

What is the Splendor Solis?

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An Introduction to the Splendor Solis



Photo courtesy [Moleiro Editor](#)

The British Library manuscript Harley 3469 – “*Splendor Solis* or the Sun’s Radiance...” – is the most beautiful and well known illuminated alchemical manuscript 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 a – or rather *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 facsimile edition by **M. Moleiro** addresses this longstanding desideratum.



Photo courtesy **Moleiro Editor**

The five contributions assembled in the companion volume of commentaries 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*” 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.

My own contribution to the volume, “The Origins of the *Splendor Solis*”, addresses the fact that the origins of the manuscript Harley 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 original miniatures supported by reliable evidence. The other sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century illuminated copies of the manuscript to have survived besides the Harley MS. 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!

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.

My “Commentaries on 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*.

And finally, Joscelyn Godwin presents us with the first reliable English translation of the Early New High German original text of the Harley 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 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 Moleiro –, 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.