

SPLENDOR SOLIS



The Splendor Solis is the most beautiful treatise on alchemy ever made.



von der Fegirung des Feuers

Al in ding der Fegirung
ist So wirdet kein heurlichheit da sein In der ordnung
der wandelich der Gatter in den son das ist son
das Geistlich ist leiblich vund das son das ist son
gemacht der son vund son sein heurlich bleiblich
son diesen swaige Planeten redet son also son
an haile vund Tricket son vund son
falt vund Tracht vund son vund son
ordnung der Fegirung So wirdet vund son
vund son das ist durch son vund son
der Alten wirdet empfangen die aneuerung der Fegirung
makant vund son vund son werden Durchleuchtig.
In der Scala Philosophorum stiet also von Feuer

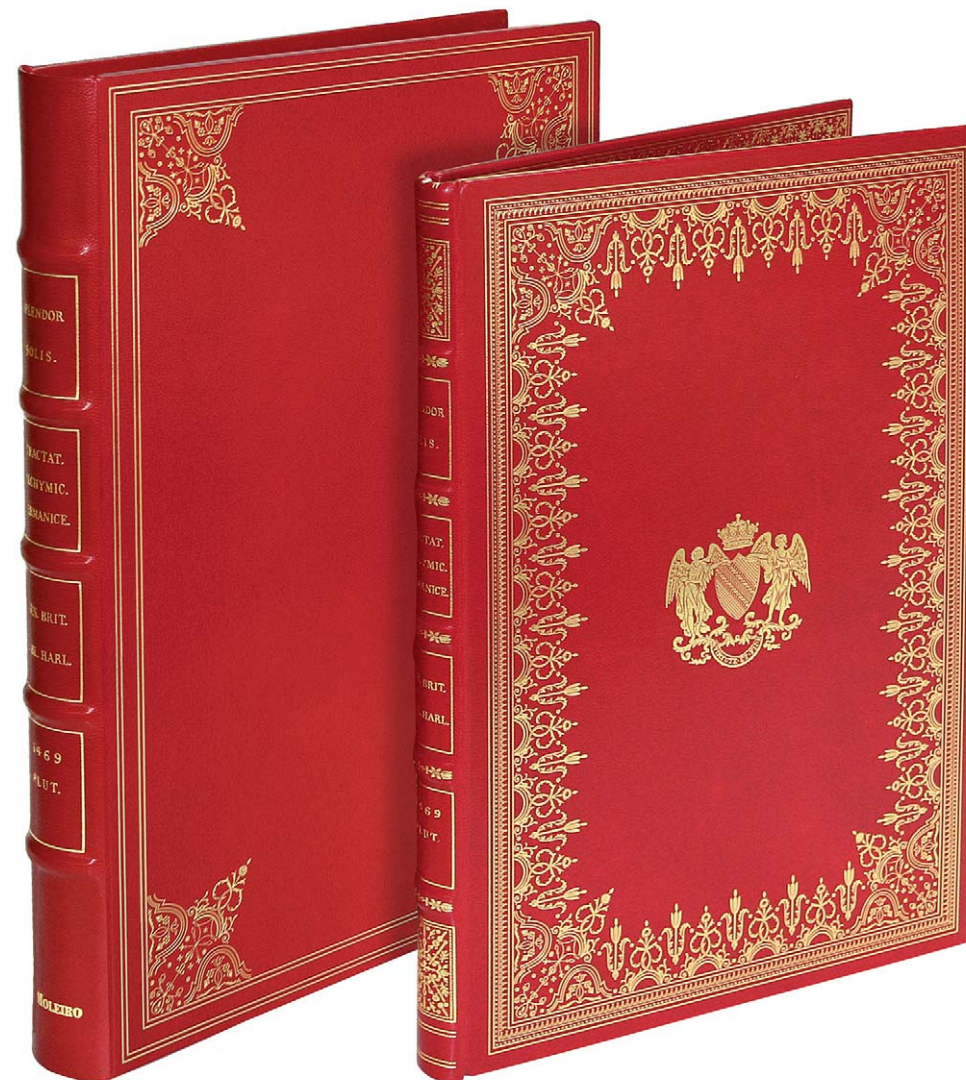
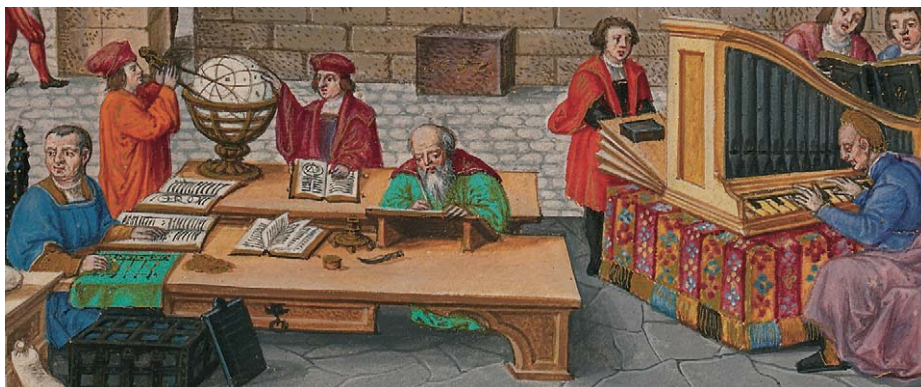
SPLENDOR SOLIS

