

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

Lesson Eight : An initial look at Birds.

In recent lessons we have examined symbols which link or connect aspects of the matter of alchemy together, such as the alchemical marriage and the Hermaphrodite linking male and female, the Ouroboros linking head and tail, and the alchemical Tree which develops a link between the world below and the world above. Now we look at another symbol that unites the above and the below, but in a somewhat different way from the Tree - the bird.

The bird is a very complex symbol and appears in many ways in alchemical emblems, so it is essential that we can identify its particular use in each particular emblem. This usually requires us to study the symbolic context of the bird symbol in the space of each individual emblem. For this lesson we are dealing with the unspecific bird symbol. There are, of course, many different birds in alchemy, indeed a veritable aviary of specific birds - Crow, Swan, Pelican, Phoenix, Peacock, among others - but these are related to stages of the alchemical process and are used in a quite definite manner. We shall look at these individual bird symbols later in the course, but for now I wish us just to look at the appearance of unspecific birds flying upwards or downwards in the emblem space.

1. The bird as messenger between the upper and lower.



The first facet of the bird that we will consider here is that where we see the the birds rise and fall, flying up to the upper realm and down to the earthly realm below, circling almost as messengers between these two worlds.

These birds are often used to describe or metaphor the circulations or repeated distillations and condensations in practical alchemical experiments. Some texts refer to repeated circulations as 'eagles', and state that the alchemist should wait until a certain number of eagles have appeared in their flask. One of the best examples of this is the important alchemical manuscript *The Crowning of Nature* which dates from the 16th century through to the 18th.

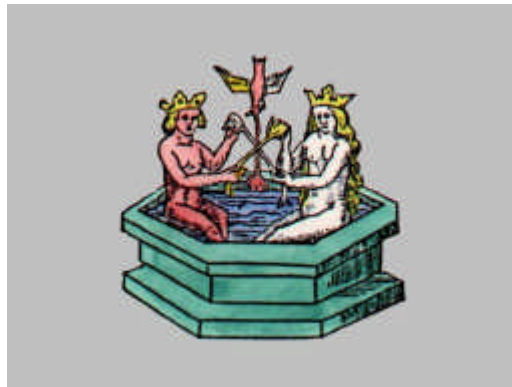
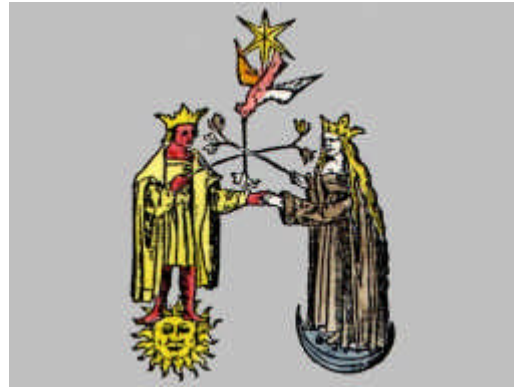
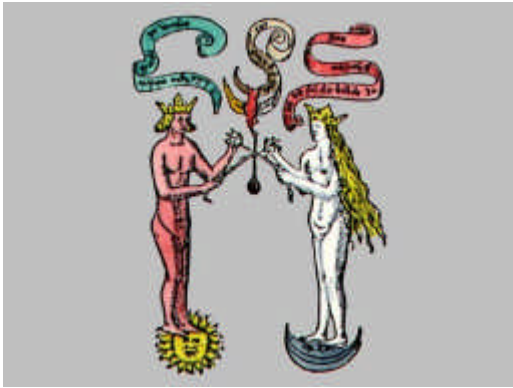
Another clear example is found in the early 15th century manuscript *Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, which shows birds flying down and taking material from the alchemist's crucible and flying up again with this material in their beaks.



It is important to discriminate this from other uses of the bird symbol in alchemical emblems. The essential aspect here is a picturing of the rise and fall of the bird, and its circulation and linking of an upper realm with a lower one.

