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"O WORKE DIUINE": THE ICONOGRAPHY
AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF
ALMA'S HOUSE IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*

"The frame thereof seemd partly circulare,
And part triangulare, O worke diuine;
Those two the first and last proportions are,
The one imperfect, mortall, foeminine;
Th' other immortall, perfect, masculine,
And twixt them both a quadrate was the base
Proportioned equally by seuen and nine;
Nine was the circle set in heuens place,
All which compacted made a goodly diapase."

(II. ix. 22)

I.

The above quoted stanza has been perplexing generations of interpreters since Spenser's contemporaries. In the commentaries of the *Variorum Spenser* the debate is summarized as follows: "Two interpretations have been urged - the mystical, neo-Platonic one, which discerns in the stanza an allegory of the mystical relations of soul and body, form and matter, male and female; and the more literal one, which sees in the stanza only a description of proportions and dimensions of the human body".

The simpler, more literal reading was first put forward by William Austin (1587-1634) a barrister by profession, who was intersted in science and literature as well as in theo-

logy. In his *Haec Homo, Wherein the Excellency of the Creation is described* (1637) he explains the correspondences between the human body and mathematical numbers or geometrical figures illustrating his thesis by quoting Spenser:

"For as all Numers and proportions, for measure are derived from the members, and dimensions of the humane body: so is the body answerable to all proportions, buildings, and figures, that are. Not only answerable (I say) to the whole world, (of which it is an epitome) but, for the most part, to every particular figure, character, building and fabrick, in the World. ...All which discourse concerning the severall proportions of the body, are very elegantly and briefly contracted, by the late dead Spenser, in his everliving Fairy Queen; where, coming to describe the house of Alma, (which, indeed, is no other but the body; the habitation of the Soule), he saith, (quotes *FQ* II.ix.22)"

(Spenser Heritage
1971, 173)

The mystical, neo-Platonic interpretation was established by Sir Kenelm Digby (1603-65), the most exact and probably the best of Spenser's early critics. In 1628 he wrote a letter to Sir Edward Stradling entitled "Observations on the 22. Stanza in the 9th Canto of the 2nd Book of Spencers Faery Queene" (published in 1643) in which he tried to document what he had stated in another of his treatises:

"He had a solide and deepe insight in THEOLOGIE,

PHILOSOPHY (especially the PLATONIKE) and the MATHEMATICALL sciences, and in what others depend of these three ... And where he maketh vse of any of them, it is not by gathering a posie out of others mens workes, but by spending of his own stocke," (*A discourse concerning Edmund Spenser*, MS about 1628, published in Spenser Heritage 1971, 150.)

Digby also sees the stanza as the allegorical description of the human body but he takes into consideration man's soul and all the implications which come from this viewpoint:

"This evident that the Authors intention in this *Canto* is to describe the bodie of a man inform'd with a rationall soul, and in prosecution of that designe he sets down particularly the severall parts of the one and of the other ... as they make one perfect compound"

(Spenser Heritage 1971,
152)

In his detailed analysis Digby speaks about the four elements, the three Paracelsian qualities, the nine angelic hierarchies, the seven planets; concluding that of all God's works Man is the noblest and the most perfect, he is a little world, and of God himself ("O work divine"). Thus Spenser can be found as "a constant disciple of Platoes School" as he speaks about the perfect harmony of the created universe (diapase, or diapaisson) demonstrating this harmony in the human microcosm, for "in Nature there is not to be found

a more compleat and more exact Concordance of all parts, then that which is betweene the compaction and conjunction of the Body and Soul of Man" (*ibid.*, 157)

If we look at the two interpretations we can realize that they are not at all contradictory, rather complementary. Both of them acknowledge certain correspondences between the human body and the universe, the first on the more concrete level in the domain of numbers and proportions, the other referring to less obvious, rather "occult" correspondences, hidden relations of the created world which can be perceived by the mystic, that is intuitive eye. There is one common denominator between the two concepts: both of them recognize certain dialectical opposites in this created world (man / cosmos; mutability / eternity; etc.) still they claim the unity of the whole system. This unity is provided by the unifying plan of the creator and can be recognized by the overall present analogies, correspondences. As Spenser's contemporary, Sir Richard Barckley put into words in his *A Discourse of the Felicitie of Man* (1598):

"The great God of nature hath tyed together all his creations, with some meane things that agree and participate with the extremities, and hath composed the intelligible, ethereall, and elementarie world, by indissoluble meanes and boundes ... between brute beastes, and those of a spirituall essence and understanding, which are the Angels, he hath placed man, which combineth heauen and this elementarie world"

(quoted by Patrides 1973,

The above description as well as Spenser's stanza naturally call to mind the much discussed concept of the pre-scientific world picture about the macro- and microcosms which have been often explained by the metaphors "the scale of nature" or "the great chain of being" (see the basic works of the vast literature on the topic, such as Lovejoy 1936, Conger 1922 and bibliography in Patrides 1973).

This metaphor was an universal commonplace in the literature of late-Renaissance England. Its usage could serve different purposes with different ideological preoccupations. The macrocosm-microcosm analogy could be a didactic aid to explain something about man and nature in a simplified form like the *Homo microcosmus* emblem in Henry Peacham's *Minerva Brittana* (1610, see FIG. 1 /from J. Hollander and F. Kermode, 1973/). In a more complicated approach Sir Walter Raleigh in his *The History of the World* (1614) used a fairly conventional Biblical framework when discussing the man-cosmos relationship:

"Man, thus compounded and formed by God, was an abstract or model, or brief story of the universal, in whom God concluded the creation and work of the world. ... And whereas God created three sorts of living natures, to wit, angelical, rational, and brutal; he vouchsafed unto man both the intellectual of angels, the sensitive of beasts, and the proper rational belonging unto man, and therefore, saith Gregory Nazianzen, *Homo est utriusque naturae vinculum*:

'Man is the bond and chain which ties together both natures' (Book I, Chapter II.v).

A good parallel of Raleigh's basically orthodox approach, taken from the visual arts, can be the diagram of the Scale of Nature in Didacus Valades *Rhetorica christiana* (1579, see FIG. 2 [from Patrides 1973, 436/]). In Raleigh's text, however, we can notice traces tending to a mystical approach akin with that of the neo-Platonists who speak about man's possibility of leaving his place on the Scale and by his free will and intellectual faculty he can move along the Chain upwards to the deity as well as downwards to the elementary, animalistic spheres of life. Ernst Cassirer (1963) considered this notion the greatest achievement of the Renaissance as opposed to the Middle Ages. Even in such a popular version of neo-Platonism like Castiglione's *The Courtier* the thesis is clear. In Sir Thomas Hoby's translation (1554):

"Think now of the shape of man, which may be called a little world, in whom every parcel of his body is seen to be necessarily framed by art and not by hap, and then the form altogether most beautiful. ... Man of nature endowed with reason, placed, as it were, in the middle between those extremities, may through his choice inclining to sense or reaching to understanding, come nigh to the coveting, sometime of the one, sometime of the other part"
(from Book IV).