THE BRITISH LIBRARY • LONDON

«First, unique and unrepeatable edition strictly limited to 987 copies»

- Shelf mark: Suppl. turc 242.
- Date: 1582.
- Size: 230 x 330 mm.
- 100 pages, 22 full-page illuminations. lavishly embellished with gold.
- Bound in crimson leather decorated with gold.
- Full-colour commentary volume (448 p.) by Thomas Hofmeier (Historian of Alchemy) Jörg Völlnagel (Art historian, research associate at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Peter Kidd (Former curator of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts at the Bodleian and British Libraries) and Joscelyn Godwin.

This codex, dated 1582, is the most beautiful treatise on alchemy ever made. The imagination and lyricism of its truly marvellous illustrations are awe-inspiring even to those not familiar with this subject. The secrets of kabbalah, astrology and alchemic symbolism are revealed on 22 folios bearing full-page illustrations with a wealth of colour and almost Baroque profusion of detail.



Bound in crimson leather decorated with gold



INTRODUCTION TO THE SPLENDOR SOLIS COMMENTARY VOLUME

Jörg Völlnagel

Art historian, research associate at the
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

The Harley MS. 3469 – “*Splendor Solis* or *Splendour of the Sun*” – is one of the most beautiful and well known illuminated alchemical manuscripts in the world. Its illustrations can be found in many different places. Decorating publications on alchemy, esoteric self-help books and fantasy novels, they have also been known to appear on the labels of aphrodisiac party drinks or record covers. Though they may or may not have been aware of it, many readers will no doubt have come across an illustration from this manuscript at one point or another. In view of such decontextualised appearances, one might well ask what these pictures are all about: what is their subject matter, and what are the concerns of the text? When was the famous manuscript produced and who was behind it? Thus the main question we face with the *Splendor Solis* is: what kind of book do we have in our hands?

The *Splendor Solis* is by no means a laboratory manual, a kind of recipe book for alchemists. Indeed, it is hardly a list of instructions for whipping up a little alchemical soup in the hope of finding a nugget of artificial gold in the pot at the end. Rather, **the *Splendor Solis* sets forth the philosophy of alchemy, a world view**

according to which the human being (the alchemist) exists and acts in harmony with nature, respecting divine creation and at the same time intervening in the processes underlying that creation, all the while supporting its growth with the help of alchemy. Comprised of seven treatises and 22 opulent illustrations, the manuscript revolves around this complex of philosophical concerns, while the business of chemistry itself is accorded a more subordinate role.

Be that as it may, both the author and illustrator of the *Splendor Solis* no doubt found the right tone, for in the course of the centuries to have elapsed meanwhile the *Splendor Solis* has become the prime example of an illuminated alchemical manuscript. Many people, including such literary greats as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Umberto Eco, have dealt with the manuscript in one way or another. **Yet up until now there has never been a monograph specifically dedicated to the Harley MS. 3469. The publication of the present facsimile edition by Moleiro addresses this longstanding desideratum.**

The five contributions assembled in the present commentary volume provide an indispensable basis for dealing with the

Splendor Solis, bearing in mind that most contemporary readers would have considerable difficulty understanding much of the content:

THE ALCHEMY OF THE *Splendor Solis*

“The Alchemy of the *Splendor Solis*” by Thomas Hofmeier offers an overview of the intellectual and spiritual environment in which the *Splendor Solis* emerged, thus providing important criteria for the intellectual classification of the codex. **What is alchemy in the first place, what is its aim, how did it come about, what is its history?** These are the questions Thomas Hofmeier treats in his essay. Introducing alchemy as a bibliographical science (with pictures), he also sheds light on the production of manuscripts and the advent of book printing during the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Era. Naturally he directs much of his attention to the *Splendor Solis*. Alongside his close reading of the text, he elucidates the various sources drawn upon by the manuscript, culminating in a genealogical tree.

