Depicting the Medieval Alchemical Cosmos: 
George Ripley’s *Wheel* of Inferior Astronomy

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**Abstract**
Alchemical images take many forms, from descriptive illustrations of apparatus to complex allegorical schemes that link practical operations to larger cosmological structures. I argue that George Ripley’s famous *Compound of Alchemy* (1471) was intended to be read in light of a circular figure appended to the work: the *Wheel*. In the concentric circles of his “lower Astronomy,” Ripley provided a terrestrial analogue for the planetary spheres: encoding his alchemical ingredients as planets that orbited the earthly elements at the core of the work. The figure alludes to a variety of late medieval alchemical doctrines. Yet the complexity of Ripley’s scheme sometimes frustrated later readers, whose struggles to decode and transcribe the figure left their mark in print and manuscript.

**Keywords**
alchemy, George Ripley, Wheel, *astronomia inferior*, pseudo-Lull, diagrams, alchemical imagery

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Introduction

The heavenly bodies of medieval Aristotelianism moved in circles, incorruptible and immutable. Far below in the terrestrial sphere, European alchemists pursued change. Whether seeking to transmute base metals into silver and gold, or sick bodies into firm and healthy ones, exponents of alchemy sought to achieve remarkable physical transformations, which they sometimes strove to represent in pictorial form. These forms varied, as did the range of alchemical theories and practical procedures that coexisted in late medieval Europe. In this variety, we can witness the efforts of diverse practitioners to represent phenomena inaccessible to the eye alone: the hidden principles and structures of matter, and the means by which these might be manipulated and brought to fruition. Yet one recurring feature of alchemical iconography is its frequent departure from earthly realms, through the evocation of astronomical figures and cosmological schemes.

Alchemical writing often develops the idea of a physical or analogical correspondence between heaven and earth: a relationship most frequently and conveniently expressed by the use of the seven planetary symbols (Sol, Luna, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn) to denote the seven metals (usually gold, silver, quicksilver, copper, iron, tin and lead respectively). Such correspondences need not have immediate practical implications.\(^1\) Rather, the presentation of alchemy as a “terrestrial” or “inferior” analogue to celestial astronomy suggested a framework within which alchemical transmutation was both possible and compatible with an established world view.\(^2\) The description of alchemy as

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\(^2\) On alchemy as astronomia inferior, see Julius Ruska, *Turba Philosophorum: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Alchemie. Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften und der Medizin*, 1 (1931), 80; Telle, “Astrologie und Alchemie,” 238-40; Newman and Grafton, “Introduction,” 18. On these correspondences more generally, see Michela