



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

Lesson Seven : Trees.

Some people have asked me to be more specific about what each symbol means. This indicates to me that these people are perhaps misunderstanding the approach I am taking in this study course, so before moving on to the substance of this lesson I would like to review what we have achieved so far.

In the first lesson we began to develop the ability to see what pictorial elements in an alchemical emblem were symbols and which were purely decorative. This is something you must constantly apply to any emblem new to you. It is an essential exercise. Then in the second and third lessons we looked at the ways in which symbols were placed in the emblem space. The fourth lesson led us to look for symbols related to each other as opposites, while the fifth and sixth lessons made us examine some symbols through which these opposites were brought into some resolution.

What I am providing in these lessons are a series of tools through which people can explore alchemical imagery. These techniques may seem to some peoples minds to be trite, obvious and simplistic. They are indeed simple and commonplace to me, but in my many years of working with others and discussing alchemical symbols, I have rarely found anyone able to look at symbols in the way I outline here. Most people rush in with meaning, forcing an interpretation onto the alchemical emblem. Usually this interpretation has nothing to do with alchemy and may derive from some modern ideas from psychology, kabbalah, tarot, eastern philosophy, or western occultism. They import meaning from some other system or set of beliefs, rather than letting the imagery speak to them. I apologise for having to keep repeating this point, but I believe it is the main reason why alchemical imagery is so little understood today. Some people taking this study course are a bit reluctant to abandon their search for projected meaning.

This course will gradually introduce you to a number of methods for investigating alchemical symbolism. It will not tell you in some simple way the meaning of a symbol. What one has to realise is that alchemical emblems are not textual information encoded in symbols which can be precised decrypted into a 'meaning', but they are instead dynamic gateways, before which we can stand and allow ourselves to enter into an inner dialogue with the imagery. One should really see each emblem (or emblem sequence) as a presentation of some facet of alchemy through a dynamic interplay of symbolism. It is by attending to this dance of symbols, with our minds able to grasp the choreography of the symbolic dance, that we can begin to resonate with the particular facet of alchemy that has been woven into its construction. Please be patient and allow yourself to develop the

skills to read the imagery and resist the need for 'meaning'. This requires that you do the exercises and not just read intellectually through the text and admire the pretty pictures. You will only develop the abilities I am trying to show to you by doing the exercises. Merely intellectualising over these lessons will regrettably lead you nowhere. If alchemical symbolism were so simple then people would have exhausted it years ago, and I would have wasted most of my adult life because I did not have a simple explanation of its meaning. This study course will not give you an intellectual picture, a meaning to alchemical symbols, but hopefully it will give you tools to explore its riches.

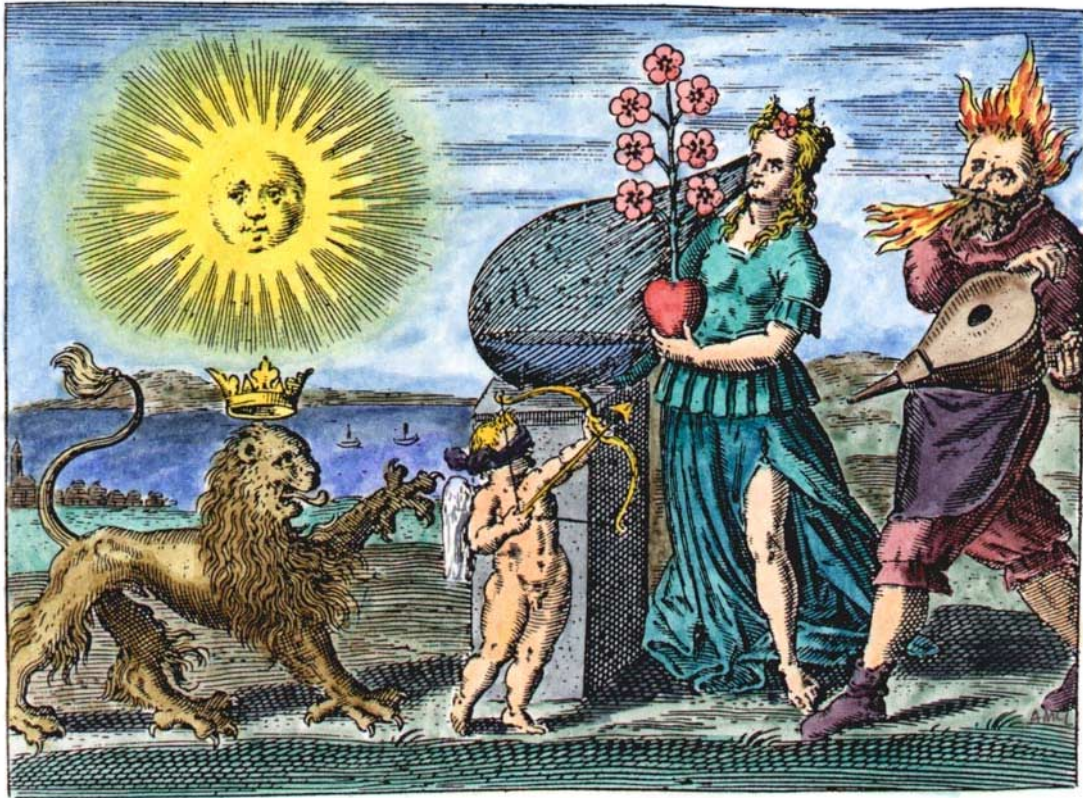
The tree.