2. The descent of the spirit

A second use of metaphorical image of the bird seems to reflect the Judeo-Christian tradition of the descent of the holy spirit in the form of a bird. This appears in some emblems as introducing a kind of grace or external impulse which enters into the alchemical process at some important stage. Thus we remember the well known image from the *Rosarium philosophorum* in which the bird descends and completes or unites the marriage of the male and female.



We can see here that the bird is seen only as descending from above. There is no circulation or movement upwards and we must try and distinguish this from the other uses of the bird symbol.

3. The bird as volatile element contrasted with the fixed.

A third idea conveyed or wrapped up in a bird symbol is that of the volatile and the fixed - that which rises upwards and that which is tied to earth. Here the bird is seen only as rising upwards. The second emblem from Michael Maier's *Symbola Aurea Mensae* illustrates this by showing the bird tied to a toad, the volatility to the fixed.



This image of the bird as the 'volatile' or 'spiritual' aspect of the alchemical work is emphasised in the Ripley Scroll where the bird eats its wings, thus removing its ability to fly and thus the volatile becomes fixed, as Ripley says

The Bird of Hermes is my name,
Eating my wings to make me tame.

In the sea without lees,
Stands the Bird of Hermes:
Eating his wings variable,
And thereby makes himself more stable;
When all his feathers be gone,
He stands there still as a stone.



There are other aspects of the bird symbol in alchemy but we will leave consideration of these to a later time. In this lesson we should strive to recognise the three different uses of the bird in alchemy - those which circulate between the worlds, those which descent as a grace from above and those which rise as volatile or purified elements. In doing so we will come to realise that one cannot tie down a complex alchemical symbol (such as the bird) and reduce it to a simple one-dimensional meaning. We must examine the context of the symbol to grasp its especial meaning in a particular emblem. It shows us that it is impossible to draw up a simple dictionary of alchemical symbols in which each symbol has a precise meaning. Such interpretations always fail and it is one of the tasks of this course to give people the tools to examine alchemical symbolism in a broader more context-based way. Alchemy has been badly served by those who have sought to simplify and narrow down its symbolism into easy pieces. Alchemical symbolism is inherently complex and its subtleties must be explored in depth. A bird (or any other individual symbol) may appear in different emblems with entirely different meanings. If you cannot live with that then you are not suited to alchemy. You must be prepared to examine each symbol in the context of the symbol space of the emblem. You have already seen how to identify the component symbols in an emblem, to see the geometrical structures that shape the emblem space, and the ways in which symbols interrelate and speak to each other across the space of the emblem. If you continue to develop these inner tools you will find that it becomes easier to grasp the complexities of alchemical symbolism. The bird symbol provides an excellent training ground for our inner work with alchemical symbolism.

So now to the exercises. As always, you should realise that these are the core of the course. Please don't just intellectualise about these symbols but look, explore and investigate the appearance of the bird in alchemical emblems. I cannot provide you with all possible examples for you to work with, so do try and apply these principles to other alchemical material you find in books and other sources.