THE ORIGINS OF THE *Splendor Solis*

My own contribution to the volume, “The Origins of the *Splendor Solis*”, addresses the fact that the origins of the manuscript Harley MS. 3469, which is dated 1582, can actually be traced back a further fifty years to the southern German town of Augsburg. Neither the author nor the commissioner of the *Splendor Solis* is known to us. Nevertheless, there is much that can be said

about the conditions surrounding the production of the illuminated manuscript: we know of numerous sources that were drawn upon by both the text and the illustrations, which were to have a lasting effect on the *Splendor Solis*. In looking carefully at the iconography of both the illustrations and their respective sources we gain a closer insight into the origins of the *Splendor Solis* which in turn leads us to an attribution of the

"Many people, including such literary greats as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Umberto Eco, have dealt with the manuscript"

original miniatures supported by reliable evidence. The other sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century illuminated copies of the manuscript to have survived besides the Harley 3469 are introduced in brief, followed by a discussion – perhaps most importantly – of the concept underlying the *Splendor Solis*, which **aspired from the very beginning to become the most beautiful of all illuminated alchemical manuscripts.** Indeed, to return for a moment to the praise lauded upon the *Splendor Solis* at the outset, it was a concept realised, it is fair to state, with enduring success!

THE PROVENANCE OF THE HARLEY *Splendor Solis*

Peter Kidd examines “The Provenance of the Harley *Splendor Solis*”. While up until now the only thing that could be said with



any certainty about the provenance of the manuscript was that, being part of the Harley Collection, it was among the original inventory of the British Library, further clues can be found in notes made in pencil by Edward Harley on the manuscript's flyleaf. Kidd investigates the historical plausibility of these markings, the source of which is not revealed by Harley, thus paving the way for the first critical analysis of the provenance of this famous manuscript.

The same can also be said of an entry in the diary of John Evelyn. The note documents Evelyn's encounter with an alchemical manuscript in the Royal Library at Whitehall whose description matches the *Splendor Solis* and which has been linked in the literature with the Harley MS. 3469 – a highly improbable conjecture, as Kidd shows.

Admittedly, it is not easy to let go of the notion that alchemy's most beautiful illuminated manuscript was not part of the Royal British Library. Indeed, it would only have been fitting for the "Royal Art" of alchemy to have acquired an altogether new significance in this way. Yet even this necessary historiographical disillusionment can be regarded among the merits of the present publication.

COMMENTARIES ON THE TWENTY-TWO PAINTINGS

My "Commentaries on the the twenty-two paintings" introduce the twenty-two full-page illustrations of the manuscript, describing the key pictorial elements crucial

for an interpretation of the work, while also offering clues as to a possible interpretation of the enigmatic imagery of the *Splendor Solis*.

TRANSLATION OF THE MANUSCRIPT

And finally, **Joscelyn Godwin presents us with the first reliable English translation of the Early New High German original text of the Harley MS. 3469 manuscript.** Godwin's translation is of particular historical importance, for right back in the early seventeenth century, there were a number of early translations in circulation that were based not on the original text of the German manuscripts, but rather on a highly distorted and corrupt French version of the text. While it does include black-and-white reproductions of the illustrations in the Harley MS. 3469 manuscript, even Julius Kohn's famous text edition, published in 1920 by Kegan Paul in London with numerous reprints in the meantime, suffers from an English translation bearing marked deviations from the original. Godwin's new translation redresses this unfortunate circumstance – all of which is thanks to the publishing initiative of **M. Moleiro Editor, allowing what may well be the most beautiful illuminated alchemical manuscript to extend its splendour beyond the British Library to a further 987 public and private libraries.**