Following on from our exploration of the symbols of the resolution of male and female and the snake in the previous two lessons, we will now look at the tree. Trees appear often in alchemical emblems and they have a number of different aspects. Here I want us to look only at one aspect of the tree symbol - that in which the tree is uniting a realm below with that above. Here the tree is seen to have three components - its roots in one layer, its trunk spanning the space between the above and below, and its leaves, branches and fruits in the world above. Resist any temptation to see this as the kabbalistic tree of life. It is a tree of transformation in which the essence of the material in the realm of the roots is drawn up into the flowering and fruiting of the tree's canopy.



This image from the *Donum Dei* series perhaps shows this aspect of the tree in its most clear and archetypal form. You will note the roots are in the layer at the bottom of the flask and are transforming this into the flower in the upper part of the flask. The tree is often found in alchemical emblems with various symbols at its roots or in its branches, and these symbols give us clues as to what is being transformed or what it is being transformed into.

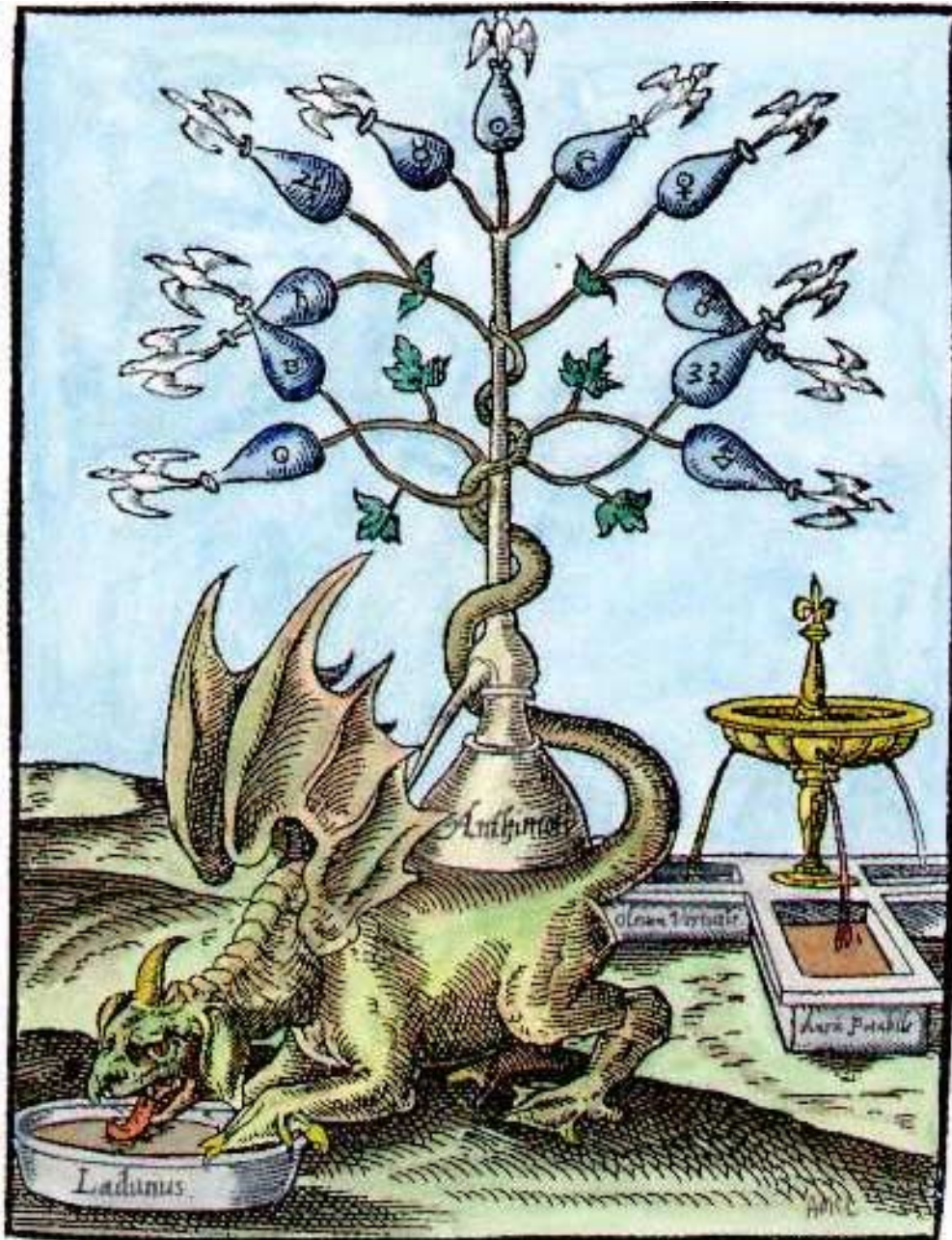
This tree is often depicted as a smaller plant but with the same symbolic intention. Thus in the fifth key of Basil Valentine we note the woman holding a plant growing with its roots in a heart and bearing flowers.