One of the more scholarly exponents of this approach

among Spenser's contemporaries was John Dee. Accepting the neo-Platonic view of man's special faculties and flexible nature he incorporated into his system the possibility of magical operations - a subject which was unacceptedly radical for the orthodoxy of the age. In his *Mathematicall Praeface* to the 1570 English edition of Euclid's *Elements of Geometrie* Dee describes "anthropographie", the study of man's microcosm as one of the highest degrees among the "artes mathematicall":

"/Anthropographie/ is an Art restored, and of my preferment to your Seruice. I pray you, thinke of it, as of one of the chief pointes, of Human knowledge. Although it be, but now, first Confirmed, with this new name: yet the matter, hath from the beginning, ben in consideration of all perfect Philosophers. Anthropographie, is the description of the Number, Measure, Waight, figure, Situation, and colour of euery diuerse thing, conteyned in the perfect body of MAN: with certain knowledge of the Symmetrie, figure, Waight, Characterization, and due locall motion, of any parcell of the sayd body, assigned: and of Numbers, to the sayd parcell appertayning. If the description of the heuenly part of the world, had a peculiar Art, called *Astronomie*: if the description of the earthly Globe, hath his peculiar arte, called *Geographie*, If the matching of both, hath his peculiar Arte, called *Cosmographie*: which is the description of the whole, and universall frame of the world: Why should not the description of him, who is the Lesse World: and from the beginning, called *Microcosmus*. And for whose sake, and seruice, all

bodily creatures els, were created: Who, also, participateth with Spirites, and Angels: and is made to the Image and similitude of God: haue his peculier Art and be called the *Arte of Artes*"

(c.iii. in Debus 1975).

To strengthen his standpoint Dee refers to Pythagoras, to Durer's *De Symmetriae humani corporis*, to Vitruvius' anthropomorphic theory of architecture, and, last but not least, Agrippa's magic speculations in his *De occulta philosophia*. From his argumentation it is quite clear that Dee understood the macrocosm-microcosm analogy not merely as a metaphor which explains certain correspondences in nature, but rather as a mystical symbol which in itself contains something of the ultimate essence of the world, and its creator. His approach in today's history of ideas is called *hermeticism*. He must have believed in the metaphysical power of this kind of representations, of emblematic signs actually, as can be understood from his earlier work, the *Monas hieroglyphica* (1564) in which he constructed a hieroglyphic monad, a sign consisting of simple geometrical elements (straight line, circle, semi-circle and point), the symbol of Aries from the Zodiac, and the alchemical representation of mercury. All this, framed by an egg-shape (standing for the alchemical vessel) was to express the unity of the world and thus accumulating the magic powers of the universe (see FIG. 3 from Yates, 1964, 338; on Dee cf. Josten 1964; French 1972). By the

17th century such magic emblems became fairly common in hermetic and alchemical literature throughout the process which can be termed as the popularization of secret sciences. These representations are well documented in recently published books (e.g. Klossowski 1973; King 1975; Godwin 1979a and b; etc), as a reminder, let me include here the well-known mystic diagram from the genuinely visual hermetic scholar, Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi historia* (1617, see FIG. 4 from Godwin 1979a, 68).

II.

The previously reviewed examples demonstrated three ways of interpretation of the macrocosm-microcosm analogy - the didactic-conventional, the religious-mystical, the philosophic-metaphysical - from the heritage of the English Renaissance. Spenser's description of Alma's castle, no doubt, belongs to this heritage, the question, however, remains: how deeply philosophical is it, how essential is this emblematic image in the context of the poet's art and world picture?

In quest of the answer it seems to be instructive to bear in mind what E.H. Gombrich wrote about the complementary traditions of symbolic images, prevailing especially in the Renaissance period. According to his crucial study (Gombrich 1972, 123-99) there are three sources of images, namely

EXPERIENCE

(representation
of an object)

CONVENTION

(representation
of an idea -
allegorical)

EXPRESSION

(private symbol-
ism - the artist's
conscious or un-
conscious mind)

The first case is simple and unambiguous: the representation is imitation, the copy of something already physically existing - it is nothing other than primary perception, or sensation. The second two classes contain images which are the products of the intellect, they are transformed or transmitted representations of physical and/or mental sensations. According to their function these mental images can be ascribed to three traditions. As Gombrich says:

"Our attitude towards the image is bound up with our whole idea about the universe" (*ibid.*, 125). The three traditions are the following:

DIDACTIC	REVELATIVE	MAGICAL
(metaphor, the Aristotelian tradition)	(symbolic-intuitive, the Platonic tradition)	(esoteric sign, "powerful", the hermetic trad.)

The didactic metaphor is the *expression* of an idea, the product of intellectual activity, its function is decorative and entertaining, it has to improve the poverty of the language, it possesses a certain explanatory, *illustrative* power in order to make discursive speech clearer. The whole rhetorical (Aristotelian-Ciceronian) tradition of the Renaissance was pursuing this notion. The Platonic tradition, however, attributed a different power to the symbolic image. For the neo-Platonist the image is a *revelation* of something higher, that is a metaphysical truth which cannot be expressed by discursive speech. Consequently, the image is not a product of rational thinking, but of a momentary intuition which all of a sudden enlightens the observer.

As for the gnostic philosopher the idea of wisdom (Sophia) can be seen only in a vision (cf. Spenser's description in *An Hymne of Heavenly Beauty*:

"There in his bosom Sapience doth sit,
The soveraine dearling of the Deity,
Clad like a Queene in royall robes, most fit
For so great powre and peerelesse majesty."

ll. 183-6/)

and as Plotinus plainly said of the higher mode of knowing:

"It must not be thought that in the Intelligible World the gods and the blessed see propositions: everything expressed there is a beautiful image" (*Ennead* V.8; cf. Combrich 1972, 158).

An extreme case of the revelative image is the esoteric sign which has magic power. It does not only symbolize the intuitively perceptible truth but it is a *representation* of the idea (deity, or demon) itself. This is how the medals of zodiacal Decans have healing power in Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*, this is how the magic circle drawn around Faustus compels Mephistophilis to appear, this is how John Dee and his medium, Edward Kelly summoned the dead by the power of a magic seal - at least according to the testimony of their *True and Faithful Relations*... and a 17th century English engraving (FIGS 5 and 6, from King 1975, 104 and Seligmann 1971, 204).