JÖRG VÖLLNAGEL



PHILOSOPHICAL TREE, f. 15r

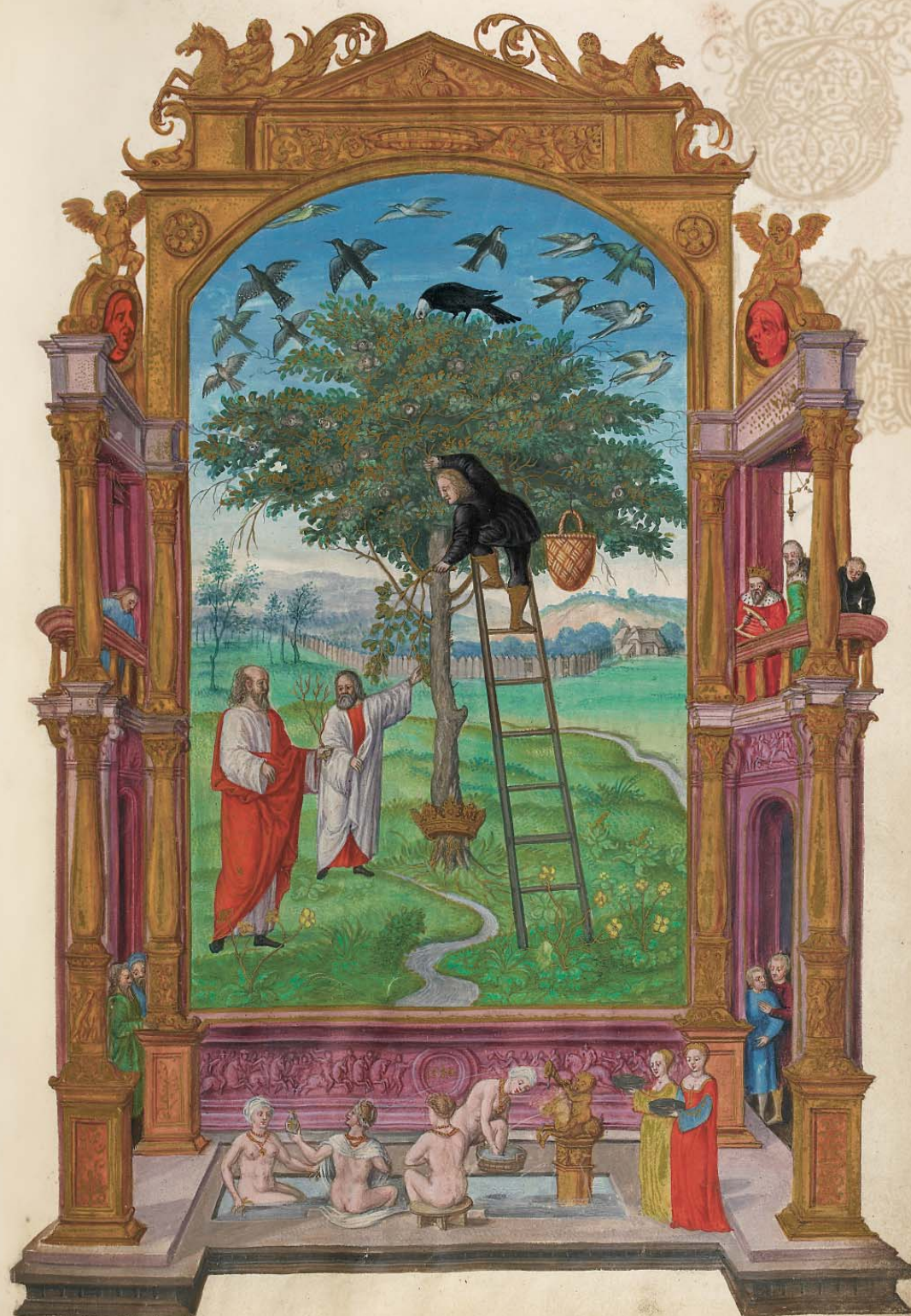
This miniature features a large tree as wide as the picture itself. In the vicinity of the tree's golden roots the narrow silver trunk is encircled by a splendid golden crown. At the very top of the tree, a large raven with a white head sits plucking transparent, white pearls from the branches, while a flock of other birds fly in all directions. Among the foliage below hangs a wicker harvesting basket. To the left is a young man standing at the top of a ladder.

The main miniature is bordered by a rather extraordinary painting of a stage-like frame structure with two tall wings on each side. At the foot of the main miniature, in the middle of the painted frame structure, a scene is taking place at a women's bath. From his position on the balcony located in the right wing a king observes the scene, suggesting the painting might well be a loose interpretation of the Bathsheba episode in the Old Testament. The plinth is decorated by a frieze depicting a battle in relief. At the centre of the frieze is a medallion containing the golden year of "1582".

Known to alchemists as the philosophical tree, the tree of life stands for the *opus alchymicum*, the alchemical process regarded as a preliminary stage of the perfection to which alchemists aspire. This fact would lend support to John Read's observation that the youth is standing on the sixth and seventh rungs of the lad-

der. According to Read, the seven rungs indeed represent the seven planets and the metals attributed to them, hence the alchemical process must be in transition from silver to gold.

