with research into alchemical emblems - one must thoroughly research the original documents. The ease of cutting, pasting and manipulating images in digital form means that there are a number of invented or rather 'improved' images in recent printed books. These improvements can often be made to suit the author's slant on the subject. These are really mischievous images as they confuse people who do not have access to the source material. I have included this 'Hebrew' interpretation of the *Hermetic Triumph* to make this point.

In what way is the Tree of Life mapping erroneous? It does seem to fit well. It is only when one looks at the details that things begin to fall apart. Kether fits the crown, and this seems absolutely convincing except when one realises that there are a number of crowns in this emblem. The reading I gave in the last lesson explains the multiple appearance of the crown symbol whereas the Tree of Life diagram does not appear to do so. Does the various attributions of the various sephira give us any insight into the emblem as a whole? It obviously provides some kind of handle for one to see component symbols in the emblem as reflecting, say, the attributes of Hod or Netzach. But does this lead us anywhere? It might be quite instructive for those who want to explore alchemical symbolism using the Kabbalah (a work I suggest is pointless) to try and see what they can do through this map. Unfortunately very few alchemical emblems are such a close fit with the Tree of Life (and that is why I chose this emblem to illustrate this point), but any emblem which has three vertical columns can usually be 'creatively' moulded to fit this structure. There are very few of these and the kabbalists amongst us will be rather disappointed at the paucity of examples on which they can make their interpretations. They can always chop off certain branches or sections and apply them to other emblems if they feel limited by a few examples like this.

There are two other points one needs to make.

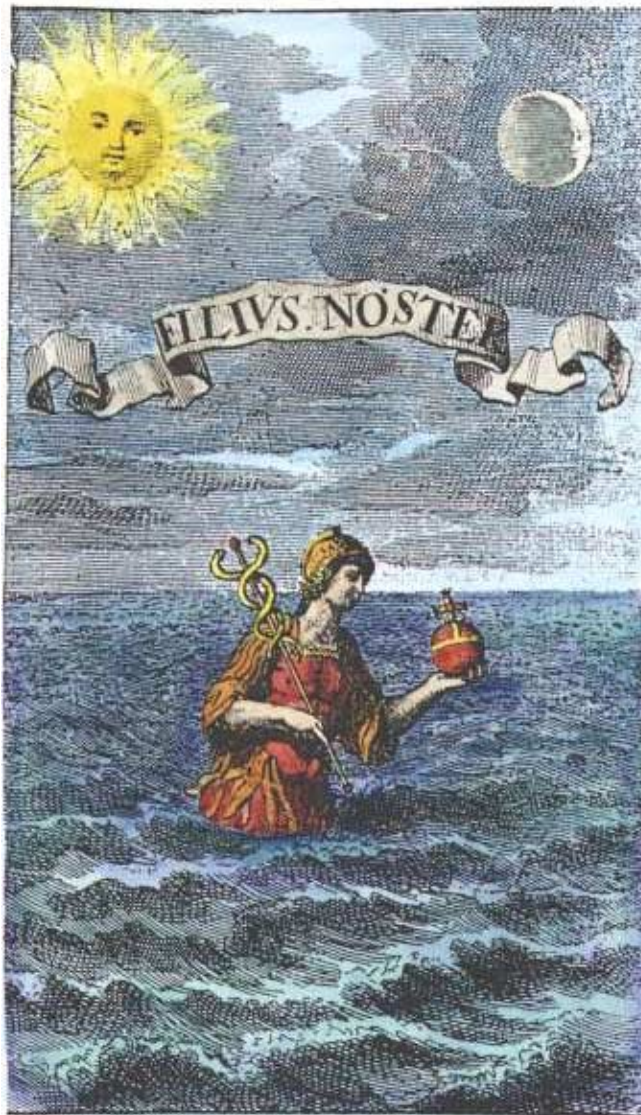
Firstly, such a kabbalistic outlook is not part of the mindset of the original author. In spite of many modern writers assumptions, there are very few, certainly much less than 1%, of original alchemical texts which even mention the word "Kabbalah". Few alchemical writers seem to have had any interest in or knowledge of Kabbalah. So by forcing a Kabbalistic interpretation on their material we risk losing sight of what these authors were actually trying to communicate.