Spenser's description of Alma's house is undoubtedly a symbolic image, in fact a word-emblem, as defined by Peter Daly (1979, 55) but the question is whether it is the

expression, the revelation, or the representation of its idea. In my opinion the problem cannot be solved by trying to assume the author's perspective, as neither Spenser's actual readings, nor his intellectual preoccupations, even less his authorial intention can be reconstructed in its entire authenticity from our present-day situation.

Gombrich classified symbolic images according to the intention of their creators. But we can approach the phenomenon from the other side, from the reader's viewpoint. And then we shall ask if Alma's house *can be interpreted* as a didactic or rather as a revelative image; to be more precise if the wider context of Spenser's art allows this or that type of interpretation.

I am inclined to say that Alma's castle is a revelative word-emblem, under the influence of the hermetic way of thinking. Before the actual interpretation of the following part of this study I am going to argue that Spenser's artistic world and what we know about the author's personality do not exclude the possibility of such a reading. And this is the border-not-to-be-crossed limiting the ambition of the literary critic. Since every great work of art has such a paradoxical nature that needs commentary, still no commentary can fully exhaust the work's meaning.

III.

In common thought "hermeticism" and the "hermetic sciences" are synonymous with the "occult"; that is with

astro-alchemy, magical medicine, primitive rituals, witchcraft, and a set of other supernatural phenomena as well as different parapsychological activities (as an example of this confusion see Shumaker 1972). Before examining the hermetic impact on Spenser's work an accurate definition of hermeticism as distinct from the occult in general is indispensable, in order to avoid the confusion of both terms sometimes found in present-day scholarship. (Cf. a clear exposition of this problem by Clulee 1977, 635, n.11; see also some recent contributions to the interpretation of Renaissance hermeticism: Burke 1974; Rossi 1975; Westman 1977.)

It is well-known, although often overlooked, that the cosmology and the view of nature of pre-17th century philosophy can be termed "occult", or, at least, as having occult elements. From the very medieval concepts of the scale of nature and the corresponding macro- and microcosms to the theories concerning the four elements and the four humours - no matter if Platonic or Aristotelian, even the whole system of Aquinas were abundant in occult sympathies.

However, from this occult-animistic world-view there emerged an easily distinguishable trend of philosophy which put special stress on a "hidden" knowledge (often called "white magic") and on the need for a religious and philosophical reformation achieved by the help of this. Such initiatives were put forward first by the Pythagoreans, and later by the hermetic writers of the Hellenistic period (their works are known as the *Corpus hermeticum*, attributed to the mythical

arch-priest, descendant of the Egyptian god Thot, called Hermes Trismegistos}. During the Middle Ages the memory of hermeticism had been preserved by a few schools of secondary importance like Lullism, while a number of Renaissance philosophers rediscovered the original Hellenistic writings and became fascinated by this way of thinking. Ficino, Pico, Reuchlin, Trithemius, Agrippa, Giorgio, Postel, Dee, Bruno were the greatest representatives of Renaissance hermeticism - up to Spenser's lifetime. (The basic studies on the history of the hermetic tradition - Scott 1925; Festugiere 1950; Kristeller 1956; Walker 1958; Garin 1961; Secret 1964; Yates 1964 - also indicate the complicated cross-currents of Platonism, Plotinism, early Christian influence and hermeticism which nevertheless incorporated non-classical and non-Christian teachings, such as Babylonian philosophy, Egyptian ideas and Jewish gnosticism).

Blossom Feinstein (1968) refers to those features of the hermetic lore which were explicitly non-orthodox if by orthodoxy we understand the Christian and the Christianized classical systems. Feinstein enlists nine features of the hermetic way of expression which can be derived from the Oriental rather than from the Occidental tradition.

Among these are that

- Creation is the result of a cataclysmic, or sexual encounter between at least two major forces. The world is created from preexisting chaos.
- Creation includes elements of the grotesque and the irrational.

- Mutability, darkness, and mud are life-producing.
- Serpents and hybrid creatures are used as symbols of energy, often in a deified form.

The orthodox view sees chaos only as a force of evil, continues Feinstein. Its God, without partner, creates something, from absolutely nothing, in an orderly manner. The world is created just once, and is heading for ultimate dissolution. Separated from God man is essentially worthless, limited like an artist who can only imitate what he sees. Unlike the asexual Creator of the world by word alone, the hermetic God is male and female - the creation is generation from love and desire. Hermetic man is created with love and he is not punished when he wishes to separate from God and work on his own. Thus *Hermetica* retains a singular importance for the adventurous mind - and this was the point that most appealed to Renaissance neo-Platonists providing them with new arguments in working out the doctrine of *superbia*, according to which man can be exalted to the level of divinity.

"An Earthly Man is a Mortal God, and the Heavenly God is an Immortal Man"

(Everard 1650, 40-1)

as we read in the *Divine Pymander*, a thought which was completed by the Renaissance hermetic philosopher, Pico:

"He received man, therefore, as a creature of undetermined nature, and placing him in the middle of the universe, said this to him: 'Neither an established place, nor a form belonging to you alone, nor any special function have We given to you, O Adam, and for this reason, that you may have and possess, according to your desire and judgement, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever functions, you shall desire'"

(*On The Dignity of Man* from Ross 1980, 478)

Naturally, besides the unorthodox features, there was some kinship between the orthodox and hermetic teachings; among other points the creation-myth of the first man, Anthropos, in *Corpus hermeticum* bears some resemblance to the story of Adam from Genesis. This is why it became possible to give a fully Christian interpretation to the hermetic writings which the enthusiastic Renaissance philosophers considered as ancient as the heritage of Moses.

In my opinion the common denominators linking these philosophers are: (1) the notion of the harmonious unity of the world and (2) the ambition to learn about this harmony by means of a reformed theology and philosophy based on the ancient hermetic teachings and the latest results of natural sciences, often called *magia naturalis*. (3) The ultimate goal is to retain the long lost union of mankind and the perfect synthesis between man and the supernatural. Consequently, as hermeticism is characterized by the ambition for harmony, agreement, and fusion of ideas (eclecticism

for its adversaries), this trend is always connected with tolerance.

On returning to Spenser, the first task would be to investigate if there are traces of such a philosophy manifest in his oeuvre. As we know little about his intellectual development and what he read, and as no private correspondence survived him, it is only his scholarly environment that can be examined, and, most important of all, the corpus of his poetical works.

Considering Spenser's intellectual biography we have to mention John Dee who was the most outspoken exponent of hermeticism in Spenser's England. Exploring the secret correspondences of the macro- and microcosms, he represented the scientist-philosopher, while his eirenism mixed with patriotic Protestantism associates him with the religious enthusiasts.

