

# Harley MS. 3469: *Splendor Solis* or *Splendour of the Sun* – A German Alchemical Manuscript

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*Splendor Solis* oder *Sonnenglanz* is the title of an illuminated manuscript that can rightfully be called one of the principal works of the alchemical tradition (fig. 1). The text survives in many witnesses dating from the early sixteenth to the nineteenth century, of which Harl. MS. 3469 is definitely the most famous and best preserved example. The miniatures of the *Splendor Solis* are doubtless among the most beautiful and best known alchemical images. There are few publications on alchemy that do not reproduce a miniature from this work, and most illustrations come from Harl. MS. 3469; William Butler Yeats praised this manuscript in his *Rosa Alchemica* (1897); for James Joyce it was the inspiration for book I, chapter viii of *Finnegans Wake* (1939); and the famous alchemist and European inventor of porcelain, Johann Friedrich Böttcher, is said to have turned to this manuscript in pursuit of the production of gold: ‘Baron Boetcher of Dresden is said to have transfused many hundredweight of Gold according to the method of this Book – He pursued the art of an Apothecary in Berlin’ (Harl. MS. 3469, later note on f. 1\*v). Last but not least, the *Splendor Solis* is also one of the most famous examples in the Harley Collection which comprises so many other splendid manuscripts. And yet, so much about this work is still unknown and only little critical research has been conducted on it.

In the context of my Ph.D. thesis of 2001, published in 2004, I closely studied manuscripts of the *Splendor Solis* paying particular attention to the earliest one held in the Berlin Collection of Prints and Drawings, the Kupferstichkabinett.<sup>1</sup> And I also had the opportunity to study the Harley copy carefully when I spent a couple of months in London. What follows is a brief outline of the results of my studies with regard to the content, structure, text, and images of the *Splendor Solis*.

Harl. MS. 3469 is a parchment manuscript of forty-eight numbered leaves measuring about 32 x 22.4 cm. There are seventy-two pages with text and twenty-two full-page miniatures in body colours. The provenance of the manuscript is of the highest rank, before it entered the newly founded British Museum as part of the Harley Collection in 1753. It was noted by John Evelyn in his diary on 2 September 1680 that he had seen a manuscript corresponding to the *Splendor Solis* in the library of King Charles II at Whitehall Palace: ‘There is also the Processe of the Philosophie[r]s greate Elixir, represented in divers pieces of incomparable miniature; but the Discourse is in high-Dut[c]h & a MSS:’.<sup>2</sup> The fact that alchemy is also called ‘The Royal Art’ increasingly gains in significance in the context of this specific manuscript.

Bearing in mind that Harl. MS. 3469 is not a unique copy, I will briefly turn to the question of the position of the London copy within the genealogy of the *Splendor Solis*

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<sup>1</sup> Jörg Völlnagel, *Splendor solis oder Sonnenglanz. Studien zu einer alchemistischen Bilderhandschrift* (Munich/Berlin, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1959), p. 691, quoted after Cyril Ernest Wright, *Fontes Harleiani. A Study of the Sources of the Harleian Collection of Manuscripts Preserved in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1972), p. 102.



Fig. 1. *Splendor Solis*, title page. Harl. MS. 3469, f. 1/r.

manuscripts. Today we know six illuminated manuscripts from the sixteenth century; in addition there are a few without images, which will not be taken into consideration here. The earliest witness is the manuscript in the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett (Cod. 78 D 3), dated 1531 and 1532. This is also the original manuscript which formed the basis for later copies.<sup>3</sup> Closely linked are manuscripts in Nuremberg (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 4° Hs. 146 766, dated 1545), Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. allemand 113, dated 1577), London (British Library, Harl. MS. 3469, dated 1582), Kassel (Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, 2° Ms. chem. 21, dated 1588) and another in Berlin at the Staatsbibliothek (Cod. germ. f. 42, undated, around 1600). It was possible to show that the versions in Nuremberg and Kassel are direct copies of the early Berlin manuscript, while the manuscripts in Paris, London and the Berlin Staatsbibliothek can be identified as direct or indirect copies of the Nuremberg manuscript. In this context it is interesting that only some parts of the unusual painted frames of the early Berlin manuscript have been copied into the subsequent versions; mostly, they have been replaced by borders of scattered flowers which, in turn, have been carefully copied from one manuscript to the next (with the exception of Kassel) (figs 2a, 2b).



Fig. 2. *Splendor Solis*, Swamp Man and Angel. Fig. 2a (left): Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (1531/32), f. 16; © bpk – Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. Fig. 2b (right): Harl. MS. 3469, f. 18.

