

Adam McLean's Study Course on the Ripley Scroll

Lesson 4 : The spiritualisation of the corporeal

Now we will turn our attention to the second panel - the two basins set around a central pillar.

The first thing we notice is that this complex panel seems primarily concerned with the interlinking of spirit, soul and body. Most symbolic elements on this emblematic panel bear the words "spirit" and "anima", often contracted to "spus" and "aia". We see this on the leaves of the canopy of the tree, on the feathers descending from Sun and Moon, in the waters of the lower basin, and elsewhere. The word "corpus" (body) only appears in three places, on the male and female bodies in the upper vessel and on the Atlas figure in the lower basin. Thus perhaps we should see that all the energies of the spiritual and soul become focussed through this alchemical process upon these three key symbols.

Let us see just how this is happening in the emblematic space. There are a number of symbolic components to investigate.

- The descent of the feathers from Sun and Moon
- The tree in the upper vessel
- The upper vessel
- The lower vessel
- The dragon and toad
- The heating of the furnace

Feathers seem to be a key symbol used in the Scroll. We see feathers in the large flask in the first panel, descending from Sun and Moon in the second, and making a final appearance in the third panel. Feathers, of course, are that which enables the flight of birds, and we note that birds appear in some of the flasks in the roundels in the first panel. Birds in alchemy were often used to emblematised a rising and descent of aspects of the alchemical work in the flask. Birds can fly up and down in the emblematic space, free from the constraints of the earthly. Thus they were useful symbols for the soul and the spirit, or of a volatilisation or sublimation of the substance in the flask. The feathers rise in the large flask of the first panel and drops of liquid descend. In the second panel things are portrayed differently. Here the symbolic process seems to indicate a descent from above down through the vessels, this being framed within the two streams of feathers emanating from the Sun and Moon, the gold and the silver feathers. In my version of the Scroll I have taken this colouring scheme from the Yale copy. We will see later how this

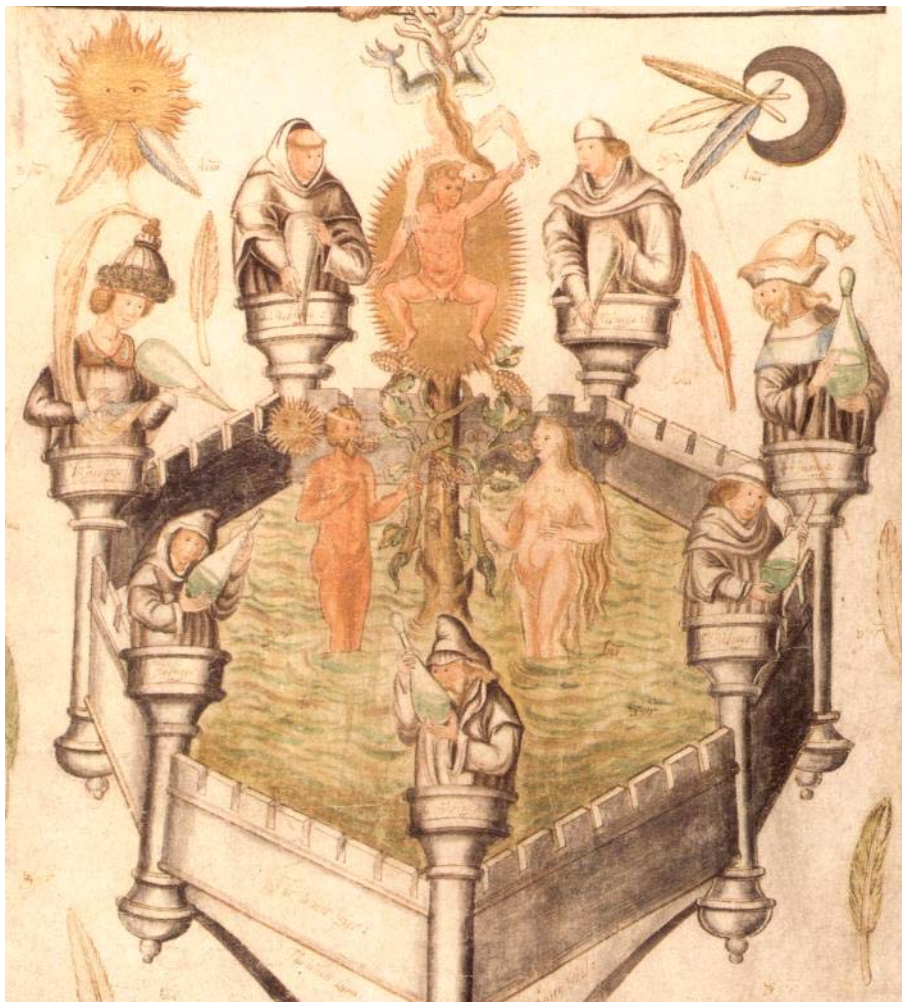
is not merely arbitrary but makes coherent sense within the Scroll.