Spenser had access to the ideology of Dee since the poet was associated with the Leicester-circle to which Dee also belonged. Although in Spenser's life this influence cannot be so well documented as in the case of his friend, Sir Philip Sidney, the hints, however, are strong enough. (See Gabriel Harvey's *Letter Book* 1573-80, London, 1884. Cf. also French 1972, 127 and Hamilton 1977, 29.) Apart from Dee, there may have been other sources conveying hermetic teachings at Spenser's disposal, as documented by a great number of Spenser scholars.

The impact of the Astreae-myth on Spenser is obvious and it can be seen along with Dee's British imperialism as a topic common for many Elizabethans, among others Spenser's patron, Sir Walter Raleigh, who was actually one of Dee's more intimate aristocratic acquaintances (cf. Yates 1975, 53-4, 69-74).

A lot of studies demonstrate the presence of the harmony-theory in Spenser's works. Alistair Fowler (1964) argued for intricate numerological patterns in *The Faerie Queene*, and for an astral or planetary pattern in the themes. A. Kent Hieatt (1960) revealed the symbolism of the numbers and their reference to the progress of time in *Epithalamion*. Similarly, Maren Sofie Røstvig (1969) discussed the number symbolism of *The Shepheardes Calender*, using Francesco Giorgios's *De harmonia mundi totius* (1525) and Pierre de la Primaudaye's *The French Academie* (1577) as cipher-keys. Røstvig remarks, that "the tradition represented by these authors should be connected with Augustine, and should be described as syncretistic rather than neo-Platonic. There is no pure neo-Platonism in the Renaissance; neo-Platonic thought is usually presented in a Christian context, the assumption being that Plato, Pythagoras, and the other so-called *prisci theologi* derived their deepest insights from Moses" (*ibid.*, 51). And indeed, Spenser always remained deeply Christian, just like Ficino, Giorgio, or Dee, at the same time, however, it can be suspected that he set out to express ultimate religious truth in a language, in a symbolism which differed from that

of the average Biblical exegesis.

There are also numerous works interpreting Spenser in the context of the Renaissance aesthetical neo-Platonism (Casady 1941; Jayne 1952; Ellrodt 1960; recently: Fowler 1973; Bieman 1977; Burchmore 1981), this being another element associated with hermeticism; just as the Egyptian themes and the influence of Eastern cosmogonies, indicated by another group of scholars (e.g. Fletcher 1971). While Røstvig emphasized the relevance of the Church Fathers - that is the Christian element - in the intellectual horizon of the Renaissance neo-Platonists, Feistein (1968) points at the relevance of the Eastern influence in the Church Fathers' works. He associates the revival of the Eastern lore and the Renaissance revival of the Fathers. "In Latin translations, the early Greek fathers serve as key sources of information on the non-classical cosmogonies and are widely quoted in 16th and 17th century encyclopedic compilations, emblem books, epigrams, bibliographies, political discussions, histories" (*ibid.*, 532, n.6).

In such a context Spenser's interest in numerology becomes more meaningful while the revival of Elizabethan chivalry - so important an element in Spenser's poetry - is more a peculiar manifestation of the modern expansionist spirit than an out-dated relic of the Middle Ages.

IV.

Vincent Hopper (1940), Carrol Camden (1943), and

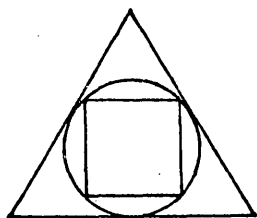
Alistair Fowler (1964) in their elaborated interpretations discussed Alma's house from the viewpoint of architectural and mathematical symbolism. Especially Fowler's analysis (*ibid.*, 260-88) is versatile and rich in quotations from 16th century philosophical and mathematical authorities as well as from classical sources. It is doubtlessly plausible, that there are numerological speculations in the background of Spenser's stanza, still I find Fowler's hypotheses too complicated and too abstract for a poet's mind - even if *poeta doctus* - who works not only on a nine line stanza but on a big scale project of an epic. I think that in poetry it is more convenient to look for the framework or reminiscences of certain philosophical ideas than the scientific tenets themselves. I follow Fowler (and Kenelm Digby) when claiming that Spenser was a poet interested in and influenced by the hermetic philosophy but I also think that one should differentiate between the doctrines of a system of thought and a product of artistic creation.

Frances Yates in her last book associated that emblematic House of Temperance with the threefold world as explained by Agrippa and Giorgio (Yates 1979, 97-8), but unlike in her usual genuine cross-interpretations of texts and illustrations in this case she said: "The actual figure which Spenser is here describing is difficult to determine." Following her path I am going to add to the existing interpretations a few iconographical parallels (in relation to the organic world picture in general, and to hermetic alchemy

in particular) which may illuminate this seemingly obscure image.

In the 1578 French edition of Giorgio's *L'Harmonie du monde* there is a diagram showing three large circles, which stand for the Supercelestial, the Celestial, and the Elemental worlds. This diagram can provide us with a possible key to Spenser's revelative image. Each "world" consists of nine spheres, grouped into triads, thus each world has four levels, or "floors". The basic numbers in the system are consequently 3, 9, and 4 (see FIG. 7 from Yates 1979).

Spenser describes a house "partly circular, part triangular, twixt them both a quadrat was the base". As "twixt" means also "in the midst of two" (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*), we can visualize this geometry as follows:



the interior consists of a quadrat, which represents the four elements, the lowest Elemental World. This is the base of the "scale of nature". Surrounding this there is a triangle, symbolizing the Superce-

lestial World, the angelic hierarchies and the Holy Trinity. The middle circle is the Celestial World, with the seven planets on their circular orbits added to this the sphere of the zodiac and the primum mobile - "Proportioned equally by seven and nine" -; all these convey astral forces from the supercelestial powers to the elemental world.

The House of Temperance represents not only the macro-

cosm, but, first of all, the microcosm that is man's world. The human body consists of four elements and represents four humours, consequently the square stands for the physical components of the human organism. Man's soul copies the divine intellect and it is referred to by the triangle and by the number 3. As Augustine wrote: "Numerus ternarius ad animam pertinet, quaternarius ad corpus". There are three souls in man, just like three persons in the Holy Trinity. The vegetative soul, the sensitive soul, and the rational soul give the three faculties of man: living, seeing, and understanding, as explained in *The courtier*:

"And because in our soul there be three manner ways to know, namely, by sense, reason, and understanding: of sense ariseth appetite or longing, which is common to us with brute beasts; of reason ariseth election or choice, which is proper to man; of understanding, by the which man may be partner with angels, ariseth will."

(Book IV, on Love)

Finally, the circle in relation to the human body stands for the organs - which from the brain, through the sensory system, to the regulators of the lower functions receive the astral stimulæ.