Going on the content of the second allegory, which directly precedes this picture in the manuscript, the figures in the miniature represent the three generations of Aeneas' family: Aeneas himself, his father Anchises, and up in the tree, his son Silvius. As it happens, the two philosophers at the foot of the tree are also faithful copies, albeit laterally reversed, of a woodcut produced for a 1502 edition of Virgil's works published by Johannes Grüninger in Strasbourg. The three generations are robed in the principal colours of alchemy. **The boy is dressed in black, the colour used to designate the beginning; white, which symbolises the intermediary stage, the *opus parvum*, is the dominant colour in the coat of his father, Aeneas; and the shawl of the family elder, Anchises, is red, signifying perfection or the *opus magnum*.** Soaring birds are frequently used in alchemy to symbolise sublimation, which could also be symbolised in this instance by the white-hooded raven, its black body equating to the sublimate that remains behind in the retort. In the alchemical process this would designate the transition from the *nigredo* to the *albedo* phase, from black to white.



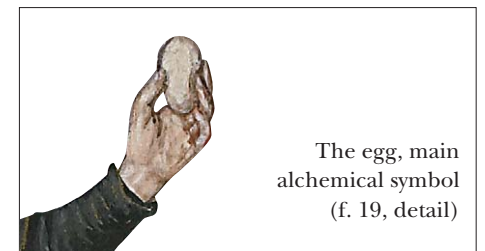
HERMAPHRODITE, f. 19v



This miniature foregrounds a winged hermaphrodite within a verdant landscape. Dressed all in black, the figure is wearing pointy shoes and tight-fitting stockings covered by a knee-length frock coat with elaborate gold braiding and appliqués. Protruding from the generous golden neckline of the overgarment are two necks and two heads. On the left is a male head with short hair, and on the right a female head with long hair. Each of the two heads is encircled by an aura – the male in gold, the female in silver – which underscores the hieratic origins of the hermaphrodite. The two big fluffy wings on the back of the figure – the left of red feathers, the right of white feathers – give further expression to the same. The hermaphrodite holds a white egg between the thumb and index finger of his left hand and a large, round plate in his right hand. The surface of the disc is comprised of a number of rings. Encompassing the round reflective area in the centre, possibly a mirror, in which an image of the surrounding landscape can be discerned, are three rings of different colours. Adjoining the outer ring of flaming orange and yellow is a cloudy ring of white and grey. This middle ring adjoins the inner ring of deepest blue which encircles the reflected landscape.

Signifying the union of opposites, the hermaphrodite is one of alchemy's principal symbols. Indeed, there is scarcely

an illuminated manuscript without one. In the three colours black, white and red, the *Rebis* (from Lat. *res bina* meaning “two-fold matter”) also stands for the essence of alchemical endeavour which aspires to overcome particular states of matter through the union of opposites. According to the related passage of text, united pairs of opposites, as envisioned by the painter in the figure of the hermaphrodite, bring forth four children: the four elements of nature – earth, water, air and fire. And it is from their entirety that the fifth “creature” emerges, this being the quintessence. In the text this notion is conveyed in terms of an egg, another of alchemy's foremost symbols. Embodying the four elements, the egg will hatch at some point, bringing forth the fifth element like a young chick. The four elements are also invoked by the image of a disc world with earth at the interior and three rings of water, air and fire revolving around it.



The egg, main alchemical symbol (f. 19, detail)



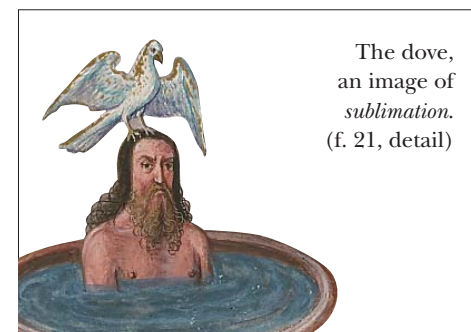
DECOCTION, f. 21v

The left foreground of the picture is occupied by a rendered brick oven with an inlaid copper-coloured tub. In this cauldron, which is filled to the brim with liquid, an elderly man is sitting up to his chest in water. Perched on top of the man's head, notable for its long dark hair and beard, is a large white dove with shimmering gold plumage. With its wings raised, it seems ready to take flight. In front of the oven is a young man kneeling down on one knee. He pumps air into the fire with a hand bellows in a bid to keep the liquid at the right temperature. The young man's clothing – fine blue stockings and an orange-red doublet underneath a black, silver-braided vest and white apron – suggests that he is no mere servant charged with the task of stoking the fire. With his left elbow resting upon his knee, his gaze fastened on the old man, the young man is clearly watching for changes of state. The grand, Venetian-style fantasy architecture in the background embellishes the scene.

