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MICHAEL MAIER'S *ATALANTA FUGIENS*

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In this article, Peter Bindon presents some of the fascinating symbolism and history behind Emblem 21 in Michael Maier's intriguing work, *Atalanta Fugiens*.



In the second volume of *De Alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum*, published in Frankfurt in 1550, an unknown Philosopher says: "Make a round circle of the man and woman, and draw out of it a quadrangle, and out of the quadrangle a triangle, make a round circle and thou shalt have the Stone of the Philosophers." Our illustration demonstrates this statement, but appears as Emblem 21 in Michael Maier's 1618 publication *Atalanta Fugiens*, in English "Atalanta Fleeing." This title refers to the well-known Greek myth, but the myth is poorly integrated with the alchemical iconography so we will ignore the myth itself and concentrate on the illustration and accompanying text that apparently refers directly to the formula given about seventy years previously in *De Alchemia*... (known more familiarly as *Rosarium Philosophorum* or The Rosary of the Philosophers). Although it is illustrated with twenty fascinating woodcuts of alchemical and Rosicrucian interest, it does not depict the theme of our symbol. Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* text accompanying this illustration repeats the quotation from *Rosarium Philosophorum*, and then presents a slightly elaborated version set to music. Maier thus provides us with a meditation in verse and melody that may be used as an inspiration for further contemplation. Recently published multi-media versions of "Atalanta Fugiens" supply recordings of the music for anyone interested. Let us however examine the engraving that accompanies Maier's fugue twenty-one and



try to interpret some of the many layers of meaning in this alchemical illustration.

Maier lived between 1568 and 1622, but published most of his work in the last decade of his life. He had been a physician and private secretary to the Emperor Rudolph II and probably assisted him in collecting items for his museum, one of the first known. Maier had visited England and it is likely that he was some kind of roving ambassador or perhaps a spy for his master in Prague. His publications cover a wide range of subjects and indicate that he had read many earlier books on alchemy and other subjects.

Adam McLean, a contemporary commentator on alchemy and on the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, points out that there are several useful ways in which modern readers can explore alchemy. Two of these are especially relevant to

Rosicrucian students. First, alchemy can be seen as a way of grouping together potent archetypal symbols that students may use as a launching pad from which to begin meditative inner journeys. Second, it may be regarded as an early attempt to record in words and pictures a type of mysticism in which alchemical transformation is an allegory for mystical experiences, and perhaps of religious ideas. I plan to discuss the illustration using a combination of these two viewpoints.

There is no doubt that constantly in alchemical writings we meet images of transformation in which elements, liquids, and people are changed from a lesser to a supposedly greater form. What is not always obvious is that the process of transformation is a metaphor for a journey towards Godhead that is made by those who practice alchemical systems of knowledge. Despite the known capacity for such major change to occur on a spiritual level, anyone who attempts the chemical experiments suggested in alchemical texts must have their level of human arrogance reduced. Following the literal explanations of alchemy inevitably leads to continual failure and one will never transmute humble elements into noble gold. We must look beneath the surface of alchemical writings for their real meanings.

In our illustration, the Philosopher, emblematic of the reader, is busily scribing the final circle around his design, which is set out upon a wall, and one in poor repair. Let us assume that this is a suggestion that we may find some explanation of this illustration in the language of the craft of those who build walls. The wall should perhaps be interpreted as a symbol

of separation dividing off the worldly realms from those of the spirit. An obvious example of this symbol is found in the walls that surround temples, in the fortress-like walls of medieval churches and the like. If not well maintained, cracks appear in this wall, which will ultimately collapse and permit a torrent of diabolical influences to enter. Our Philosopher works on the inner surface of the spiritual wall indicated by



other buildings in the background. As his wall is in disrepair, we understand that the spiritual tablet on which he works remains imperfect. Open as it is to the heavens however, Cosmic influences may yet descend to effect repairs. By this symbol we become aware that there is potential for success in our esoteric exercise unlike the failure that accompanies a literal perspective on the task ahead.

To reinforce this idea, Maier includes a symbol of the union of opposites on the manuscript lying on the ground behind the feet of the Philosopher. In a faint circle we see two interlinked triangles forming a hexagram. These may be symbolic of the alchemical conjunction of male and female that we will discuss later, but in the context of Neoplatonic ideas that influenced Maier,

they are symbolic of the descent of the creative force of the Cosmic that formed the universe and the upward ascension of the creature towards the eternal.

The combination of the two triangles thus emphasizes the twofold process of ascending and descending that will culminate in our linking with Cosmic Consciousness.