To make all this clear it is worth looking at a 17th century visualization of the organic-hermetic world picture which also dominated 16th century mind, obviously, including Spenser's. An engraving in Tobias Schütz's *Harmonia macrocosmi*

cum microcosmi (1654) shows a human figure standing with stretched arms and legs in a circle. The symbol refers to the correspondences between the human world and the universe through astrological connections. The female figure above Man is Nature and they are chained together as well as Nature and God. On both sides of the emblem two diagrams show the four elements (quadrat) and the three principles of the paracelsian system (triangle). The picture is framed by the portraits of Hermes Trismegistus and Paracelsus, authorities on this interpretation of the universe (see FIG. 8 from Debus 1978, 28).

Similarly to Schütz's diagram, Fludd also put the human figure in a circle which represents the celestial world conveying the zodiacal and planetary forces to the body (FIG. 9 from Godwin 1979, 72).

An illustration from a manuscript (1588) containing the vision of the 15th century English alchemist, Sir George Ripley, shows another aspect of the human microcosm. The three figures are the three manifestations of Anthropos during his transformation: body, soul, and spirit. Under Anthropos there is the dragon of the *prima materia* devouring the poisonous toad whose venom is turned into the miraculous elixir by the end of the process of purgation (FIG. 10 from Jung 1980, 367). As Aeyreneus Philalethes, "Anglus, Cosmopolita" comments on this transmutation (of both matter and the human spirit):

"Thus onely by Decoction these Natures are changed

and altered so wonderfully to this blessed Tincture, which expelleth all Poyson, though it self were a deadly Poyson before the Preparation, yet after it is the Balsam of Nature, expelling all Diseases, and cutting them off as it were with one Hook, all that are accidental to Humane frail Body, which is wonderful" (*Ripley Revived*, 1677, quoted in Klossowski 1973, 30).

Jakob Boehme's emblem, the *Signatura rerum* (1682, see FIG. 11 from Jung 1980, 356) is a more abstract, however clear and compact, summary of all that has been said. The image is to represent the transmutation of metals, the unification of Luna (Moon = silver) with mercury which aims at reaching up to Sol (Sun=gold). The base of the transmutation is silver, represented by a square on the emblem. The intermediary mercury is spherical, divided into eight sections (expressing the balanced nature of the process: "All which compacted made a goodly diapase") while the goal to be achieved is symbolised by a triangle. But Boehme's picture is more than a simple reference to a chemical event. The transmutation takes place in a cosmic setting (the 12 signs of the zodiac and the six planets encircle the diagram of transmutation) while at the base of the picture there is the scheme of the heavenly Jerusalem - square-shape, with 12 gates on its walls and with the Lamb in its centre; this as well as the sign of the cross in the upper corner suggest the message that the *signatura rerum* is not merely the

explanation of certain natural phenomena, but at the same time a program of a universal and revelative kind which identifies the purification of nature with the exaltation of the human soul.

By the help of the described emblematic pictures we can give a fairly certain - although not wholly unambiguous - reading to almost all the elements in Spenser's description. One point, however, still remains obscure.

"The one imperfect, mortall foemine:
Th'other immortall, perfect, masculine."

The problem to be solved first is: which is the "one" and which "th'other"? If we keep the order of the description the "one" will be the circle, that is mortal and feminine. Consequently the triangle should be seen as immortal, perfect, and masculine. Having in mind that nature is usually represented as a womanly figure and to her domain belong the circular spheres of the planets and the "mineralia, vegetabilia et animalia" - we can see the finite, mortal character of this world, properly associated with the circle, just as the human organs, which correspond to the Nature of the macrocosm. On the other hand the immortal and infinite god is designated by a triangle, and so is the human intellect.

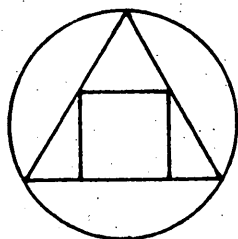
In spite of all this Sir Kenelm Digby gave a different interpretation:

"Mans soul is a Circle, whose circumference is

limited by the true center of it, which is onely God. ... By the Triangular Figure he very aptly designs the body: for as the Circle is of all other Figures the most perfect and most capacious: so the Triangle is the most imperfect, and includes least space. It is the first and lowest of all Figures. ... Mans Body hath all the properties of imperfect matter. And as the feminine Sex is imperfect and receives perfection from the masculine: so doth the Body from the Soul, which to it is in lieu of a male."

(Spenser Heritage 1971, 152-5)

Digby's reading implies a different order of the plane figures. It is the most perfect circle which frames the whole construction, whithin which there is the imperfect triangle, and, "in the midst of two" there is the quadrat, the elements, on which the body, the unit of organism and soul is built:



Actually, there is indeed an iconographical tradition within the hermetic lore which follows this second way of symbolisation. While the first reading could mainly be associated with the hermetic cosmologies, the theories about the scale of nature, this second reading derives from another branch of hidden knowledge, namely alchemy. The plane figures put together in this order show the different stages of the alchemical process from chaos to final perfection. But it should be stressed once again that this process is analogous with the soul's purification, the

intellect's achieving the final understanding, which, in the neo-Platonic sense undoubtedly means intuitive revelation rather than rational thinking. As in the case of Samuel Norton's *Mercurius redivivus* (1630) where the alchemical terminology refers to a mental hermetic transformation: the making of the *homo philosophicus* Mercury (FIG. 12 from Jung 1980, 393). The image shows the tree of life with the venomous toad at the bottom while at the top between the red and white roses there is the crown, symbol of unity. The transformation process is represented as a two- three- and four-fold union of opposites. On the circles: solid and fluid; white, black, and red; Jupiter, Mars, and Venus; water, earth, and fire. Around the triangle: spirit, soul, and body. Within the triangle: heaven, sun, male, and earth, moon, and female. Within the square there are the four elements, together with the figure who represents Mercury (=quicksilver) Anthropos, the *homo philosophicus*; and Christ the religious meaning of Microcosm - all to be transformed into a higher, transcendental substance. (Cf. Jung *ibid.* and Cook 1974, 112).

A fascinating hermetic emblem book, Michael Maier's *Scrutinium chymicum* (1687) shows the same geometrical combination, but mainly concerning the actual chemical procedure:

"Similarly the philosophers maintain that the quadrangle is to be reduced to the triangle, that is to body, spirit, and soul. These three appear in three colours which precede the redness: the body, on earth, in Saturnine blackness; the spirit in lunar whiteness, like water; and the soul, or

air, in solar yellow. Then the triangle will be perfect, but in its turn it must change into a circle, that is into unchangeable redness"

(Emblem XXI, quoted by Jung
1980, 126)

Maier's diagram shows an inner circle in addition: this is the original chaos, the *prima materia* (sometimes symbolized by a dragon, sometimes by a toad) from which the whole process is started. This initial state is a combination of opposites which is represented by the naked couple, that is the presence of different sexes. The result of the transmutation, in contrast, must be homogeneous, a complete synthesis, that is sex-less (see FIG. 13 from Jung, *ibid.*). A similar image in Herbrandt Jamsthaler's *Viatorum spagyricum* (1625) puts the transformation again in a cosmic setting. The male and female human figures are paralleled with the male Sol (sun) and the female Luna (moon). The text accompanying the image is less scholarly - "All things do live in the three / But in the four they merry be" - the meaning, however is highly hermetic. "It is a symbol of the *opus alchymicum* since it breaks down the original chaotic unity into the four elements and then combines them again in a higher unity" - as Jung explains (*op. cit.*, 124, see also FIG. 14).