At this point in the *Splendor Solis*, mention is made of a tale by Ovid in which a wise old man, in a quest for rejuvenation, has himself cut to pieces and boiled. The process of boiling, or decoction, will, he believes, bring his limbs back together as part of a rejuvenated and stronger whole. **Alchemy regards the decoction of matter as equivalent to the operation of putrefaction, insofar as it serves as a starting point for the perfection process.** The dove

perched on the head of the old man can be interpreted as an image of *sublimation*, as the fleeting distillate of the decoction process, which, following putrefaction, reunites with the physical residue in the flask. In his entry on the “Colombe”, Perney confirms this association, pointing out that it is the task of the *souffleur*, in pumping the bellows, to ensure the success of the alchemical project.

This depiction of decoction was inspired by two miniatures from the *Aurora Consurgens* – the sage in the cauldron pertains to the fifteenth and the kneeling *souffleur* to the thirteenth illustration in the manuscript. By incorporating an image of the sculptor Pygmalion into the miniature, which is set into the tall base on the lower right, the painter added of his own accord a second episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In so doing, he alluded to the creation of a new, ideal human being – a mythological theme that congenially concurs with the ideas of alchemy.



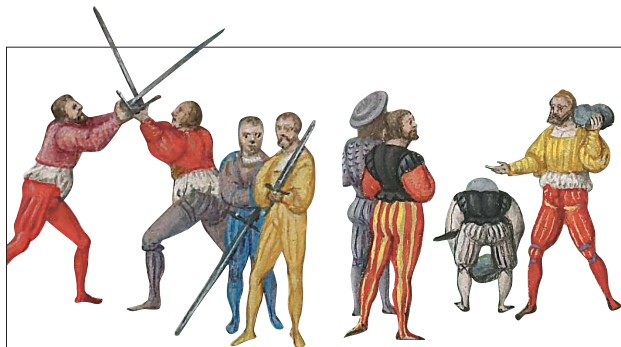
The dove,
an image of
sublimation.
(f. 21, detail)



Sunshine permeates the atmosphere on the planet Sol, and its children are sunny in nature. An aureole of brilliant light pierces the cloudy sky at its zenith; seated within is the radiant golden sun god. He appears in a shiny metallic chariot drawn by two grey horses. In his hands the planetary god holds a staff topped by a sun. Under the influence of the planet Sol, the people down on the earth below are engaged in physical exercise alongside aristocratic games and customs. In the left foreground a prince is seated on a throne, holding court in his orange, ermine-colored coat. A group of men clad in fine, brightly coloured garments has assembled around him, partially replicating engravings by Albrecht Dürer. The inserted miniature contains a flask set against a purple background. Beneath its vitreous shell a winged creature in hues of yellow and brown can be seen. The creature has a

long tail, three long necks and one white, one red and one black head.

When it comes to interpreting the contents of this particular flask, no consensus has been reached to date. Hartlaub and Roob argue that the creature is a three-headed lion symbolising iron vitriol; Alleau identifies a three-headed dragon, while Lennep sees in the figure a depiction of Cerberus. Even the related passage in the treatise, which deals with the purification of matter, offers no real clue as to the identity and significance of the animal symbol. It may well be that the ambivalence was intentional, that the painter deliberately created a monster which could be either dragon or lion. Once again, we might look to the inscription in the colour cartouche of the Nuremberg manuscript for clues. There it is written: "*Draconem nostrum vivum date devorandum leoni ferocissimo*" (Give our living dragon the wildest lion to swallow).



The people down on the earth below are engaged in physical exercise alongside aristocratic games and customs. (f. 6r, detail)



VENUS, f. 28r

As mentioned above, the Venus miniature, which is also dated 1582, should theoretically be fifth in the planet series. **The rule of Venus is characterised by pleasure, amusement, joy and beauty.** Surmounting the scenes of sensual activity is an image of the planetary goddess in her orange chariot with two doves harnessed to the front. In her left hand she holds an arrow as her attribute, while securing Amor with her right hand. Leashed and blindfolded, he is shown balancing on one leg upon the seat, poised to shoot an arrow with his bow. The depiction of the planetary goddess, enwreathed by clouds and illumined by a bright light, is accompanied by a winged heart which, pierced by an arrow, lingers in the sky like a leitmotif.

