

# Adam McLean's Study Course

## on the interpretation of alchemical symbolism

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### Lesson 0 : Introduction and orientation.

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Alchemical symbolism has, in general, been badly served by modern writers. Most people writing on the interpretation of alchemical imagery come to the subject with a pre-existing agenda, and they then proceed to use alchemical symbolism to illustrate their own underlying set of preconceptions rather than trying to reflect what is actually in the material itself.

Thus the late 19th century theosophists saw alchemy through a filter of their own eclectic bundling together of ideas and different spiritual traditions. The Golden Dawn savants found in alchemy their own abstract 'magical' ideas. Later the Jungians amplified alchemical symbolism and saw it everywhere that humans experience images. There have been some recent books drawing on the rich vein of alchemical imagery that merely seem to indulge the author. It would be invidious to focus on certain writers, but I must say I have not seen any book in recent years which actually attempts to let alchemical symbolism speak for itself. All authors hack away at alchemy with their own external tools - kabbalah, magic, tarot, new age meditative practices - they don't allow the inner world of alchemical symbolism to speak its own message, but overlay it with their preconceptions.

So if you want to join me on a journey to the heart of alchemical symbolism, you must be prepared to throw off your preconceptions and not bring to your investigation of alchemical symbolism the baggage of a set of ideas external to alchemy. Otherwise you will end up fighting inwardly with what I am trying to present, and you will just end up dissatisfied, and return to your original view of what you want alchemical symbolism to say to you.

What I intend to do in this extensive course is to provide people with some tools for investigating alchemical symbolism. These tools are found in the emblems and symbolism itself. They are not drawn from some external philosophy or spiritual path - but arise from a close study of symbolism in itself. Here I intend only to consider European alchemical symbolism. Those primarily interested in Eastern material will find nothing here to interest them. The course will begin relatively simply but will build to an in-depth consideration of allegories and sequences of alchemical emblems. The early lessons will focus entirely on the symbolic material in emblems.

Each lesson will have some theory and shows ways of working towards understanding some particular facet of alchemical symbolism, and there will also be a series of exercises which must be carried out. It will be pointless just reading the theory. It will only feed some more theoretical interpretations into your brain, which your mind will seize on and

try to reinterpret within your existing set of concepts and preconceptions. If you don't do the exercises you will not learn anything. It will be a pointless waste of your time and eventually after six or ten lessons you will just give up as you will not see the point of anything I am saying. In order for you to understand alchemical symbolism you must be prepared to work with the symbolism yourself and make it part of the vocabulary of your inner world. I cannot do this by exposing you to a few abstract ideas. For this reason the lessons will only be distributed one at a time. If I threw you twenty lessons you would just read it all through and think you understood it, but in reality you will have gained nothing from this. You must always keep in your mind that it is through the exercises that you will gain some understanding of alchemical symbolism. For this reason it will be almost impossible to make this course into a book.

This course will only be available through me as a series of lessons. Originally these were sent by e-mail every two weeks, but now I have placed it onto a CD-Rom which releases the lessons at a two week interval. By signing up for this course you must agree not to distribute this material to anyone else, nor make it available in any form, printed or electronic. This course is copyright by Adam McLean and material from this course cannot and must not be distributed. The course fee is really very modest and should not prevent anyone from joining the course. Distributing the material to others means that it is outside my control and may be misused and distorted. Anyone who distributes this material to anyone else will immediately forfeit their right to receive any of my other courses. It is a matter of trust. I am spending much of my time putting this course together - I really do not want to find it misused, distorted and misappropriated. I apologise for being rather heavy handed here. Most people will automatically respect this, but, it is my experience, regrettably, that some people will promiscuously seize on original ideas, distort them and then publish them as their own. For example, I recently discovered that one of my own hand coloured alchemical paintings had been placed on a web site, without my permission and the user had the brass neck to claim copyright over this image, the original of which is presently on my kitchen wall !

This course will not work as a book. The separate lessons and exercises must be worked through gradually and in sequence. The course is self contained - each lesson having text and images to work with. But if you want to make progress you should gather other material to work with in parallel with the course lessons. You should try and build up your own library of emblems either in the form of books, or photocopies of images, or accessing material on the alchemy web site

<http://www.levity.com/alchemy>

I would certainly recommend you obtain Fabricius' *Alchemy* (but please don't read the text - it is an irrelevant external interpretation of alchemical symbolism) and Roob's *Hermetic Museum* (again the text is really unhelpful - just enjoy the images). There are many other books, Klossowski de Rola's two books, the Opus Magnum Exhibition volume and the Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks are good sources of imagery. There are also some coloured prints available through the alchemy web site, and two CD-Roms of alchemical images (over 500 emblems).

It might also be a good idea to keep a notebook of your work with the exercises and build up your own list of symbols and emblems.

The course will be distributed in the form of Adobe Acrobat files. These are amazingly compact and allow the formatting of text and graphics to be preserved across different computer systems - the same file will work on a Windows PC and a Mac.

I regret I cannot take on personal tuition or help people individually. If difficulties arise for a number of people due to my failure to explain sufficiently a particular point then I will attempt to address this in a future lesson in the series.

### Subsequent courses

The present course is a foundation course, developing people's abilities to read alchemical emblems. I now have a second course on alchemical sequences. This also lasts for one year and works through a number of important alchemical sequences of emblems using the tools we have developed in this foundation course. A third course on alchemical allegories is also being prepared.