Comparing the two mystical readings introduced above - (1) Scale of Nature: quadrat-circle-triangle, (2) alchemical transmutation: quadrat-triangle-circle - we can conclude that although they are different they still express the same

approach to the world. They are complementary as the right side and the reverse of the coin. We could notice a similar completion at an earlier point of this essay; between the "literal" and mystical readings of Alma's house: (1) the correspondence between the physical proportions of man's body and the world; (2) the correspondence between man's and the world's existence as micro- and macrocosmic organisms. This duality shows another characteristic feature of the organic way of thinking. The "one" and "th'other" are not fixed, they are interchangeable. Once the circle is masculine and the triangle is feminine only to replace each other for the next occasion. Everything, every personality, every way of existence, every source of occult forces can turn out to be good or bad, mortal or immortal. Just as in hermetic astrology all the signs of the zodiac are blank but every sign has its positive and negative representations in reality. In connection with this we can speak about man's double nature, his possibility to incline to the godly or decline to the beastly. This notion can be found in the texts of Pico and Castiglione quoted but this is what Spenser himself expresses at the beginning of the canto containing the vision of the House of Temperance:

"Of all Gods workes, which do this world adorne,
There is no one more faire and excellent,
Then is mans body both for powre and forme,
Whiles it is kept in sober gouernment;

But none then it, more fowle and indecent,
 Distempred through misrule and passions bace:
 It growes a Monster, and incontinent
 Doth loose his dignitie and natiue grace.
 Behold, who list, both one and other in this place."
 (II.ix.1)

It should be noted that for example A.C. Hamilton (1961, 25-9) interpreted this stanza as a moralizing lesson, in connection with rhetorical dispositions: *confirmatio*, *confutatio*, and *peroratio*. In my opinion such a less mystical reading does not exclude a more hermetic one, especially that hermetic symbolism was also rich in moral meaning while medieval rhetorics was not free from esoteric number symbolism, it is enough to think of the Hellenistic scheme for the divisions of the literary treatise - *poesis*, *poema*, *poeta* - or the seven traditional parts of rhetorical disposition.

For the hermetically oriented mind all this was of secondary importance in the light of the only vital goal and ideal: the ever-hoped-for and never-to-be-discovered "quintessence", the "hermetic Monad", the "One". It also should be remembered that Spenser's poem was written in a period when - in Jocelyn Godwin's words - Soul Alchemy, rather than physical transmutation, became the chief concern of the best alchemists.

Some present-day readers may complain that when the hermetic philosophy itself was so ambiguous and often contradictory then Spenser's description can be at best only

a vague reflection of these philosophical-scientific-mythological-religious speculations. It is certainly true on the level of technical details. It should, however, be acknowledged that Spenser was in the first place a poet, not a philosopher, thus, in accordance with the character of the English Renaissance he was also syncretic, inspired by other concepts than merely the occult philosophy. Nevertheless in his "dark conceits" sometimes I unmistakably feel the inspiration of the hermetic lore. The ambition to ascend and descend through the spheres of the universe, a topic so manifest in the *Fowre Hymnes* as well as in the *Amoretti* sonnets.

Finally one has to face one more objection. The one that Maren-Sofie Røstvig also dealt with and answered as follows: "These /discovered/ structures no doubt provide evidence of Spenser's perfect command of his art, but an increased respect for his craftsmanship cannot affect our emotional response to the poetry. I would nevertheless argue, on the basis of personal experience, that the discovery of the universal level of meaning does affect our response" (*ibid.*, 73).

I fully agree with this opinion and on the basis of my personal experience I believe that such an analysis compels us to confront the fact that though the scholarly exponents of the hermetic tradition are already out of date, forgotten and confined among the requisites of Renaissance curiosity Spenser's poems are still living, possessing their full poetical energy. And this is what can revive

even the anachronistic thoughts. The analysis is necessary to find the borderline beyond which no further analysis can be carried out. There the only possibility is to stop and acknowledge: "O worke diuine!"

FIGURES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Homo microcosmus in Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britannica*.

Fig. 2. The Scale of Nature from Didacus Valades' *Rhetorica Christiana*.

Homo Microcosmus.

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HE ARE what's the reason why a man we call
A little world? and what the wiser ment
By this new name? two lights Celestiall
Arc in his head, as in the Element:
Eke as the wearied Sunne at night is spent,
So seemeth but the life of man a day,
At morn'g hee's borne, at night hee thus away.

Of heate and cold as is the Aire composed,
So likewise man we fee breath's whot and cold,
His bodie's earthy: in his lunge's inclosed,
Remaines the Aire: his braine doth moisture hold,
His heart and liver, doe the heate unfold:
Of Earth, Fire, Water, Man thus framed is,
Of Elements the threefold Qualities.



D d r.

And

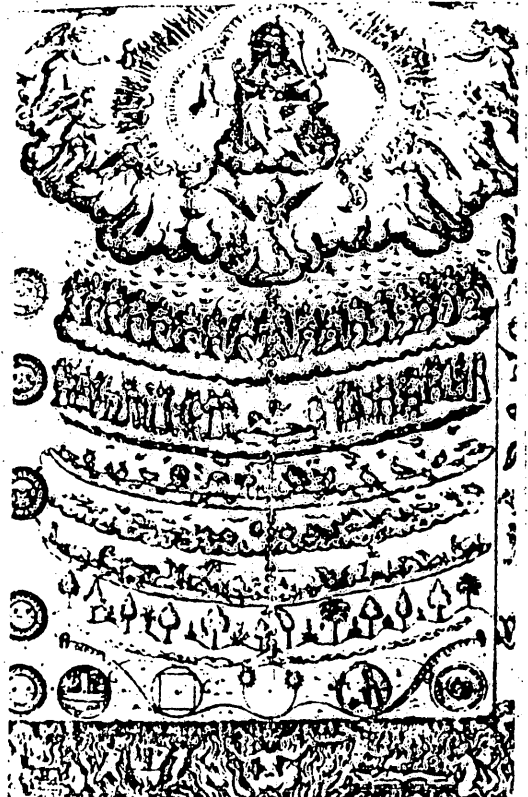
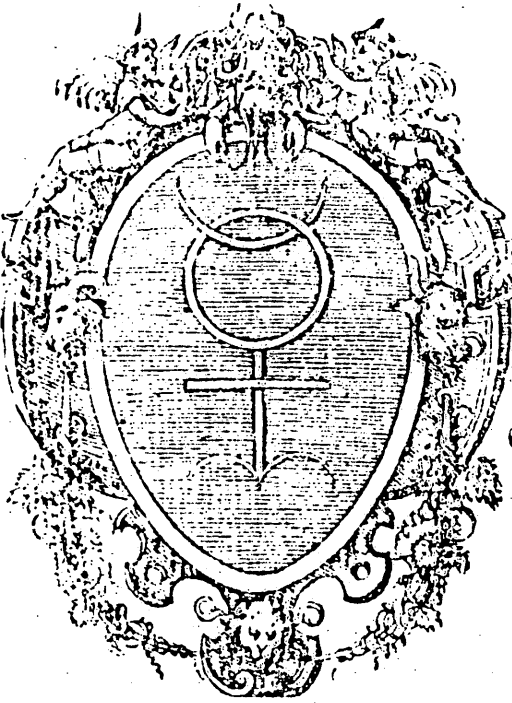