In the Western Esoteric Tradition, the compasses held by the Philosopher are used to measure and compare distances. They are usually emblematic of geometry and provide a visual link with Pythagorean mathematics. We also use compasses to construct a perfect circle, and thus they are regarded as symbols of exactness and indicate the necessity for adhering to the strict rules required in achieving one's goal. The large outer circle with its center is an allegory of the whole, circumscribing every part of creation. Traditionally the center of the circle is an allegory for the nature of God or as Rosicrucians say, of the Cosmic. In these symbols we are presented with the goal of our alchemical journey which is finding unity with the Cosmic.

Within the outer circle of our illustration lies a smaller circle containing drawings of a male and a female figure, unmistakable and potent symbols for the union of opposites. We are reminded of Adam and Eve, the primal couple of Creation to whom the biblical authors attributed the commencement of the human race. Let us imagine that these two figures amalgamate, the two forms interpenetrating one another until they form just one existence. Through their union, humanity manifests and begins the alchemical journey that will result in the reunification of individuals with the

creative genius of the Cosmic. Maier's words accompanying the illustration describe this quest in the language of alchemy and in other writings he explains the process in the following way. The alchemical squaring of the circle consists in adding a cross, (lying at the Philosopher's feet), to a microcosmic sphere which is then converted into a square (the four elements), then into a triangle (body, spirit and soul). The triangle finally transforms into the great sphere of the macrocosmic, called the Philosopher's Stone.

For the alchemists there was nothing strange about the squaring of the circle. They used the square derived from the circle to demonstrate that every simple body contained the four elements. How can this be? Imagine the rose at the intersection of the arms of a Rose Cross growing outward until the outer circle of petals reaches the ends of the arms. Use the arms of the cross to divide the circle evenly into four segments. A builder's square, forming one fourth of a circle, lies at the base of



the wall hinting that our interpretations seem correct. Now separate the circular rose into its four segments and rearrange these to form a square that surrounds a circle (formed by the edge of the quartered rose). Collecting the four segments and stacking each segment one on the other combines the four elements into a more or less triangular shape, which now represents the four elements making up the human body. By the transformation of the square into this triangle the alchemists taught that one should bring forth spirit, body, and soul, which appear briefly in their symbolic colors before re-combining into a glowing red sphere (the rose). The body (earth) is assigned the black color of Saturn, to the

spirit (water) is given the whiteness of the moon, and to the soul (air) the pale yellow of the Sun. As the triangle has now attained its highest perfection, it must in its turn change into a circle, colored red like the everlasting fire of the fourth element. Becoming now spherical the final result of the alchemist's efforts, the "soul of the substances," is transmuted into the gold of the Philosopher's Stone.

Using the segment of the circle or protractor at the foot of the wall the philosopher has been checking the drawings on the plans that lie behind him. The segment of a circle is an early form of square, familiar to builders, carpenters, bookbinders, and many other craftspeople. Now philosophically, the square is the equivalent of matter, while the compasses are symbols of the spirit and of its power over matter. By operating with spiritual and material forces the Philosopher suggests that we need to balance these two aspects of existence.

In this case, matter is symbolized by the male figure and spirit, the Biblical breath of God by the female figure. Throughout the transformative operation that has been described, the woman returns into the man (reversing the Biblical imagery), the two individuals becoming a single entity.

It is fascinating to realize that the alchemists of the late Middle Ages understood the necessity for humans to reconcile the two aspects, male and female, contained in every individual. People who acknowledge that their personality is composed of attributes that can be seen as either feminine or masculine, and come to accept these characteristics are made more whole and balanced in their personality. Individuals who have battled with finding their real psychic identity find that they can achieve a new outlook on life after they accept the gifts wrapped in the guise of the opposite gender.

You may wish to ponder further the imagery of our illustration in the light of

two other illuminating artworks. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) made an interesting drawing of a male human figure circumscribed by a circle and enclosed in a square. While this is superficially interpreted as a study in proportions of the human figure, other interpretations are possible. This is especially so as it is known that Leonardo was familiar with occult writings including the strange mixture of Christian ideals and pagan thought known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). A related drawing by William Blake (1757-1827), "The Ancient of Days Measuring Time" depicts him seated on the solar disk and stretching a vast pair of compasses earthwards. In the sense used by these two artists and by the Kabbalists, compasses have been interpreted as images of thought being capable of constructing the many concentric circles of the theoretical world. Readers will be familiar with the many Rosicrucian, Kabbalistic, and alchemical images of the world that make use of this symbolism found in the publication *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians of the 16th and 17th Centuries*.