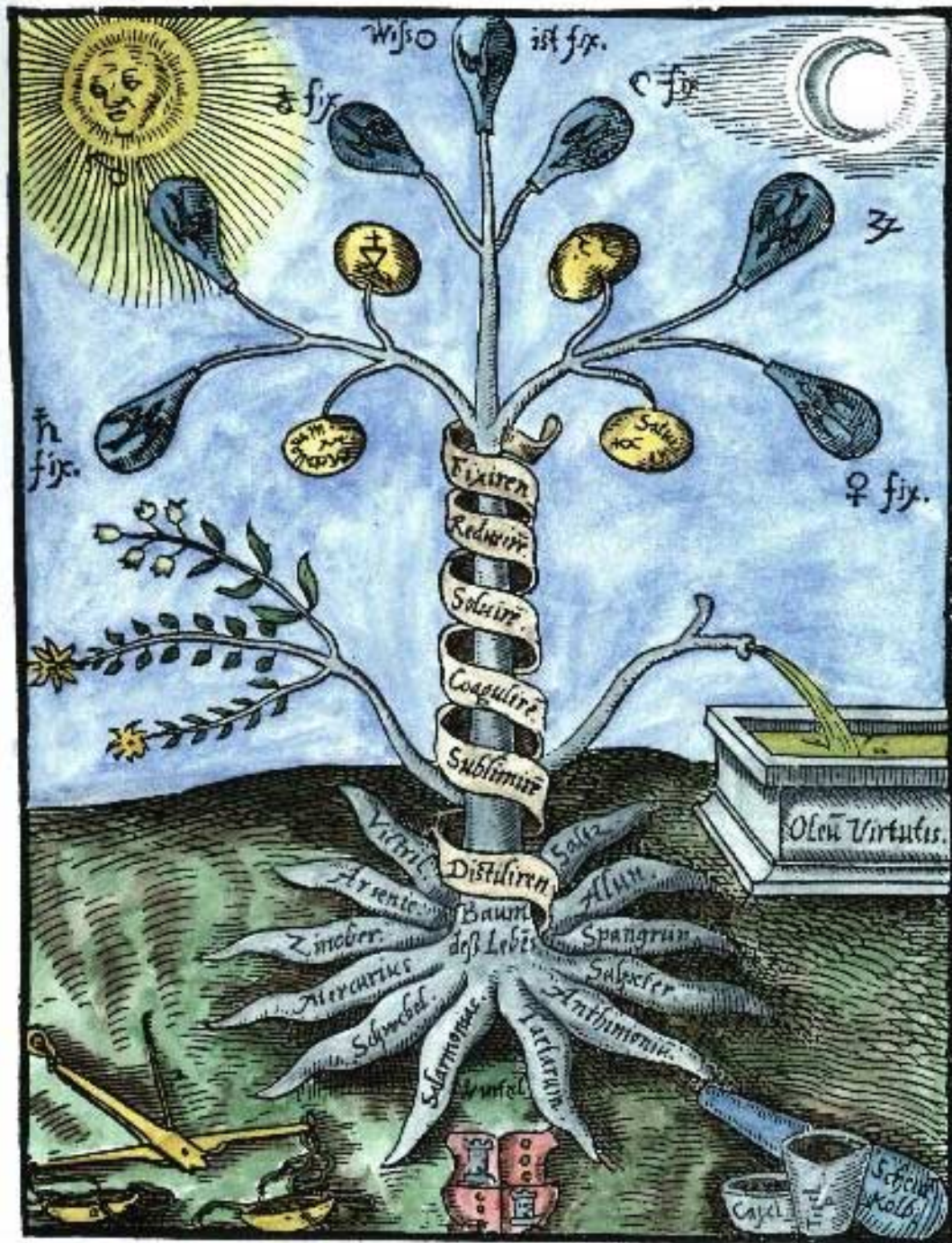
Exercises.