The text of the *Splendor Solis* describes in cryptic language the so-called Royal Art of Alchemy: even though it is commonly known as the art of making gold, for the true alchemist, the production of gold was only a parergon, a symbol. Alchemy was not only aimed at transforming metals of little worth into gold but generally the sublimation and thus the liberation of matter from its base and sickly existence through the process of transmutation. In order to successfully accomplish this transformation, the practising alchemist must undergo a catharsis. The means to perfection is the magical philosopher's

<sup>3</sup> Völlnagel, *Splendor solis*, pp. 135–40.



stone, which can be obtained by those who are initiated, obtained through processes of distillation within a laboratory from primary matter, the so-called *prima materia*. This procedure is based on a view of life that defines a complex relationship between nature and the Royal Art of Alchemy. Nature and art work hand in hand: nature presents the initial situation, the substances and methods of which help to complete and to perfect creation through alchemy, working as a time factor, something that nature could have only done over a very long period of time or not at all.

The name of Salomon Trismosin, who is reputed to have been the teacher of the famous Paracelsus, is often mentioned as the author of the *Splendor Solis*, for example in the Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts of the British Library. This attribution is particularly widespread in the English-speaking world, since the publication of an English translation of the German text of the *Splendor Solis* by the hermeticist Julius Kohn in 1920 (fig. 3). The fact that Salomon Trismosin, whom Kohn calls the author, is a legendary figure with supernatural powers, who is supposed to have lived 150 or even more than 200 years, has done little to refute this attribution.

In fact, the German text of the *Splendor Solis* is based to a large extent on older alchemical texts, most of them from the fifteenth century. Even though the possibility of an earlier, lost version of the *Splendor Solis* from the late fifteenth century is raised in critical discourse now and then, we can, because of the nature of the text, be certain that it was not produced before the 1520s. Indeed, the text of the *Splendor Solis* is based to a considerable degree on the alchemical illuminated manuscript *Aurora Consurgens* from around 1410 that the author of the *Splendor Solis* turned into a new text by a kind of patchwork process. However, the author evidently did not consult one of the Latin versions from the fifteenth century, but rather absorbed a richly illustrated German translation that dates from around 1520 and is today kept in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek (Cod. germ. qu. 848). At the same time, this manuscript also served as inspiration and a model for many of the details within the illustrations of the *Splendor Solis*.<sup>4</sup>

The anonymous author created a new text based on ideas contained in the *Aurora Consurgens*. The close relationship between the two is demonstrated by the fact that at times he reused whole sentences or passages. Seeing that, as I will show below, the painter applied a similar method when dealing with the miniatures, it would seem that a corresponding approach seems to underpin the *Splendor Solis*, the mastermind of which can be assumed to be the *spiritus rector* of the work. There is, however, not the slightest indication as to the identity of this person.

At centre stage are the twenty-two large illustrations of the manuscript that brilliantly depict the fanciful content of the alchemical narrative in opulent colours – well surpassing the expressiveness of the text. Up to and including the fourth tract, the full-page miniatures each follow the text to which they pertain, either a short chapter or individual parts of that chapter: recto and verso in irregular sequence. The miniatures are closely related to the text; they illustrate its ideas as well as the narrative mostly literally. Only in the fourth tract does the painter accompany the rather abstract content with an existing series of images drawn from an astrological context, the motif of the so-called children of the planets, enriched with alchemical details in a second picture plane (fig. 4). In the firmament is the god of the sun in his chariot drawn by two horses. On the ground are his so-called children – rich, happy and sunny figures engaged in sports as well as the pursuits of the aristocracy in a picturesque setting. In the middle, the second picture plane shows the progress of the alchemical creation in the oversized glass phial: here, a mythical creature in the main alchemical colours black, white and red embodies the individual stages of purification.

<sup>4</sup> See Völlnagel, *Splendor solis*, pp. 31–5 (text) and pp. 95–108 (miniatures); cf. also the contributions in the forthcoming commentary volume to the facsimile edition of Harl. MS. 3469 (Barcelona, 2011).