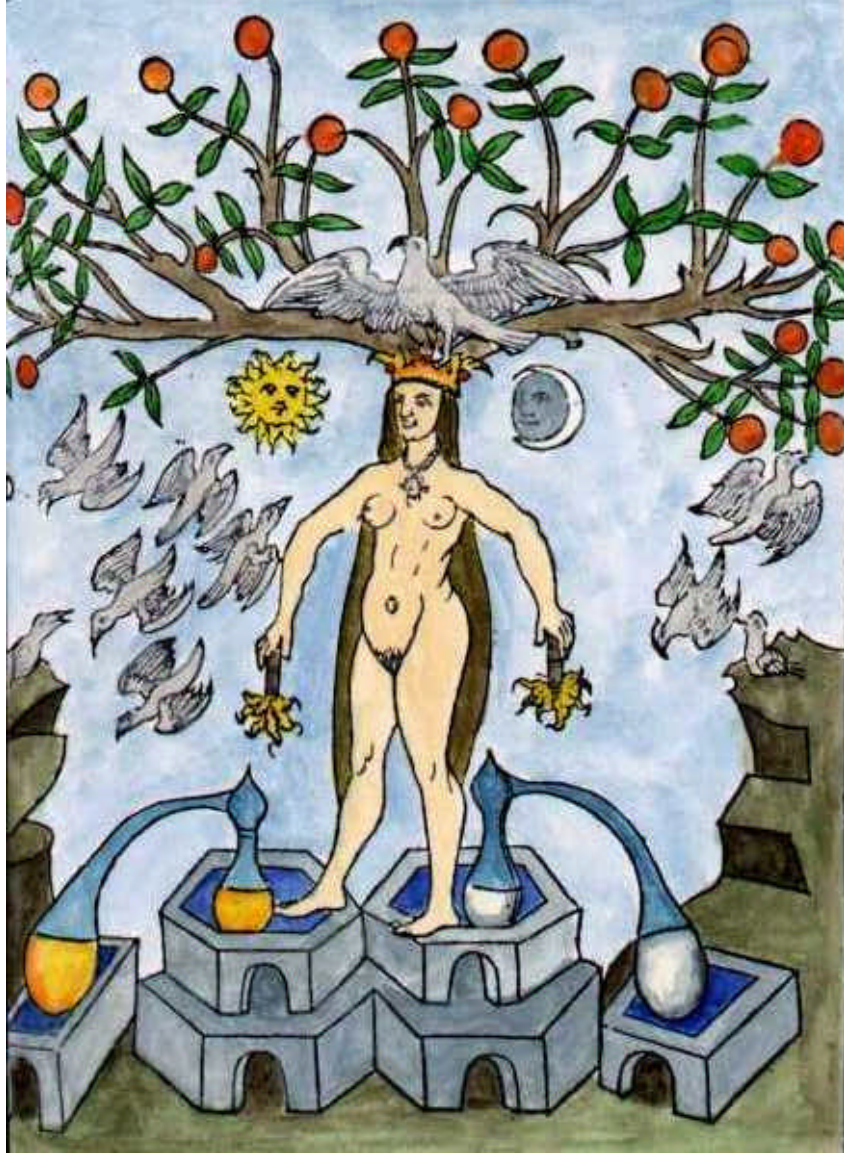
Exercises.

Here you should try and identify from the context just what aspect of the bird symbol is being presented in each emblem. We are not here considering the birds as individual symbols (eagle, peacock, crow, pelican, phoenix etc.) but just as the non-specific bird symbol. Some of these examples may seem to be a bit ambiguous. If you cannot decide in what particular way the bird is being depicted, then just draw up a listing of the pros and cons for each of the three facets I mentioned above. The important thing for you here is to develop your abilities to analyse the symbolism from the context - and not to get 10 out of 10. In alchemy much is ambiguity. Often one needs to see the emblem against others from the same sequence, compare it with similar emblems, or read the original text associated with the illustrations. Try to relate the bird symbol to what is happening with other symbols in the emblem. In some cases the other symbols echo, resonate and reflect the appearance of the bird.

Example 1. Mylius' version of Emblem 13 from the Valentine *Azoth* series.



Example 2. Woodcut 1 from the *Pandora*.



Example 3 .Woodcut 14 from the *Pandora*.



Example 4. Drawing from British Library manuscript Harley 2407.