Let us now turn to the tree growing out of the upper vessel. This has a number of symbols upon it which are familiar. From the branches above, a serpent woman or Lilith figure descends, gesturing towards and seeming to be in the act of seizing the small child labelled "anima". This child sits at the middle of the tree in a nimbus of light. From below two vines grow towards him, intertwining with one another. These vines are held by two figures, a man on the left, coloured yellow (or possibly golden), and a woman on the left, coloured greyish white (or possibly silver). They both have the word "corpus" on their bodies and a Sun and Moon stand besides their respective heads. They are both eating of the fruits of these vines. The imagery here may draw upon the miniatures in medieval religious manuscripts which the creator of this manuscript could have seen (certainly George Ripley would have been familiar with these). Here are two examples, one from a medieval manuscript and the other a woodcut from the *Biblia pauperum* (late 15th century).



If one looks at the wide variety of paintings of the temptation of Adam and Eve from the 14th through into the 16th century, we will note that the Scroll has subtly altered the symbolism depicted there and adjusted it to a new and more alchemical conception. Usually the serpent is seen as a slippery thing of the earth and is shown as crawling up the tree from the ground to tempt Eve. This complies with the underlying Judeo-Christian religious idea of evil arising from contact with the earthly. But in the Scroll the Serpent figure descends from above. The figure of the soul, the child in a nimbus of light seems to be reaching up with his left arm to the heavens and downwards to the earth with his right. This serpent even has "spirit" and "soul" written upon her thighs. This emblem appears to have turned the Temptation and Fall myth on its head. Now, in this alchemical conception, the spirit descends down from the heights of the tree animating the soul, and nourishes the earthly body with a spiritual food. The alchemist who created this imagery was daring to invert the creation myth and instead have us see that matter could be ennobled though contact with the spiritual instead of the more conventional idea that spirit (Adam and Eve) were debased through contact with matter.

The vessel itself is heptangular. One immediately thinks of planetary associations. Are the seven figures in the towers representations of each of the planets? This would be a nice neat alchemical resonance, but on closer examination this does not appear to be so. Two of the planets, Venus and the Moon, are definitely feminine and always depicted as women. But in most of the Ripley Scrolls it is difficult to see more than one woman. She always appears in the first tower (on the left). The figure on the right immediately opposite her in the fourth tower is also uniquely dressed. He appears to be a King wearing the same costume as the figure crouching over the book with seven seals at the centre of the first panel, thus it might not be wrong to see her as his Queen. The other figures in the towers seem to be dressed as monks, similar to the figures in the roundels of the first panel. We can see this, for example, in the early version in the Huntington Library.



Whether we can see them as king or queen these two figures are definitely dressed in a secular manner, while the others are cowled monks. If they were to be seen as reflecting the planets, then the woman figure would be the Moon and the king the Sun. This would

mean, following the conventional order of the planets, that the two figures in the towers on the back wall would be Mercury and Venus, and the three in the foreground, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn (reading right to left). We should expect Saturn to be shown as an old man, but this does not appear to be so in the known versions of the Scroll. So instead of pursuing a planetary association we should see this as an extension of what was taking place in the roundels. There we saw a number of monks pouring the contents of flasks into their main vessel which was being heated on the furnace. Three flasks were initially extracted from the prima materia and then later poured back onto the work. At the end of the process, four of the monks held flasks full of some essence. This seems to parallel what is depicted around the heptangular basin.

Each of the towers is labelled from the first to seventh "Imbibing" and the figures hold flasks containing some essences. Three have poured these into the basin, while four hold full flasks. It is not quite clear if they will in turn pour the essence into the basin, or whether they will keep this for another stage of the process. These may be the four flasks that are seen on the towers around the lower basin. The way in which these flasks are used is surely a key part of the process explored in the Scroll. As an exercise you should review the various possibilities. It may be that the Scroll is ambiguous on this matter and that no definite conclusion can be drawn as to how this works.

In some of the Scrolls fires are shown under each of the towers, but this is not true of all the manuscripts. The bath of transformation is labelled "The White Sea". We have already noticed that the water in the flask of the first panel was called "The Black Sea".

The lower basin is foursquare and associated more with the elements. These are shown in four flasks set in towers at the corners of the square vessel. Above each is a small label giving the main quality associated with the element, and each has short phrase on the masonry of the tower.

