Evelyn De Morgan’s Female Alchemist in The Love Potion: A Figurehead for the Female Artist
Evelyn De Morgan’s enigmatic Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist allegories are informed by multiple artistic movements.¹ They have been interpreted against a feminist backdrop due to her status as a female artist in Victorian and Edwardian England and her personal engagement with women’s rights. They have also been studied as a pacifist response to the major horror of her time, war, and in the context of spiritualism, which had the most profound impact on her visual language and will provide the starting point for this essay’s argument.²

¹ Her paintings oscillate between late Pre-Raphaelitism, late Romanticism, Victorian Classicism, Aestheticism, Decadence, and Symbolism. For a discussion on the evaluation of her work, see Elise Lawton Smith, Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 13, 54, 203.

designer, ceramist, writer, and son of the spiritualist author Sophia De Morgan,³ were both practicing Spiritualists. In 1909 they anonymously published The Result of an Experiment, the edited automatic writing that resulted from a yearlong investigation into the spirit realm.⁴ The messages received by a potpourri of voices from angels, allegorical impersonations, spirits of deceased friends, family members, and nameless individuals give insight into the De Morgans’ individual approach to art. In this paper I am going to examine two paintings: The Love Potion (Fig. 1) by Evelyn and The Alchemist’s Daughter (Fig. 7) by William. As indicated by the latter’s title, they address the topic of alchemy which, as I argue, can be seen in analogy with spiritualism due to its emphasis on the progress and transformation of the soul. During the Age of Enlightenment, alchemy was stripped from its esoteric pillar. Apart from a few exceptions, practical alchemy had largely been taken up by chemistry in the 19th century.⁵ However, its twin pillar, spiritual alchemy, remained alive. Numerous publications as well as the spiritualist and occultist press confirm this drift towards the spiritual branch of alchemy, which seems in its broadest sense related to spiritualist

notions. Recent research into 19th century spiritualism has hinted at the necessity of investigating the movement’s roots in Western esotericism. Indeed, spiritualism’s well-established connection to Mesmerism, which itself has its roots in the teachings of occult philosophers such as Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim and Paracelsus, gives credence to this link. Having grown up in intellectual households that engaged in occult and secret knowledge, the De Morgans would have come across the ancient hermetic tradition. The paintings that will be analyzed in the following essay serve as evidence for this trend. It is striking that both artists depict an explicitly female alchemist. As I intend

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9 Evelyn’s sister Wilhelmina Stirling published a biography on the artistic couple in 1922. Her record of her childhood gives insight into Evelyn’s versatile education that was in particular encouraged by their mother: “she [their mother] dwelt on the discoveries of astronomy, the grand riddle of the stars which looked like glittering dust strewn over the dome of heaven; the marvels of chemistry, of geology, of the practical application of many recent discoveries.” Anna Maria Diana Wilhelmina Stirling, *William de Morgan and His Wife* (London: Thornton Butterworth Limited, 1922), 144. Yet the source of occult knowledge must be mainly traced back to William’s mother, Sophia De Morgan, herself a spiritualist healer and writer, op. cit. For her intellectual background, see her biography edited by her daughter Mary: Mary A. De Morgan, *Threescore Years and Ten: Reminiscences of the Late Sophia Elizabeth De Morgan* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1895). William’s father was the famous mathematician Augustus De Morgan. In Sophia’s biography, his familiarity with Agrippa is attested; De Morgan, *Threescore Years and Ten*, 127.
to demonstrate, this iconographic formula has no antecedents, which invites reflection upon the De Morgans’ motives for this unusual reversal of a traditionally gendered role.

