



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

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## Lesson Eleven : The human figure.

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It is very important that we try and see the human figure within its proper context in alchemical emblems. We have a natural tendency to identify with or see some special message for us in the depiction of the human figure. We are less likely to view ourselves as dragon, lion, or pelican - here we often view these as external forces - but it is difficult not to identify ourselves with the human figure. Of course, some of the creators of alchemical emblems wanted us to do just that.



It is not always so straightforward as in this image from the Mylius *Azoth* series. The human figure is used in a variety of ways in alchemical emblems and it will be important for us to be able to discriminate and realise in what way the human figure is being used in a particular emblem.

We have already looked at the symbol of the resolution of the male and female, the king and queen say, and the hermaphrodite in lesson five. Please review this lesson now. You should be familiar with this use of the polarised human figures and the appearance of the hermaphrodite in alchemical imagery.

One way in which the human figure often appears is as a planetary symbol, representing the classical gods of the planets. There are numerous examples of this, some of which we have already seen in this course. Here the alchemical choir of the planets is depicted in a grotto, in an engraving from the *Musaeum Hermeticum*.



Sometimes only a single planetary god is shown in a human form. This is usually, though not invariably, Hermes-Mercury. This is the frontispiece from *Drey curieuse chymische tractätlein*.



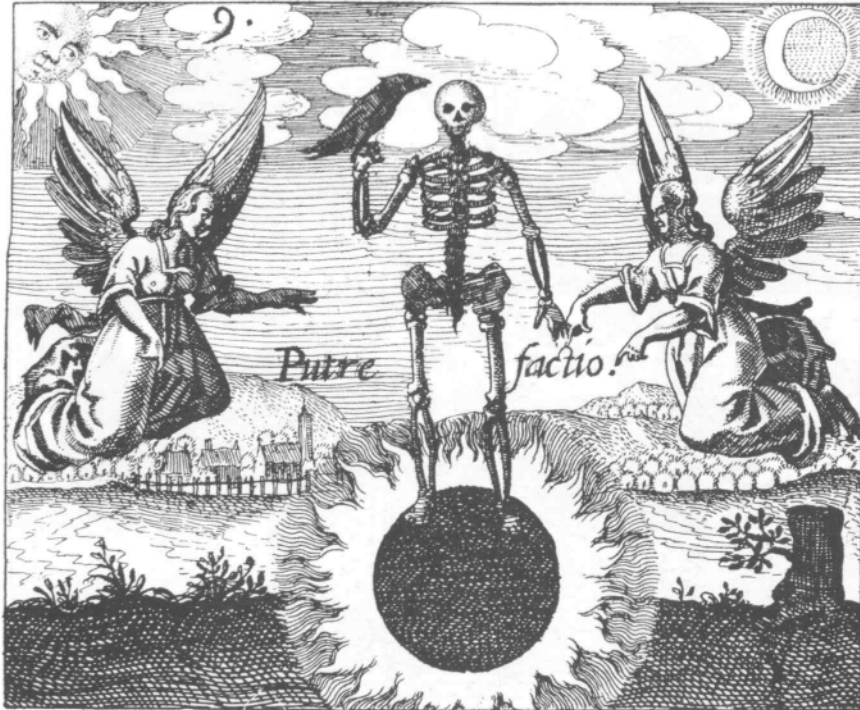
In emblems where the human figure is the centre of the symbolic activity of the emblem space, we will often find that we can further analyse these into those in which the human figure is active and those in which the human figure is being acted upon. In this first group the human figure often is the agent, or operator, of the alchemical work. Thus we see in the tenth emblem from the *Book of Lambspring*.



In other emblems the human figure is shown being acted upon, almost as the prima materia of the work. This is perhaps more rare, but there are a number of obvious examples, Splendor Solis image 11 being one. Here one human figure is the operator and another appears as that which is being operated upon.