In these exercises we will look at a number of examples of the tree. You should apply your abilities to identify the symbols in the emblem, their geometrical relationships, and any polarities which appear in the emblem space. Then you should identify any symbols associated with the roots, the trunk or the canopy. These symbols can be a clue to what is being transformed or what it is being transformed into.

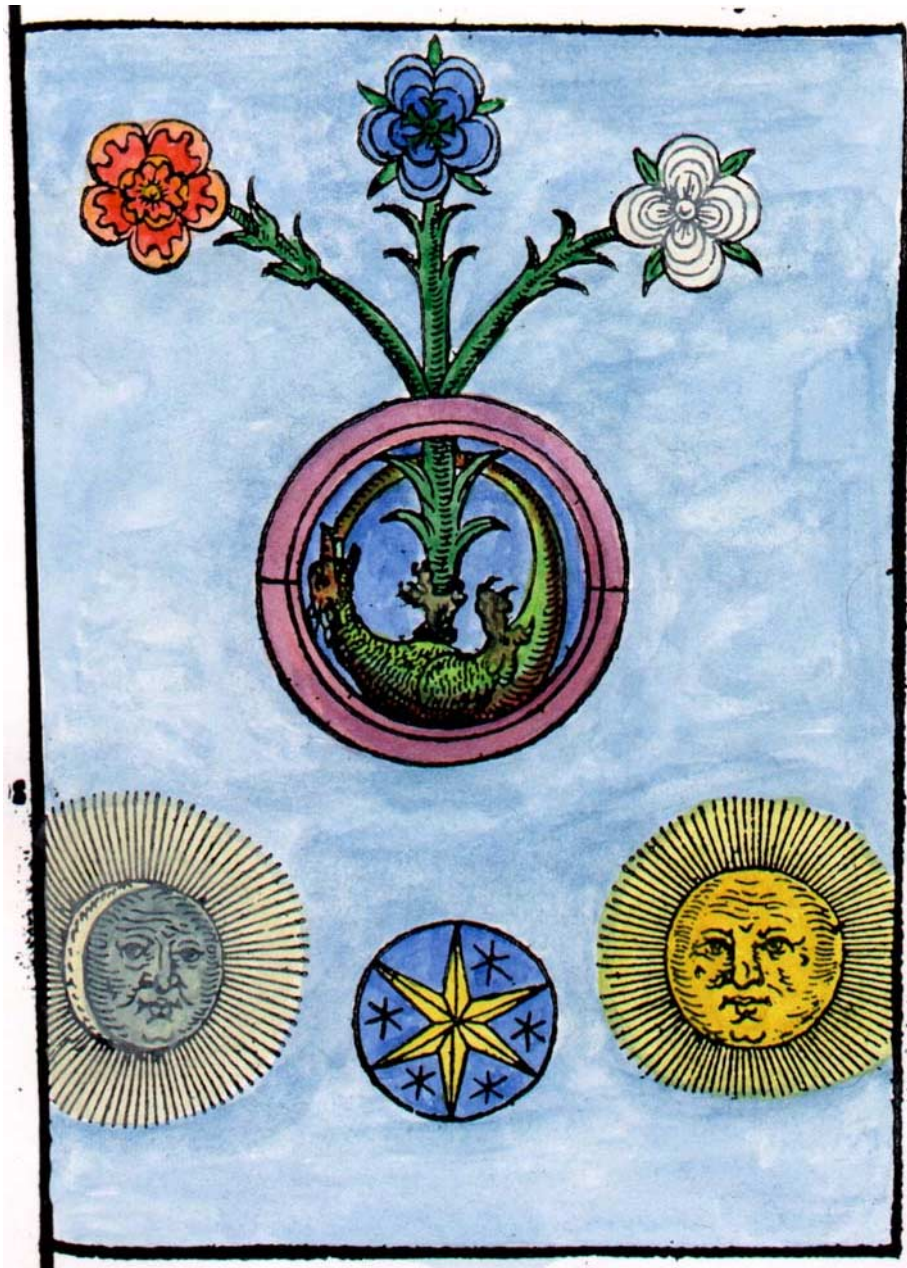
Example 1. Woodcut from Thurneisser *Quinta essentia*.