In *The Love Potion*, a red-haired woman dressed in a golden gown is seated in a richly-decorated study stocked with books, pouring a red liquid into a silver chalice. A black cat is cowering at her feet. Through the open window, a knight in silver armor and a lady in a white gown are caught in a loving embrace and can be discerned on a terrace. At first glance, Evelyn’s painting aligns with the many depictions of witches that populated Victorian and Edwardian art. Particularly from 1860 onwards, fascination with the image of woman-as-witch was increasing. Examples include paintings like Frederick Sandys’s *Medea* (Fig. 2), John Collier’s *An Incantation* (Fig. 3), as well as John William Waterhouse’s *The Magic Circle* (Fig. 4). Early interpretations of *The Love Potion* had a strong impact on how following generations categorized Evelyn’s painting.

Susan P. Casteras has provided an interesting understanding of witches and sorceresses in art. She discusses how their intellectual, psychological, and creative powers are turned into evil and threatening characteristics by the male gaze that fears their rising independence. This is certainly true for *The Love Potion*, yet the woman in the painting cannot be classified as one of those witches that are often associated with the *femme fatale*, as in Collier’s painting, since her physicality is nearly negated by the extensive drapery. I agree with Lawton Smith’s approach. She has identified the woman as a “learned and civilized scholar,” an “alchemist and sorceress,” and has shown that the

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11 One of the earliest reading of this painting is De Morgan’s sister: Anna Maria Diana Wilhelmina Stirling, *Pictures and Statuary: Mrs. Evelyn De Morgan* (London: Privately Printed, 1920), no. 40: “A witch mixing a love-potion to upset the lovers who are seen in the distance.” For a similar reading, see *The De Morgan Foundation at Old Battersea House* (Wandsworth: Wandsworth Borough Council, 1983), 14: “A witch in bright yellow robes is mixing a potion to upset two lovers, who are seen on a terrace in the background. On a shelf by her side are books on black magic, one of which is labelled ‘Paracelsus.’”

12 Susan P. Casteras, “Malleus Malificarum or The Witches’ Hammer: Victorian Visions of Female Sages and Sorceresses,” in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. Thaïs E. Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 142–170. Casteras briefly mentions *The Love Potion* (152); yet she also dismisses the inclusion of Paracelsus’ book as a possibility to rehabilitate the woman’s status and sticks to Stirling’s evaluation of the malevolent quality of the potion. On the image of the learned woman in the 1860s, see also Cherry, *Beyond the Frame*, 159–77.
Fig. 2 Frederick Sandys, *Medea*, 1866–68, oil on wood, 62.2 × 46.3 cm, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (Betty Elzea, ed., Frederick Sandys, 1829–1904: A catalogue raisonné (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors’ Club, 2001), 53, pl. 26.)

Fig. 3 John Collier, *An Incantation*, 1887, oil on canvas, 181.5 × 137.6 cm, Bournemouth, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum (Photo: © Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum)

Fig. 4 John William Waterhouse, *The Magic Circle*, 1886, oil on canvas, 182.9 × 127 cm, Tate Britain (Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 76, fig. 52.)
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painting truly is informed by the visual language of alchemy, upon which I will elaborate. The most curious feature is the row of hermetic literature under the window. From the left to the right the following inscription on the back of the books can be deciphered: “Libri I,” “AZ: opus,” “Orra,” “Artis Magi,” “Iamblicus,” “Agrip. Con. Libri III,” “BEK: Opus XII,” and “Paracelsus.” (Fig. 5)

![Fig. 5 Detail of The Love Potion](image)

Whereas some inscriptions might be classified as mere “filler books,” others refer to various hermetic authors and magical traditions. Lawton Smith has identified the rather cryptic “AZ: opus” as the Azoth, a universal solvent, cure, and the elixir of life. Iamblichus was a Syrian Neoplatonist of the 3rd and 4th century AD who promoted theurgy. "Agrip. Con. Libri III" is clearly meant to be Cornelius Agrippa’s De occulta

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13 Smith, Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, 107.
14 Smith, Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, 221.
15 Gregory Shaw, Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus (University Park: Pennslyvania State University Press, 1995). Sophia De Morgan said to have read Iamblichus: De Morgan, Threescore Years and Ten, 62. The following translation was available by the mid-19th century: Thomas Taylor, trans., Iamblichus on the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians (Chiswick: C. Whittingham, 1821).
philosophia libri tres (1531), a compendium of esoteric wisdom. No particular publication can be deduced from the inscription “Paracelsus,” although Paracelsus was a 16th century physician, alchemist, astrologer, mystic, and philosopher. Still to be questioned are the titles “Orra” and “BEK: Opus XII.” Apart from those concrete literary references, one must pay attention to the painting’s color symbolism.