Fig. 3. John Dee's hieroglyphic monad.

Fig. 4. Man and Macrocosm from Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi historia*.



15 (a) The "Monas Hieroglyphica". From the title-page of John Dee, *Monas Hieroglyphica*, Antwerp, 1564 (p. 420, note)



Fig. 5. John Dee's magic seal.

Fig. 6. Dee and Kelly summoning the dead.

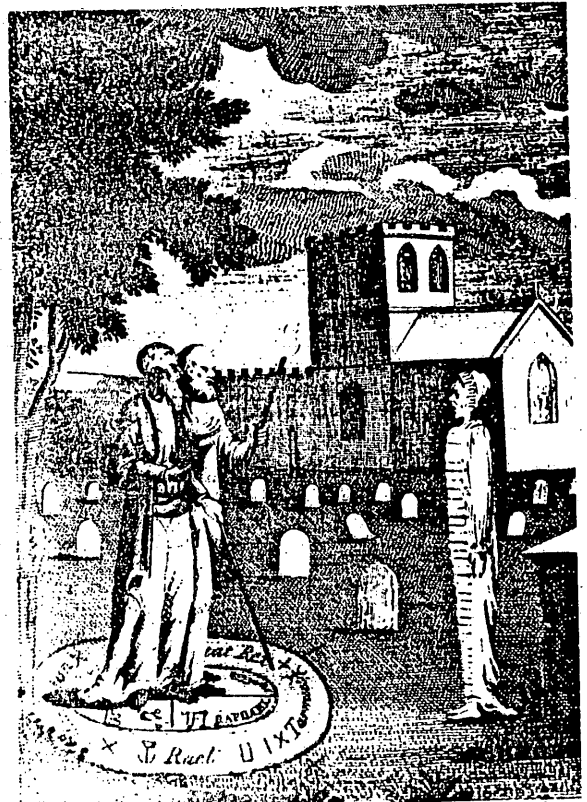
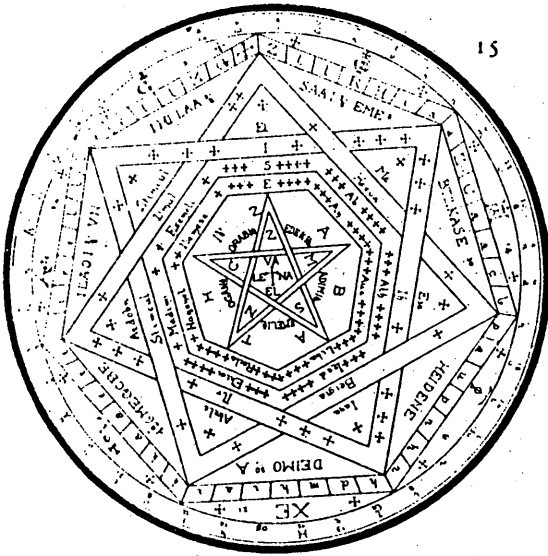


Fig. 7. The three worlds from Giorgio's *L'Harmonie du monde*.

Fig. 8. Microcosm and macrocosm from Schütz's work.

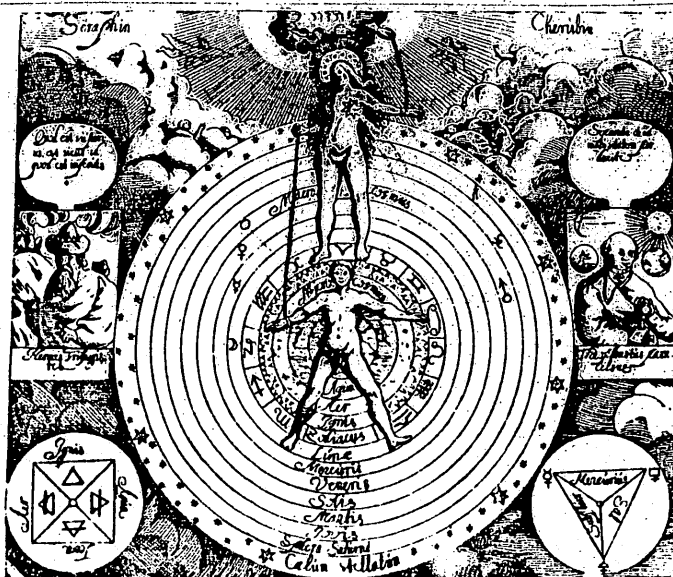
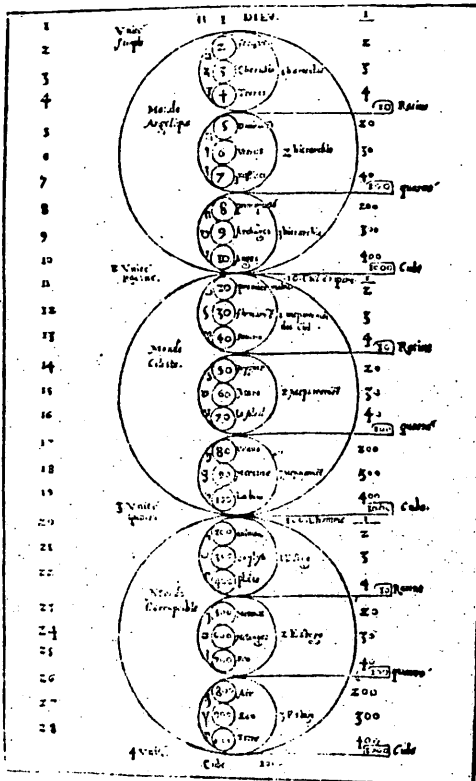


Fig. 9. Microcosm and planetary forces in Fludd's *Historia*.