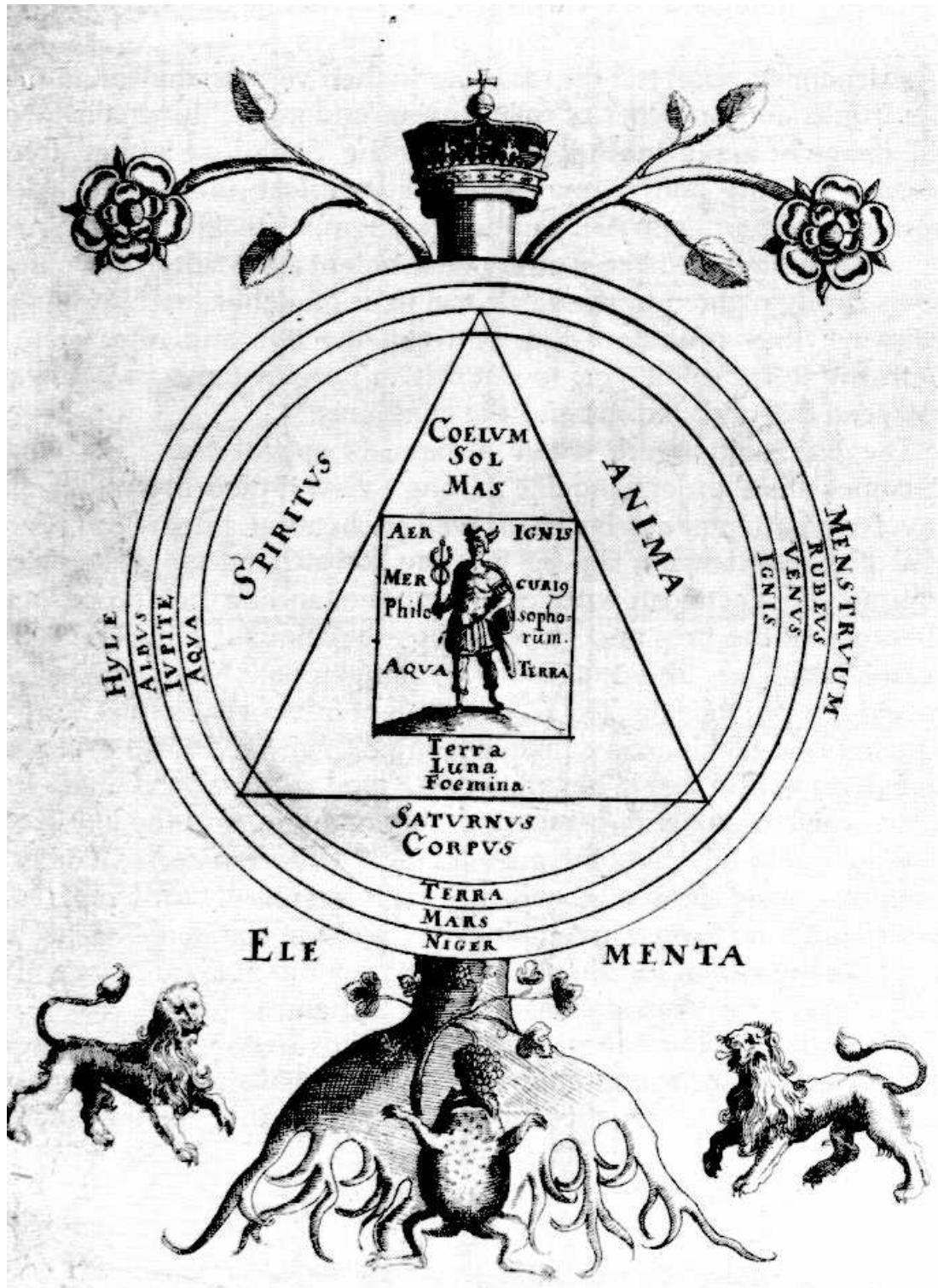
Example 2. Woodcut from Thurneisser *Quinta essentia*.