The alchemical color triad of black, white, and red that hints at the opus magnum’s three stages is presented in a spiraling upward movement, indicating the different stages during the alchemical process. The starting point, the black cat, as a symbol of prime matter in the stage of nigredo, is appropriately positioned on the floor. On the next “level,” on the bench, the white piece of cloth indicates the stage of albedo, and might be an allusion to the alchemical image of the opus mulierum, the woman’s work. This process culminates in the red potion, a symbol of rubedo. The most striking detail is the couple in the background. Unlike traditional interpretations of the couple as

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17 Paracelsus was a prominent historic figure in the 19th century. To be mentioned are for example Robert Browning’s epic poem Paracelsus (1835); Franz Hartmann, The Life and Doctrines of Philippus Theophrastus, Bombast of Hohenheim: Known by the Name of Paracelsus (New York: J. W. Lovell, 1891); and Arthur Edward Waite, ed., The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim, Called Paracelsus the Great, vol. 1, Hermetic Chemistry (London: James Elliott and Co. 1894).

18 Speculating about BEK, I suggest considering the German-Dutch theologian Balthasar Bekker. In a four-volume treatise on witches, Die bezauberte Welt (1693), he speaks against the persecution of witches. In 1695, an English edition was published, The World Bewitch’d, or, An Examination of the Common Opinions Concerning Spirits: Their Nature, Power, Administration and Operations, as also the Effects Men are to Produce by Their Communication (London: Printed for R. Baldwin in Warwick-Lane, 1695).


20 The alleged harbinger of evil that, at first glance, identifies the woman as a witch practicing black magic may also be interpreted against an alchemistic backdrop. In alchemical emblems referring to the opus mulierum, the women’s work, women were quite often accompanied by cats without any reference to black magic. See for example Matthaeus Merian’s engraving for Michael Maier, Atalanta fugiens (Oppenheim: Johann Theodor de Bry, 1618), 97; and woodcut in Johannes Sambucus, Emblemata (Antwerp: Christophe Plantin, 1564), 146 as reproduced in M. E. Warlick, “The Domestic Alchemist: Women as Housewives in Alchemical Emblems,” in Emblems and Alchemy, ed. Alison Adams and Stanton J. Linden (Glasgow: Glasgow Emblem Studies, 1998), 25–47, 35, fig. 5, 37, fig. 6.

the potion’s victims or beneficiaries, I suggest an allegorical and alchemical reading. The view through the window is reminiscent of an illumination in the alchemical manuscript Splendor Solis, namely folio 10 of the Harley manuscript in the British Library (Fig. 6).

Here King Sol and Queen Luna, embodying the polarities of male and female, fire and water, as well as the archetypal alchemical substances sulphur and mercury, are positioned in a similar world landscape at dawn. The time of day indicates the apparition of the philosopher’s stone. They are being joined in the chymical wedding for the philosopher’s child to be received.\(^{22}\) Aptly, the lovers in De Morgan’s painting are positioned

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**Fig. 6** Splendor Solis, fol. 10, “King Sol and Queen Luna,” 1582, Harley 3469, The British Library (Photo: © The British Library)