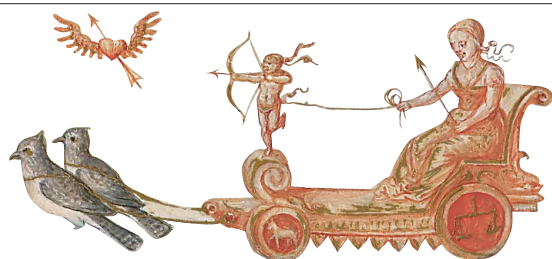
Around the inserted panel are compositions of various human activities in the outdoors. A courtly scene at the lower edge of the picture conveys corporeal and musical pleasures. The right-hand side is reserved for the simple, rural stratum of society, a rather unusual clientele for the children of Venus. Here, a peasant fair with a

bagpiper and dancing couples is framed in the foreground by two lovers caressing in the shade of a tree and in the background by a couple setting out on a horse ride. The interior miniature centres on a niche composed of pilasters and protruding columns. The flask inside the niche contains a magnificent peacock spreading its tail.

In alchemy the peacock tail serves as a symbol of the shifting patterns of colour which become visible in the flask once a certain level of transmutation has been reached. Being a *noble oiseau*, a bird typically associated in the Middle Ages with the upper echelons of society, the peacock appears at the fifth level of the transmutation process in the realm of Venus. Venturing a full interpretation of the miniature, Petra Schramm regards the music-making, playing and dancing "planet-children" as a prelude to the "Chymical Wedding", heightening the human capacity to love. **As it happens, the two birds assigned to Venus were widely regarded as aphrodisiacs: peacock meat was believed to increase male potency and dove meat the willingness of women.**

Venus in her orange chariot with two doves harnessed to the front.

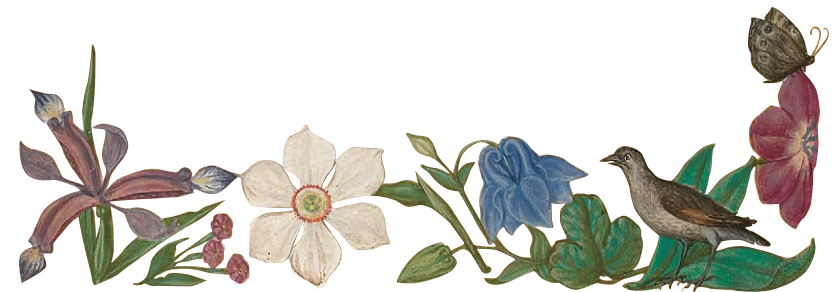
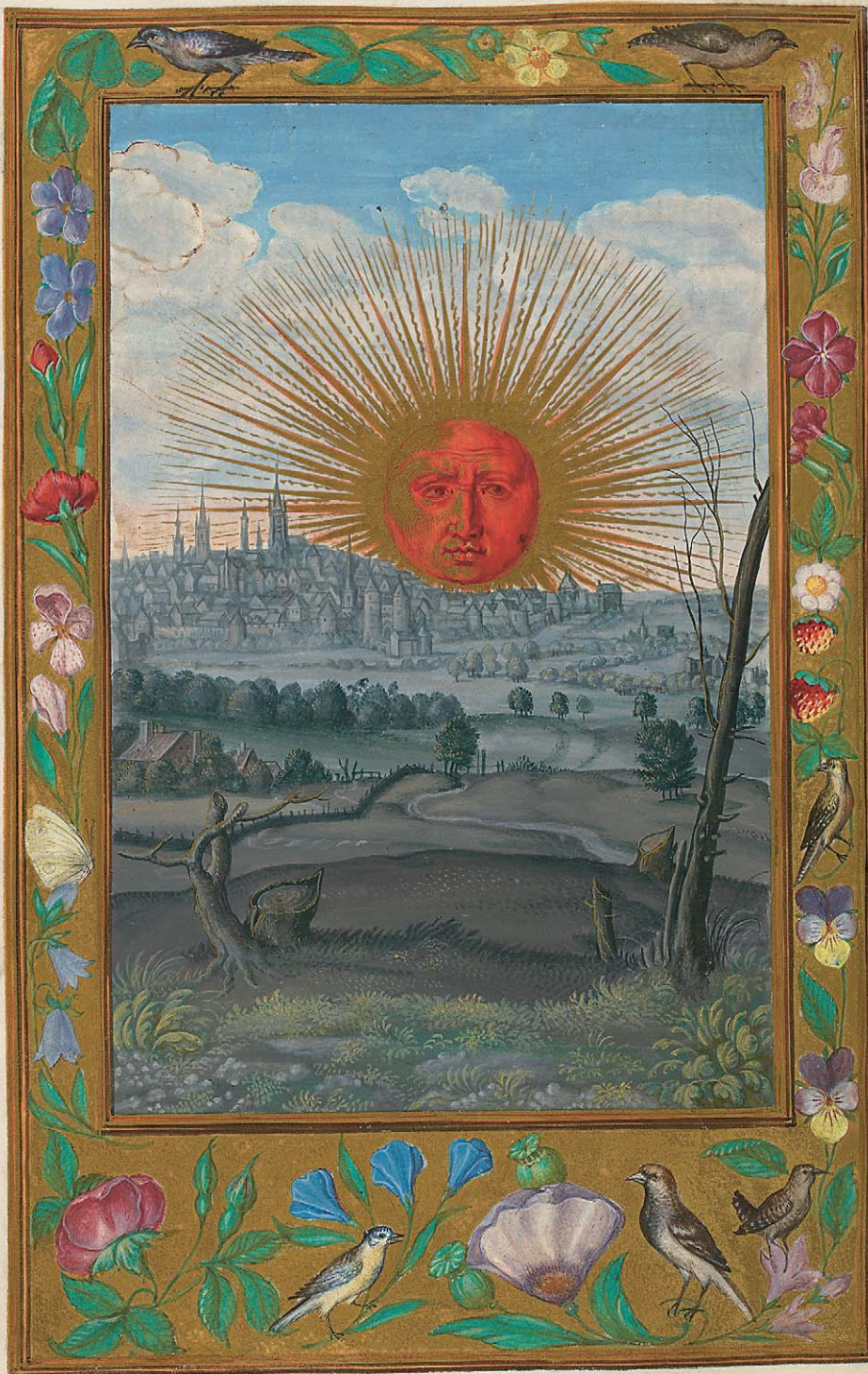
(f. 28r, detail)