Fig. 10. Anthropos' transformation by Ripley.

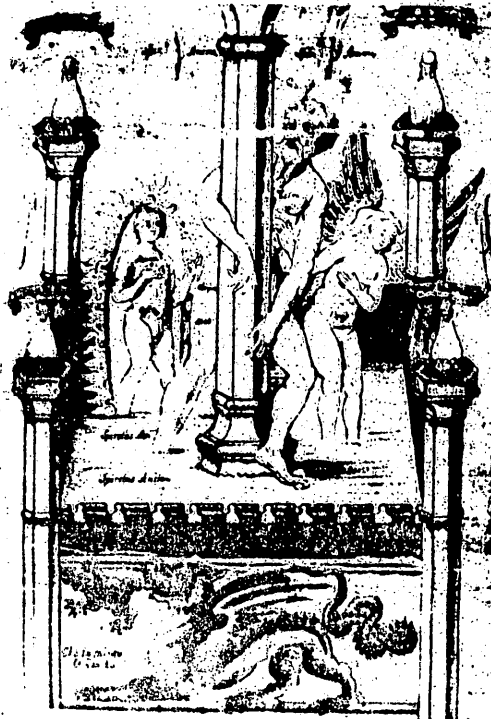
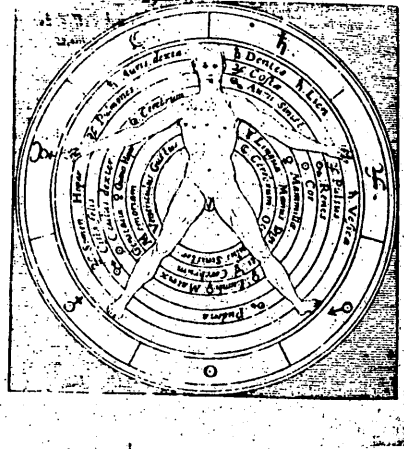
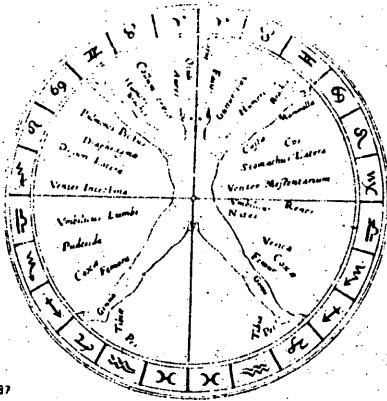


Fig. 11. Boehme's *Signatura rerum*.

Fig. 12. Homo philosophicus in Norton's *Mercurius redivivus*.

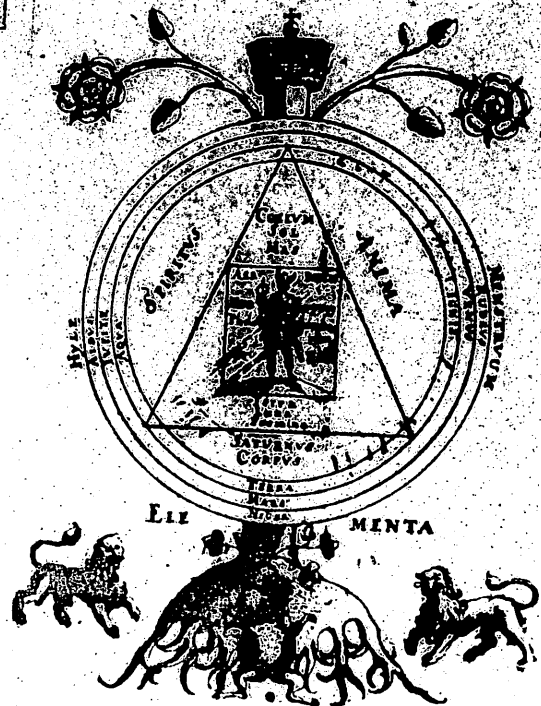
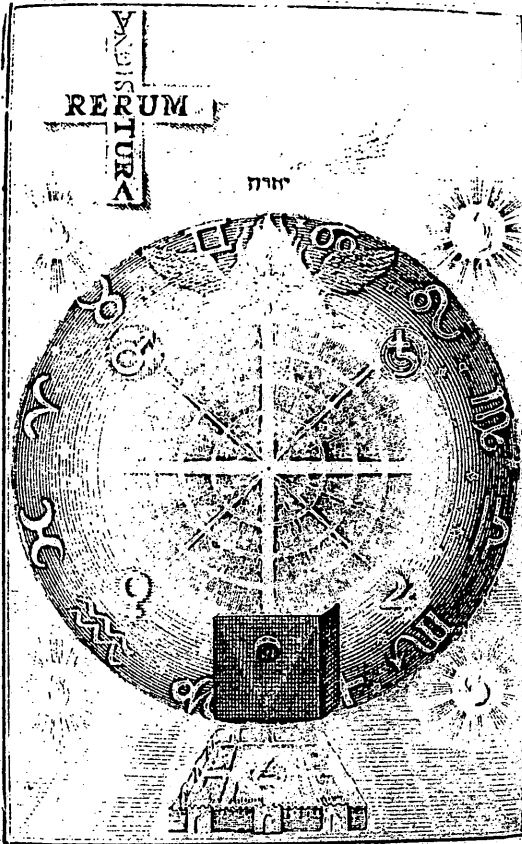
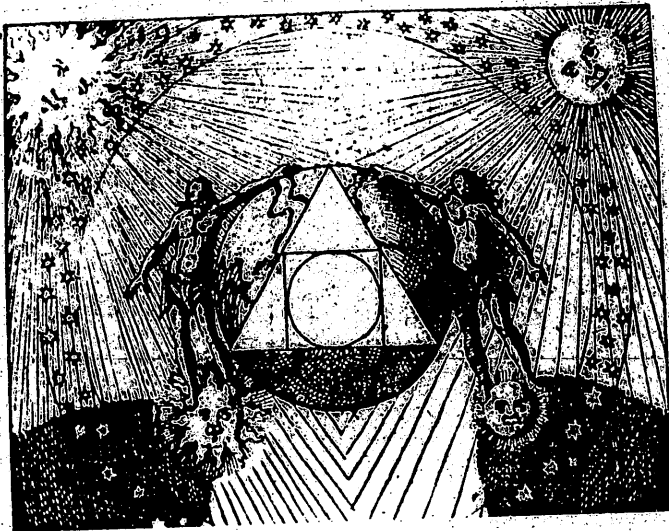


Fig. 13. Squaring the circle from Maier's *Scrutinium chymicum*.

Fig. 14. Squaring the circle from Jamsthaler's *Viatorum spagyricum*.



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