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\(^{22}\) Quite often the polar qualities are depicted as lovers. cf. Rosarium Philosophorum, 16th century, Ms. Lat. 7171, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. On the origins of nuptial imagery in alchemy, see B.J. Gibbons, Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought: Behmenism and Its Development in England (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76ff.
right above the red potion that consequently becomes the result of their unification. Another similarity between the painting and the illumination is the wooden frieze on the female alchemist’s bench and the grisaille frieze in the frame surrounding King Sol and Queen Luna.\(^{23}\) Even though I cannot provide definite proof that either of the De Morgans had seen the Splendor Solis, it is nevertheless not unlikely, especially since William drew inspiration from medieval bestiary and ornaments and clearly consulted medieval and early modern manuscripts.\(^{24}\)

Evelyn was supposedly inspired by William’s *The Alchemist’s Daughter* (Fig. 7).\(^{25}\) The painting reveals a view into a loggia, which is neither a study nor a traditional alchemical laboratory. Three ornamental pillars separate the interior from a fictive world landscape stocked with alchemical symbols such as the chasing lions, the castle, and the farmer ploughing his field.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{23}\) Unlike in De Morgan’s painting, the scenes are identifiable in the illumination. From the left to the right they show: 1: The battle between Achilles and Hector, 2: Scenes from the life of Alexander the Great, 3: Alexander and Diogenes. cf. Jörg Völlnagel, *Splendor solis oder Sonnenglanz: Studien zu einer alchemistischen Bilderhandschrift* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2004), 67f.

\(^{24}\) The Appendix of Philip Rowland Harris, *A History of the British Museum Library, 1753–1973* (London: British Library, 1998) provides a list of famous holders of reader tickets for the British Library. Unfortunately, the De Morgans are not listed, yet several Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Edward Burne-Jones are among the ticket holders. William Butler Yeats explicitly mentions the *Splendor Solis* in his *Rosa Alchemica*: “The book was written upon vellum, and in beautiful clear letters, interspersed with symbolical pictures and Illuminations, after the manner of the *Splendor Solis,*” cited in Brady J. Peneton, “‘Rosa Alchemica,’ ‘The Tables of the Law,’ and ‘Adoration of the Magi,’ Edited and with An Introduction” (Master’s thesis, Eastern Washington University, 2013), 47. Furthermore, a facsimile edition of the manuscript was prepared to be published in 1920, cf. Solomon Trismosin, *Splendor Solis: Alchemical Treatises of Solomon Trismosin, Adept and Teacher of Paracelsus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1920). Thus, research on the Splendor Solis was carried out towards the end of the century which may have contributed to its renownedness. I am grateful to Claire Wotherspoon of the British Library’s Manuscript Reference Team for her advice.


\(^{26}\) Castles and cities allude to alchemical furnaces that often had a similar shape, cf. M. E. Warlick, “Philosophic Mercury: Evolution of the Alchemical Feminine,” in *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination*, ed. Arthur Versluis, Lee Irwin, John Richards, and Melinda Weinstein (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 67–90, 81. The farmer occurs as in Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, ca. 1560. For an alchemical reading of the painting, see Jacques van Lennep, *Art et
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Fig. 7 William De Morgan, *The Alchemist’s Daughter*, 1872–81 (Stirling, *William De Morgan*, 84–85.)

carved chair is reading from an ancient folio. The fuming bowl placed on a four-footed pedestal separates him from a young red-haired woman dressed in gold who seems to follow his instructions, and who is about to pour the content of a carafe into the bowl. Her attire is reminiscent of the woman in *The Love Potion*. Here too, we find the white piece of cloth, formerly identified as a reference to the *opus mulierum*, placed on the daughter’s lap. It is striking that the title as well as her activity stage the woman as the painting’s protagonist. Evelyn goes a step further and emancipates the woman from her role as daughterly apprentice, presenting her as a fully educated scholar.

27 Interestingly, the alchemist is reminiscent of an adept as depicted in another illumination in the *Splendor Solis*, fol. 4. cf. http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=60590.