Fire	fiery and hot	Fire purges
Earth	earthy and dry	Earth stands
Water	watery and cold	Water washes
Air	airy and moist	The spirit enters

The central pillar is supported by an Atlas like figure who looks upward. He is labelled "Terra - Corpus - Stat" or "Earth and the body stands". The pillar he supports is also labelled "Earth stands or holds firm". This pillar supports the upper basin with its towers and the tree. Beside Atlas are two smaller figures who echo the Adam and Eve of the heptangular vessel. Here the male figure appears enveloped in a ring of cloud from which emanates a nimbus of fiery light. The female figure, labelled "water", is winged. This square vessel contains the "Red Sea".

On the front of the lower basin we note a dragon biting at a toad. From the toad issues a spray of venom, which is labelled as the tingeing venom. A text below states "Here is the fume which is called the mouth of choleric".

The verses written below the foursquare vessel may perhaps throw some light on what is being shown in this panel.

On the ground there is a hill,
Also a serpent within a well
His tail is long with wings wide
All ready to flee by every side
Repair the well fast about
That thy serpent prise not out,
For if that he be from there gone
You lose the virtue of the stone
The well must run in water clear
Take good heed for this the fire
The fire with water bright shall be burnt
And water with fire washed shall be
The earth on fire shall be put
And water with air shall be knit

Thus you shall go to purification
And bring the serpent to redemption
First he shall be black as a crow
And down in his den shall lie full low
Swelling as a toad that lies on the ground
Burst with bladders sitting so round
They shall to burst and lie full plain
And this with craft the serpent is slain,
He shall shine colors here many a one
And turn as white as whales bone,
With the water that he was in
Wash him clear from his sin,
And let him drink a little and a light
And that shall make him fair and white
The which whiteness be here abiding
Lo here is a very full finishing
Of the white stone and the red
Lo here is the very true deed.

The first section of this poem talks about the prima materia, the dragon or serpent. This must be placed in the well or alchemical vessel, set on a hill. The text teases us to identify these aspects of the work.

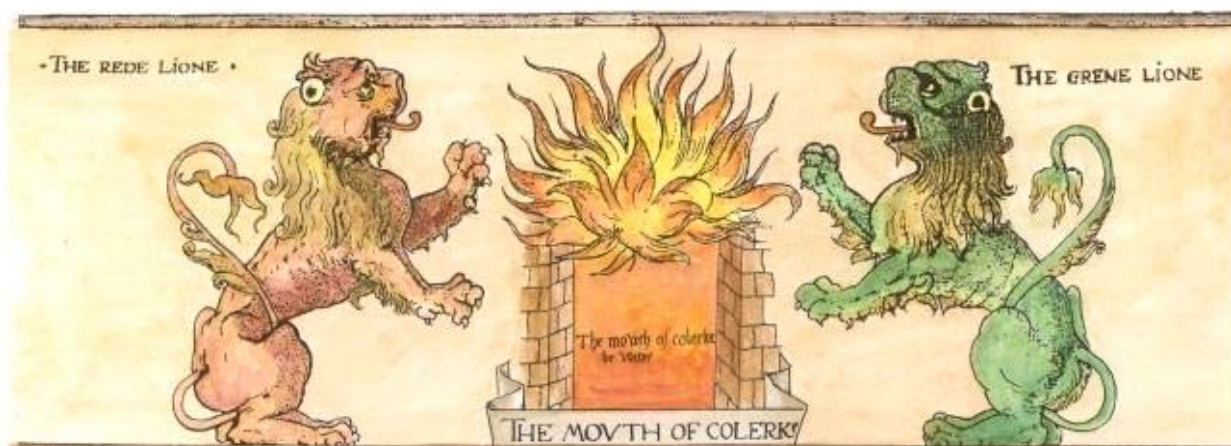
Where is the ground you must know here
And the well that is so clear
And what is the dragon with the tail
Or else the work shall little avail

The ground or hill may be the alchemical furnace, the well the alchemical flask, and the dragon the unknown prima materia. The alchemical work must be nourished by adding liquids, as we have seen depicted by the figures in the towers around the vessel or well. The work must then be taken through a cycle of the elements. The fire shall be

burnt with water, and the water washed with fire. Earth shall be put on fire, and water and air knit together. This echoes the phrases about the elements seen in the upper part of the flask in the first panel. "You must take water of the earth, and earth of the air, and air of the fire, and fire of the earth". When these paradoxical processes have been completed the work then proceeds to purification.

The second part of the verse gives the conventional cycle of colour changes in alchemy. First the putrefaction, the Nigredo, "First he shall be black as a crow". Next the Peacock's Tail "he shall shine colours here many a one". Then the washing to the Albedo "And that shall make him fair and white", with the implication of the Rubedo to follow.

Finally we should note that this whole process in these two vessels is being heated on a furnace attended by the two lions - the red and the green.