Secondly, I hope to have already demonstrated in these lessons that alchemical symbolism is rather fluid, and that symbols mean different things in different contexts

and must always be seen against the ground of the other symbols in the emblem. The kabbalistic (or more correctly, modern reworking of kabbalah) view is much too rigid, systematised and intellectualised to capture the essence of alchemical symbols. To the modern kabbalist everything fits into a pre-ordained scheme or diagram, but in alchemy everything is in a state of flow and flux, and symbols cannot be nailed to a particular sephiroth.

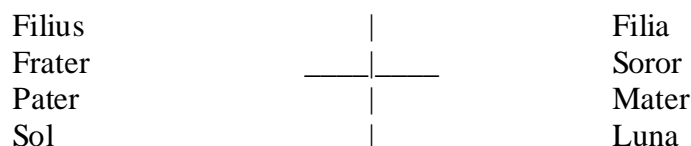
The value of the approach I am taking in this course is that it is based on reading the emblems and their symbolism from within the alchemical context, not by applying an external system to it. Compare the reading of the *Hermetic Triumph* emblem which we have been able to do from within the perspective of this course to the interpretation of the original author. Can any kabbalistic reading get close to this?

Let us now interpret another emblem we had looked at in some detail in lesson 15, but this time from a depth psychology perspective.



Here Mercury the trickster, the symbol of the intellect, watched over by male and female archetypes, has descended into the dark sea of the unconscious. Guided by his caduceus, deep in these murky depths he has found the sphere of the soul, the ego, which he now proudly displays. This bears on it the quaternity which is now integrated by the circle.

Principium Mercurius



Filius Mercurius

The mercurius duplex has dared to cross the threshold, and in this liminal dive into the dark sea, has found the philosophers' stone that integrates and heals the wounds in the soul. Only when we become as the divine fool of the Tarot can we find our true self. Here the Tarot Fool in his journey towards individuation has walked off his cliff and descended into the depths of his inner sea. In the darkness he has opened his bundle to find what he was carrying with him all along - his inner being. As he ascends again to the light, his psyche is now integrated and made whole.

Does such a reading of this emblem tell us anything about the emblem itself, or does it merely tell us about the mindset and concerns of the interpreter? The revival of interest in alchemy in the twentieth century, can to a great extent be placed in the hands of the depth psychologists. We all owe them a great debt of gratitude for opening up some of the alchemical material which had been closed to outer culture since the late 18th century. The interpretations of these depth psychologists can be very seductive, as they actually reflect our modern concerns and inner insecurities. That perhaps is their main flaw - they address modern social and personal issues rather than the alchemical contents of the material. I was influenced by this approach in my early attempts at investigating alchemical symbolism, but as my study of this material deepened I realised its limitations and the problems of trying to impose these ideas onto the alchemical material. No alchemist of the sixteenth or seventeen centuries had any concept of the unconscious or indeed any interest in Tarot cards. I have never seen an alchemical book or manuscript (predating the French occult revival) which mentions Tarot cards. These were just not seen by alchemists as having any relevance to their work or their symbolism. Compare this with the reading of this emblem I gave in lesson 15.

Exercises.

Now I would like to give you two examples to work on over the next weeks. I will provide a reading of these in the next lesson. These two are really quite simple and relatively unambiguous. If I may remind you, the main steps you should take when trying to read an emblem, are:

Identify all the symbols in the emblem

Note any geometrical structures.

Look for linked symbols - pairs of opposites etc.

Check for special symbols with specific meanings.

Try to see what this emblem is trying to say to us - the message or alchemical drama that the composer was trying to convey.

The first is from the *Waterstone of the Wise*.



The second example is from the Monte Snyder 'Metamorphosis of the Planets'.