28 The woman’s status as daughter is odd. Usually one finds allusions to the sister, the *soror mystica*. Most likely, the term “daughter” rather refers to an ideational kinship, the philosopher’s daughter as apprentice highlighting the intimate relationship between an adept and his student and the secrecy of ancient knowledge that is only passed on to a selected group of people. My considerations are based on the following essay: Penny Bayer, “Madame de la Martinville, Quercitan’s Daughter and the Philosopher’s

alchimie: etude de l’iconographie hermetique et de ses influences (Bruxelles: Éditions Meddens, 1966), 233f. The alchemical quest was compared to agriculture, i.e., nurturing nature in order to harvest metals.
What has been presented as self-evident is in fact an iconographic novelty, as I will briefly outline in the following section. Ever since its origins, women were practicing alchemy, just like the male adepts. The most famous example is Mary the Prophetess who invented several apparatuses and after whom the so-called bain-marie is named. She was also among the first alchemists in antiquity to formulate the gendered qualities of matter: “Combine together the male and the female, and you will find which you seek,” a tenet that is applicable to The Love Potion. However, until recently, female activity has been neglected by history studies. In the visual arts, women in alchemical depictions were usually pressed to the margins. M.E. Warlick has done pioneer work in the investigation of the female in alchemy from an art historical perspective. Whereas Warlick’s major focus lies in alchemical emblems, Elizabeth O’Mahoney has discovered that emblematic alchemical depictions can also be traced in Netherlandish alchemical genre painting of the 16th and 17th century. The female sex is abundant in allegorical depictions, and yet

Stone: Manuscript Representations of Women Alchemists,” in Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture, ed. Kathleen P. Long (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 165–87. Also, the “daughter” might be an allusion to the androgynous nature of the philosopher’s stone. Valentin Andrea and Johann Mylius explicitly mention a female child, in terms of Sophia, wisdom. Thus the daughter can be equated with the stone itself. cf. Lyndy Abraham, A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 148f.


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the independently practicing female alchemist in genre painting will be sought in vain. I have established four categories and contexts in which women are usually depicted in alchemical workshops: women as alchemical allegory, women in the background of the laboratory, women as passive assistants to the male alchemist, and actively participating female alchemists.

As indicated before, the female is an indispensable element when it comes to illustrating abstract alchemical processes. Besides that, the allegory of alchemy is usually depicted as a woman, as for instance in the frontispiece of Thurneysser’s Quinta Essentia (1574) (Fig. 8). Here “Alchimia” is presented in her laboratory among the traditional devices and a furnace.

The subject of the alchemist in his laboratory was highly popular in Netherlandish genre painting of the 16th and 17th century. At that time, many paintings depicting alchemical practices were created. David Teniers the Younger specialized in this genre and produced an immense number of paintings of alchemists, establishing certain formulae that served as templates for other artists. Yet none of them show a practicing woman. Searching for women in such depictions, Warlick refers to the tradition of the “foolish alchemist,” a type of picture in which the alchemical quest is being mocked. Thus the alchemist was often seen as an exemplary emblem of foolishness. Pieter Bruegel’s cartoon-like drawing The Alchemists is exemplary of this type. (Fig. 9) The woman, presumably the alchemist’s wife, is positioned in the middle of the laboratory. However, she remains passive, and rather serves as an ironic commentary on the scene by indicating her empty purse to the beholder. Within this depiction the “Great Work” has failed and resulted in financial ruin, and the “foolish alchemists,” who can be seen through the open window in the background, are condemned to bring their children to an orphanage.

34 On Teniers, see Jane P. Davidson, David Teniers the Younger (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 38–43.
Fig. 8 Thurneysser, *Quinta Essentia*, frontispiece, “Alchimia,” 1574 (Alexandra Lembert and Elmar Schenkel, eds., *The Golden Egg: Alchemy in Art and Literature* (Glienicke: Galda + Wilch Verlag, 2002), 185, fig. 1.)