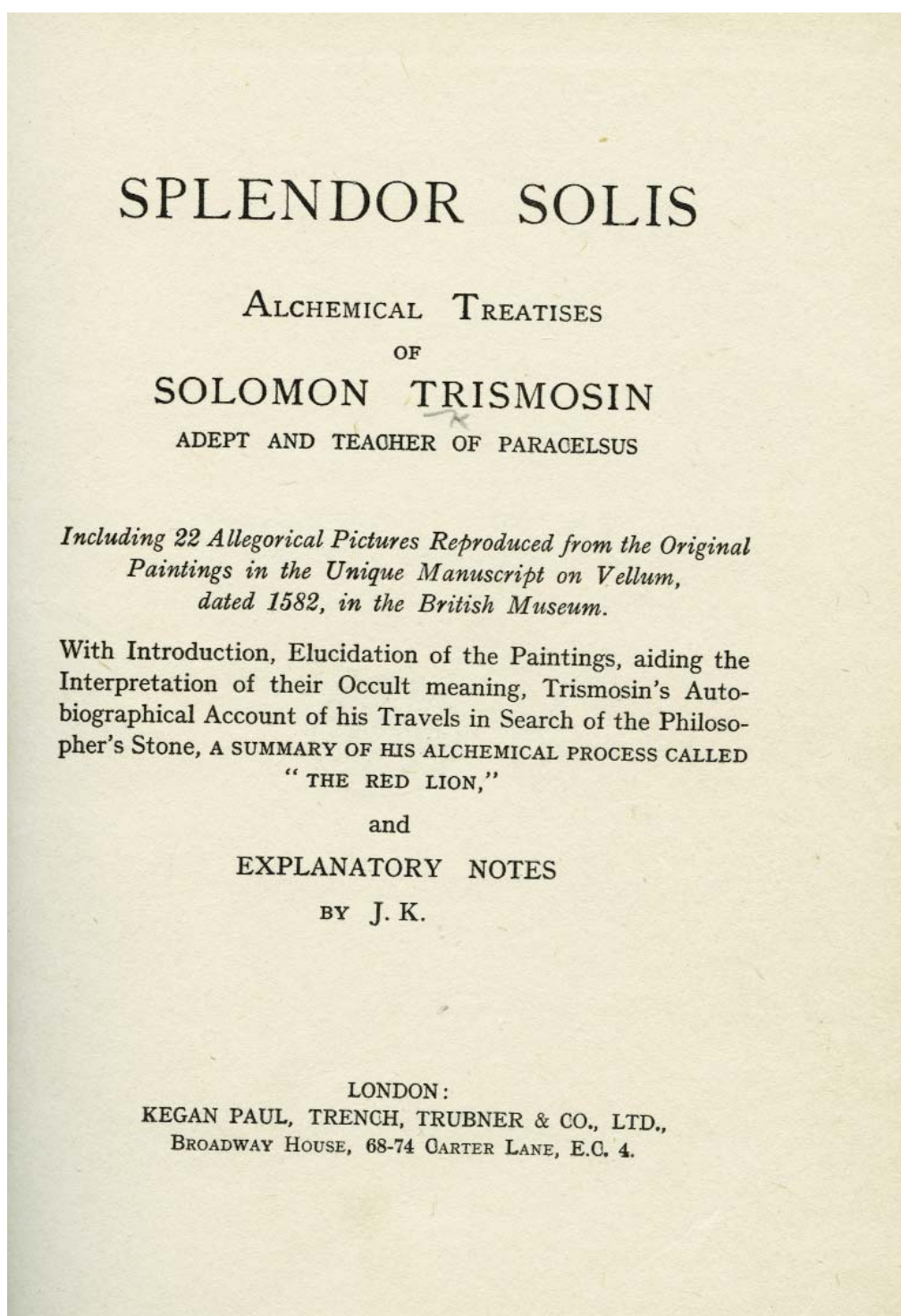


Fig. 3: *Splendor Solis*. *Alchemical Treatises of Solomon Trismosin ... With Introduction ... and Explanatory Notes* By J.K., London (Kegan Paul) [1920].



Fig. 4. *Splendor Solis*: The Children of the Planet Sol. Harl. MS. 3469, f. 26.



The provenance of the twenty-two miniatures of the *Splendor Solis* is nearly as enigmatic as its authorship. Even though the original Berlin manuscript of 1531/32 is very elaborate, opulent and costly, there is not the slightest hint as to the patron of the book. And we are also still not entirely certain who the artist was. In my monograph of 2004, I attribute the miniatures to the Augsburgian painter Jörg Breu the Elder.<sup>5</sup> One important piece of evidence was provided by the bookplate by Jörg Breu (fig. 5), inserted in a very rare example of a missal for the use of Brixen, printed by Jacob von Pforzheim in Basel and published in August 1511, now in the British Library (shelfmark C.35.k.11). Stylistic similarities link the miniatures of the *Splendor Solis* in the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett, here for example the Children's Play (fig. 6), in numerous details to the work of this painter and contradict the previously accepted attribution to Nuremberg and painters like the Glockendon or the Beham.