RED SUN, f. 33v

Depicted as a large red ball with golden rays, the round body of the animate sun in the sky is almost touching the horizon. The sun's human face is vividly captured in gold-embellished hues of red. As a result, details such as the wrinkled forehead and furrowed eyebrows are clearly discernible upon the serious countenance. The golden rays emanating from the figure's circumference enhance its appearance, lending it the nimbus of a mythical deity. Backed by a light-blue sky with white cumulus clouds, the sun lights up the almost monochrome landscape that extends all the way to the horizon in shades of green and blue. The picture embodies the perfect complement to the miniature of the setting black sun in every regard.

The accompanying passage in the treatise describes the final union of the purified substances or polarities – sulphur and quicksilver for example – whose composition leads to the creation of the philosopher's stone. **Since the colour red stands for the *opus magnum*, for purified gold, there can be no doubt that the illustration of the red sun embodies the ultimate goal. It symbolises the state of perfection, the magic wonders of the philosopher's stone or, to put it succinctly, the splendour of the sun which, as invoked by the *Splendor Solis*, beneficently spreads out over all the earth.**





f. 31v, Child's Play

All our editions are first, unique and limited to **987**
numbered copies certified by notary public.



JOSÉ ANTONIO CANEDA GOYANES

Notario de

Notary of

Lugo, Colegio de Galicia

DOY FE: De que a la presente edición facsímil del

DO HEREBY CERTIFY that the facsimile edition of the

SPLENDOR SOLIS

SPLENDOR SOLIS

cuyo original se conserva en la British Library, en Londres, bajo la signatura «Harley 3469», le corresponde el número 1 de la edición primera, única e irrepetible, numerada en arábigo y limitada a 987 ejemplares, realizada bajo la dirección de Manuel Moleiro Rodríguez y editada por:

the original of which is housed in the British Library, London, under shelf mark "Harley 3469", is number 1 in Arabic numerals of a single and unrepeatable, limited edition of 987 copies directed by Manuel Moleiro Rodríguez and published by:

M. MOLEIRO EDITOR, S. A.

Forman parte de esta misma edición 77 ejemplares con numeración romana destinados a la British Library, al Editor y al Depósito Legal.

This same edition includes 77 copies in Roman numerals for the British Library, the Editor and the Spanish Book catalogue.

Todo ello según el acta autorizada por mí, el 12 de marzo de dos mil diez, número 648 de mi protocolo.

The foregoing is pursuant to document 648 in my records which I authenticated on March 12th of the year two thousand and ten.

Lugo, 23 de marzo de 2010.

Lugo, March 23rd, 2010.



[Handwritten signature]

M. Moleiro Editor S.A. - Travesera de Gracia 17 - 08021 Barcelona - España
Tel. (+34) 932 402 091 - Fax (+34) 932 015 062 - www.moleiro.com



M. MOLEIRO ÷ THE ART OF PERFECTION

Travesera de Gracia, 17-21

08021 Barcelona - Spain

Tel. +34 93 240 20 91

Fax +34 93 201 50 62

Tel. UK +44 (0)20 7193 4986

Tel. USA +1 305 831 4986

moleiro.com
moleiro.com/online