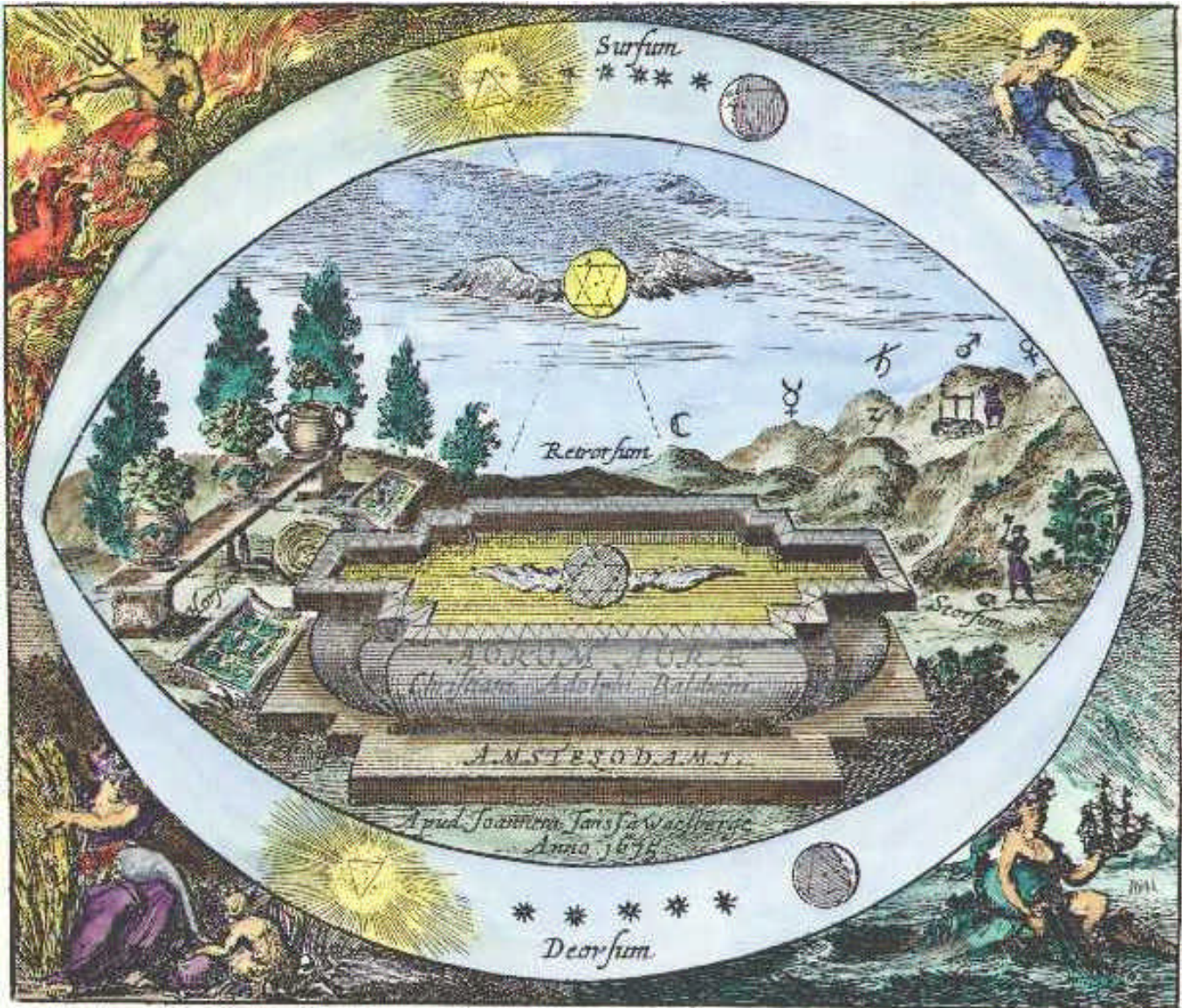
Example 5. Engraving from Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 1652.



Example 6. Mylius' version of Emblem 9 from the Valentine *Azoth* series.



Emblem 7. Frontispiece from Balduin's *Aureum superius et inferius*. Sometimes the same symbolic import of a bird may be depicted by an angel or winged cherub, or even here as a winged disc.



Example 8. Mylius' version of Emblem 6 from the Valentine *Azoth* series. We are not here so interested in the black crow.