Moreover, this attribution can be supported by iconographical arguments. For his series of ink drawings of the seven planets and their children from 1510/15, Jörg Breu reverts to models of very different depictions of the motif such as the Florentine series of engravings from the circle of Baccio Baldini as well as interpretations from north of the Alps, which he combines to produce new images of the children of the planets (fig. 7). With regard to the motif of the children of the planets, this procedure is indeed noteworthy. Series like the woodcuts in the planet block books, the Baldini engravings that date back to around 1460, the so-called Florentine copies, which are a few years later, the drawings of the medieval house book, as well as the woodcuts of 1531 by Georg Pencz, can all to a large extent be traced back to one single model of this motif. Only the miniatures of the *Splendor Solis* also feature this method of compilation as seen in the ink drawings of Breu.<sup>6</sup> The programmatic usage of many different images as models that can be found in all of the twenty-two miniatures of the *Splendor Solis* is particularly noticeable in the seven miniatures featuring the children of the planets. Art-historical literature on the subject mostly ascribes them to the woodcuts of Georg Pencz (fig. 8), but the children of the planets of the *Splendor Solis* incorporate numerous further series of the motive; the woodcuts of Georg Pencz from 1531 have become an important element in the argument regarding the date of the *Splendor Solis*, constituting a *terminus post quem*. This procedure for the motif of the children of the planets may thus be considered to be characteristic of the artist Jörg Breu; it serves as an important corroborative argument for the attribution.

With regard to the graphic models, the influence of the *Images of Death* by Hans Holbein the Younger deserve particular attention. Even though they were only published in 1538 in Lyon, they were created between 1524 and 1526 and served as a model for the *Splendor Solis* in various places (fig. 9).<sup>7</sup> It would seem as if the painter had had access to one of the trial prints, and that he borrowed several of the ideas of the images of this important series thus underlining his quest to ennoble himself through reference to famous images and to emphasize the fact that his work was artistically up to date.

The concept that underpins the text as well as the images of the *Splendor Solis* is that of a florilegium. This is particularly noticeable because the miniatures of the *Splendor Solis* are based on images from many of the best known alchemical manuscripts. Illuminated tracts such as the *Donum Dei*, the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, and the *Book of the Holy Trinity* were already in circulation in several copies at this date, and Breu used them for the creation of his miniatures.<sup>8</sup> As I have already mentioned, the *Splendor Solis* shows a strong dependency upon the *Aurora Consurgens*, a work that is not, however, mentioned anywhere in the *Splendor Solis* as its key source. The title of the manuscript, *Splendor Solis* or *Splendour of*

<sup>5</sup> See Völlnagel, *Splendor solis*, pp. 127–33.

<sup>6</sup> See Völlnagel, *Splendor solis*, pp. 87–92.

<sup>7</sup> See Völlnagel, *Splendor solis*, pp. 90–2.

<sup>8</sup> See Völlnagel, *Splendor solis*, pp. 106–8.



Fig. 5. Jörg Breu the Elder, bookplate (1518), British Library, C. 35. K. 11.





Fig. 6. *Splendor Solis*: Children's Play (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, f. 26)  
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Fig. 7. Jörg Breu the Elder, *The Children of the Planet Saturn* (about 1510/15), Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett © bpk - Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.





Fig. 8. Georg Pencz, *The Children of the Planet Saturn* (1531), Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett  
© bpk – Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.





Fig. 9. Hans Holbein the Younger: Images of Death, The Ploughman (1526/38), Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett. © bpk - Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

the Sun, reveals the work's agenda (fig. 10). It is not only that it contains an implicit reference to the *Aurora Consurgens*, the opulence of which is meant to be surpassed, and not only in the title: the rising dawn, in Latin 'aurora consurgens', is followed by the shining sun, 'splendor solis'. In fact, it becomes clear – and this is the message that the mastermind of this work wants to express – that this manuscript has been consciously conceived as the most splendid of all alchemical manuscripts. For the brilliant miniatures, inspired by numerous illustrations from earlier alchemical manuscripts, shine brighter than their predecessors, eclipsing their beauty and opulence. Just as the sun stands at the zenith of the sky, the *Splendor Solis* can rightly be called the climax of alchemical imagery. Later periods did not produce illuminated manuscripts of the same superlative standard, but instead excelled in the graphic illustration of alchemical printed books of prime artistic quality at the beginning of the seventeenth century.



Fig. 10. *Splendor Solis*: The Red Sun or The Sun of Perfection. Harl. MS. 3469, f. 33v.