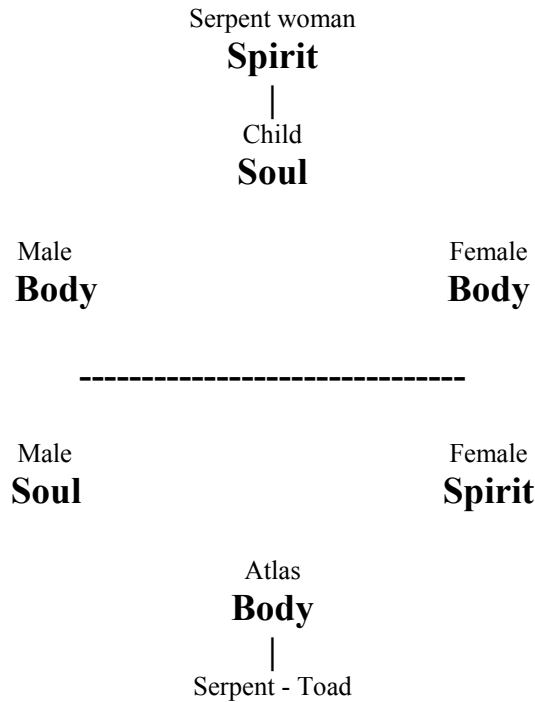


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We should now attempt to summarise the process outlined in this panel. The alchemical work here proceeds on two levels. On one level it involves a work with the elements in the foursquare vessel. The Atlas figure bears the label "Earth stands firm". He holds the axis or central column that supports the alchemical work. He is the opposite of the female serpent figure that descends from the heights and brings a spiritual influence into the sphere of the soul, the anima child clothed in light half-way up the trunk of the tree. This spiritual transformative force must descend all the way down into matter in order to create the spiritual power of the philosophers' stone. In the upper vessel the alchemical process enables this spiritual power to descend down into the anima or soul. This is the whitening - the phase of the white sea, the white Luna the white Sol. In the lower vessel it then enters the world of the four elements and becomes firmly rooted in the material. This is the reddening - the phase of the red sea, the red Luna, the red Sol.

We have seen before that the word "corpus" only appears on three figures. In the upper vessel the female serpent figure has "spirit" and "anima" marked on her, there is the child with the "anima" and the male and female figures each bear the word "corpus". They form with the soul child a triangular structure. This is echoed in the lower vessel

where the man is soul, the woman spirit and the Atlas figure is "corpus".



Here is perhaps a clue to the structure of this section of the symbolism. It is primarily concerned with the bringing of the spiritual into the material through an alchemical process which began in the black sea with the materia prima in the large flask and roundels, then proceeded to the white sea where the spirit incarnated itself in the soul realm, and this finally anchored itself in the material body in the Atlas figure, the "earth which holds firm", the stone that is so purified that it withstands the fire and transcends corruption, and indeed can tinge and transform, with its indwelling spirit, baser materials. The male and female figures seen in the first roundel are transformed in the series of flasks into a white woman. In the white sea of the upper vessel we again see a male and female figure. These appear to be transformed into the male figure in a nimbus of clouds and light and his winged female companion who stand in the red sea. It may be that the transformative element that sets the whole process depicted on the second panel into action, is the female serpent form descending from the heights of the tree. The first roundel also contains the symbolism of this process in a summarised form, for in this there appear the red and green lions, the tree, the fountain or basin, sun and moon, toad and serpent dragon, and the birds.



As an exercise try and extend this structure and see if other symbols in the panel resonate with this idea - The Sun and Moon, the two lions tending the fire.

Another point you can consider is the role of the toad. We see the toad at the top of the flask in the first panel, and again at the bottom of the square vessel. Ripley is well known for his use of the toad. Here is his famous *Vision*

When busy at my book I was upon a certain night,
This vision here expressed appeared to my dimmed sight:

A toad full ruddy I saw, did drink the juice of grapes so fast,
Till over-charged with the broth, his bowels all burst.
And after that, from his poisoned bulk he cast his deadly venom,
For grief and pain whereof his members all began to swell,
With drops of poisoned sweat approaching thus his secret den,
His cave with blasts of fumous air he all bewhited then.
And from which in time a golden humour did ensue,
Whose falling drops from high did stain the soil with ruddy hue.

And when his body the force of vital breath began to lack,
This dying toad became forthwith like coal in colour Black.
Thus drowned in his proper veins of poisoned flood,
For a term of eighty days and four he rotting stood

By trial then this venom to expel I did desire,
For which I did commit his carcass to a gentle fire.
Which done, a wonder to the sight, but more to be rehearsed,
The toad with colours rare through every side was pierced.

And white appeared when all the sundry hues were past.
Which after being tinted ruddy, for evermore did last.
Then of the venom handled thus a medicine I did make,
Which venom kills, and saves such as venom chance to take.

Glory be to him the granter of such secret ways,
Dominion, and Honour both, with Worship, and with Praise.
Amen.

As an exercise see how this vision relates to the imagery of the scroll.