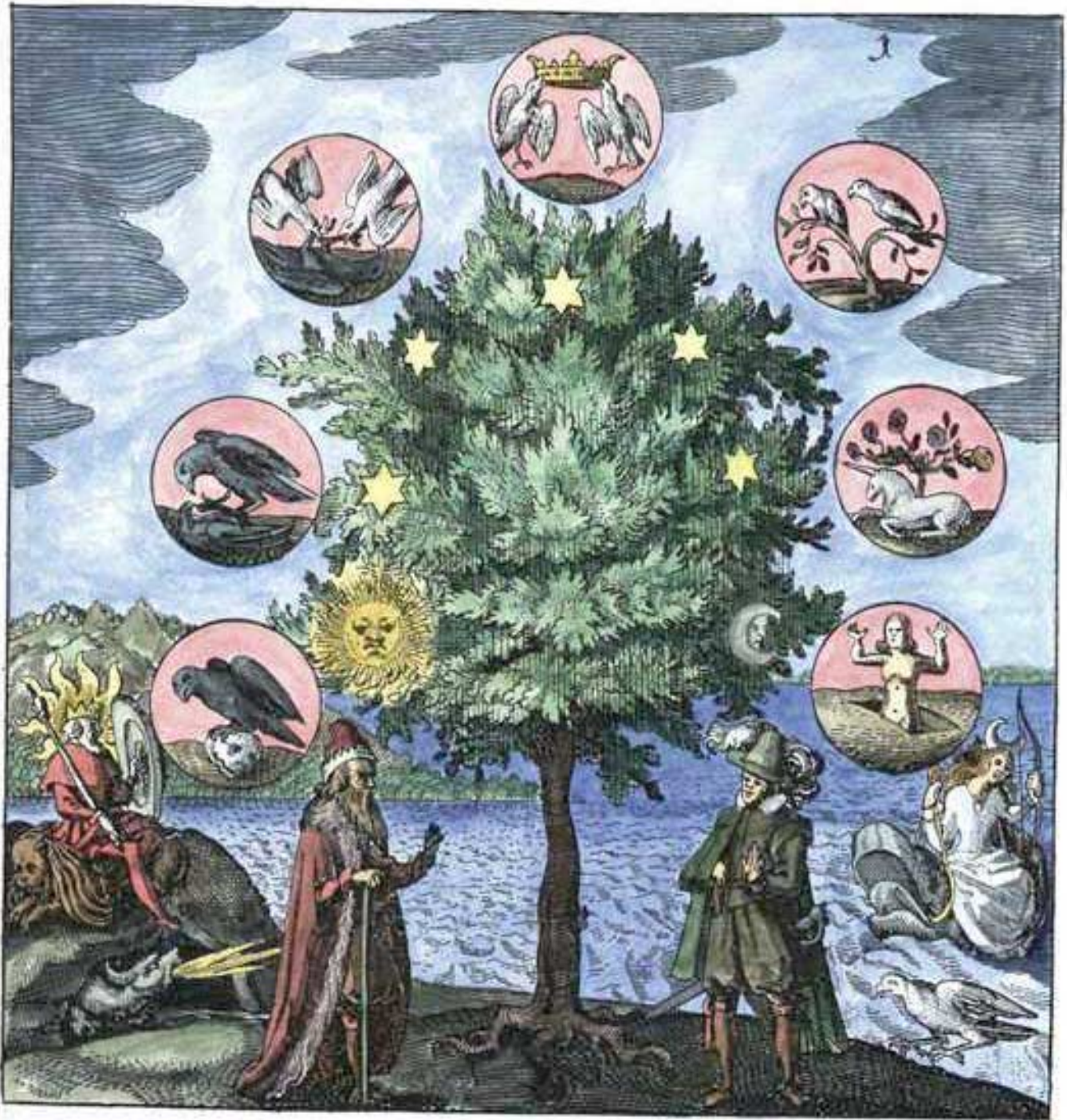
Example 3. Woodcut 16 from the *Pandora*.



Example 4. Engraving from Samuel Norton *Mercurius redivivus*.



Example 5. Frontispiece from Johann Daniel Mylius *Philosophia reformata*.



Example 6. . Frontispiece from Adolph Christoph Bentz, *Philosophische Schau-Bühne*.



Example 7. Section of the Ripley Scroll.

This is a very complex part of an even more complex emblem. Note here that the male and female figures each hold a separate branch of a vine. These intertwine so we can see parallels with aspects investigated in lesson 6.