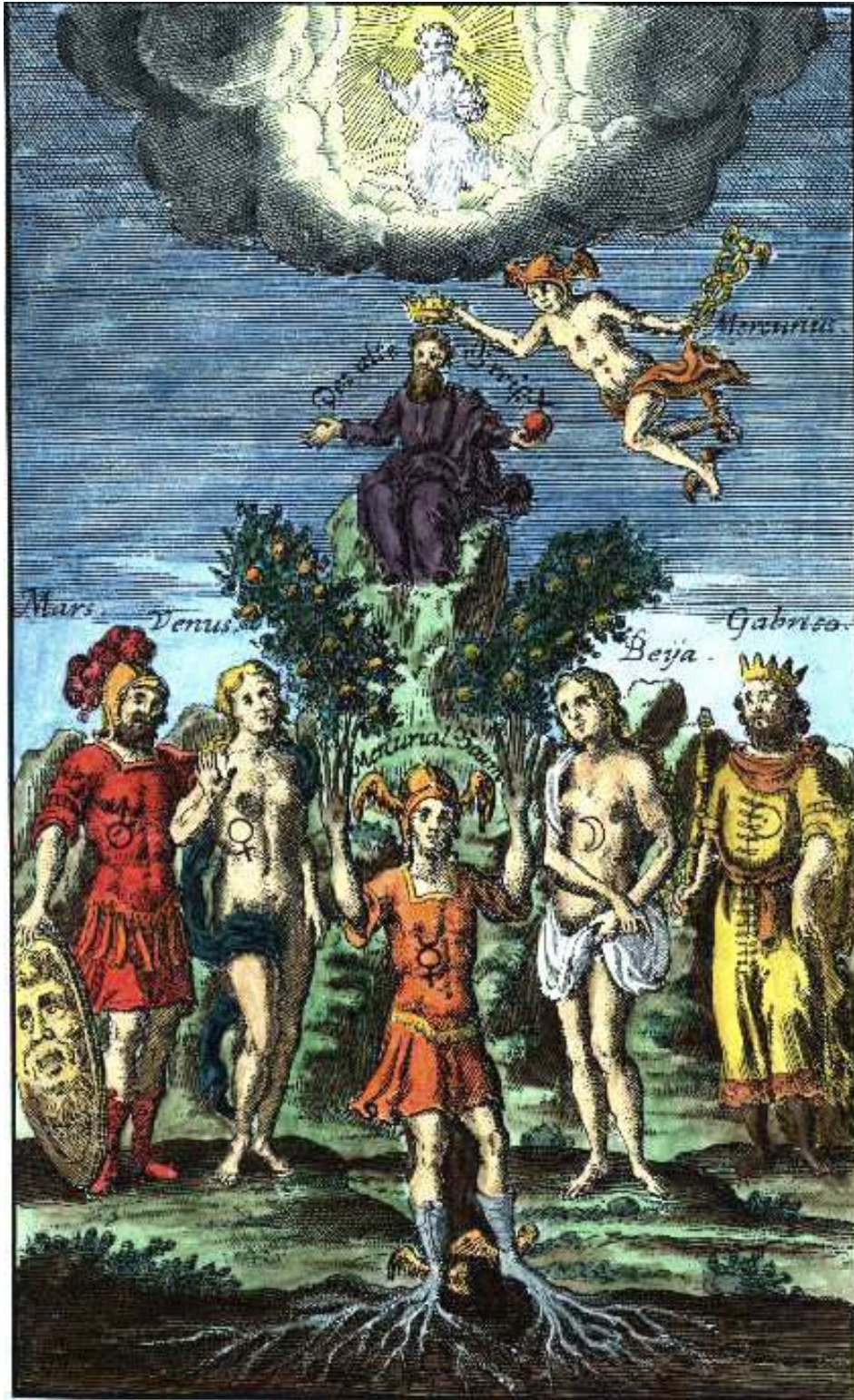


A symbol which we should consider under this heading is that of the skeleton. This is sometimes used in the sense of the decayed human figure, or the human figure reduced to its alchemical nigredo. It is, of course, conventionally merely a symbol for death, but in the alchemical context it has other resonances, related to the nigredo which will be considered in a later lesson. Here is a skeleton figure from the Mylius *Philosophia reformata* series.



For the exercises I would like you to focus upon the role of the human figure in each example. Analyse it in terms of the ideas I have outlined above. Try to see how this human figure relates to the other symbols in the emblem space, using all the tools we have been developing in the course lessons so far. Remember never to neglect the first key tool - that of being able to identify all the symbols that are found in the emblem - and the second great tool in our toolbox - that of seeing how the symbols are placed in the geometrical space of the emblem and whether they are geometrically related to other symbols.

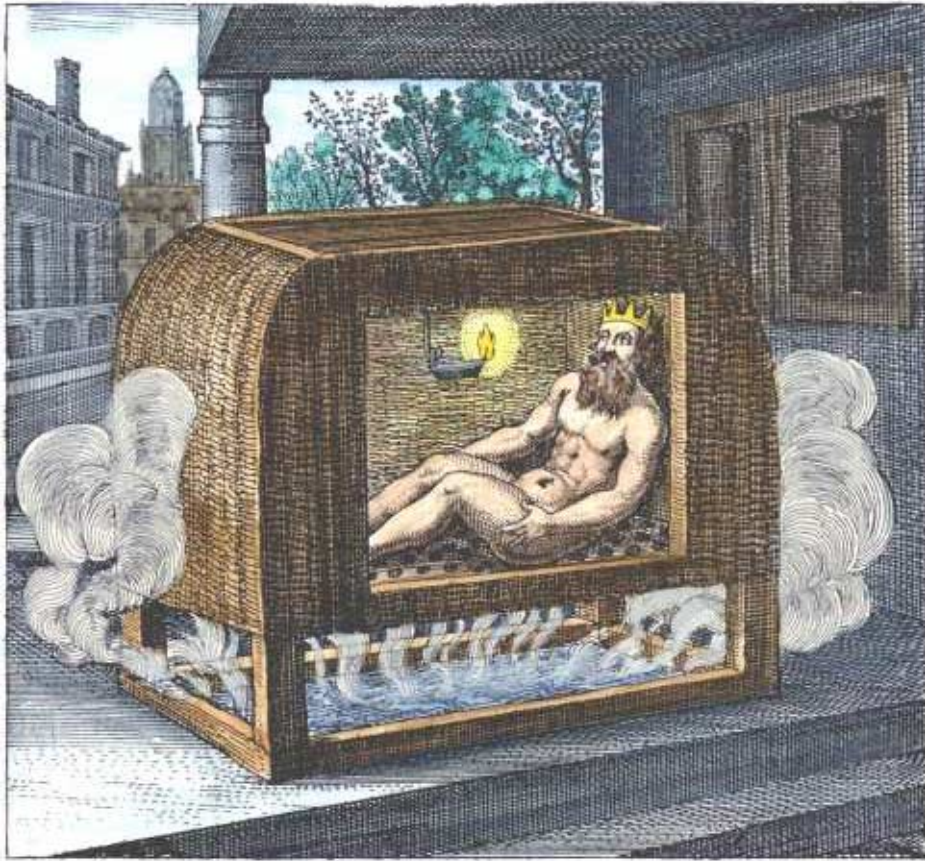
Example 1. Frontispiece from Adolph Christoph Bentz, *Philosophische Schau-Bühne*, 1706.



Example 2. Twelfth key of Basil Valentine.



Example 3. The twenty eighth emblem from Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*.



Example 4. Figure twelve from the Valentine Azoth series. Here the human figure is not perhaps so immediately obvious.





Example 5. Figure thirteen from the Valentine *Azoth* series.



Example 6. The 8th picture from the Bonacina manuscript