Fig. 9 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Alchemist*, ca. 1600, copperplate by Philip Galle, 20.3 × 27.3 cm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam. (Roger H. Marijnissen, *Bruegel: Das vollständige Werk* (Köln: Parkland Verlag, 2003), 108.)
Fig. 10 Hendrick Heerschop, *The Alchemist’s Experiment Takes Fire*, 1687, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 57 × 47.5 cm, Chemical Heritage Foundation Collections, Fisher Collection, Philadelphia (Völlnagel, Alchemie, 123, fig. 93.)

Fig. 11 Adriaen van Ostade, *The Alchemist*, 1661, oil on wood, 34 × 45.2 cm, The National Gallery, London (Völlnagel, Alchemie, 123, fig. 92.)
Two further examples to be mentioned are Hendrick Heerschop’s *The Alchemist’s Experiment Takes Fire* (Fig. 10) and Adriaen van Ostade’s *An Alchemist* (Fig. 11). In both cases, the alchemist’s wives are clearly present in the background performing domestic tasks and serve, according to O’Mahoney, as “barometers of the moral condition of the household” and “a self-contained symbol of domesticity.”36 Neither of them takes part in their husbands’ practices.

A closer connection between husband and wife can be found in a group of pictures depicting the woman as alchemical assistant. In the mid-17th century, David III Ryckaert produced several paintings of an elderly couple in front of a furnace (Fig. 12). The woman in these works remains passive. She is reading from a large book, which has been interpreted in two rather contradictory ways: Benedette van Haute clearly identifies it as the Bible.37 The woman must consequently be a moralizing agent who is trying to convert her husband and save him from sacrilege. Warlick and O’Mahoney, however, object to this opinion.38 Since books were common features in alchemists’ workshops, the one depicted might also be an alchemical book containing secret recipes. The situation would be similar to *The Alchemist’s Daughter*, yet with reversely gendered scopes. Of course, the ambiguous interpretation of the book leads to a dilemma, as the role of the women in these paintings cannot be determined conclusively. Still, this is the nearest one can approach the female alchemist in genre art.

Perhaps the most explicit example of male and female collaboration and active female participation can be found in the *Mutus Liber*, the silent or mute book, particularly in plates 5 to 8, 10, 13, and 14 (Fig. 13).39 The couple are possibly an allusion to Nicholas and Pérenelle Flamel, the legendary alchemists who supposedly discovered the philosopher’s stone.40 Unlike in the images shown earlier, the practices carried out are not gendered. There is no hierarchy and man and woman are presented on an equal level. They rather seem to rely on each other and the *opus magnum*’s success is dependent on their mutual assistance.

36 O’Mahoney, “Representations of Gender,” 143. For an emblematical reading of the women in the background, see O’Mahoney’s chapters 1 and 2.
38 Warlick, “Moon Sisters,” 192n31; O’Mahoney, “Representations of Gender,” 162.
Fig. 12 David Ryckaert, *The Alchemist and His Wife in Their Workshop*, 1648, oil on canvas, 66 × 87.5 cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels (van Haute, *David III Ryckaert*, 331, fig. 79.)

As this short outline with representative images suggests, there are neither depictions of autonomously practicing female alchemists, nor is there a distinct iconographic formula of the female alchemist. Thus lacking a visual tradition, the De Morgans’ approach must be seen as innovative. This “new formula” consists of a young red-haired woman in a golden gown who draws her knowledge from hermetic books and is operating with liquids. Unlike the visual tradition that has presented the figure of the alchemist mainly as a negative moral exemplar, the De Morgans elevate her status to the member of an intellectual esoteric elite that can be associated with what O’Mahoney calls the “Chymical Scholar.”

Certainly this type is informed by 19th century depictions of sorceresses; however, the female figure is rehabilitated in the De Morgans’ work through the language of alchemy.

The question remains, why did the De Morgans choose to depict a female alchemist? As mentioned previously, the De Morgans’ spiritualist practices can be brought in line with the 19th century conception of spiritual alchemy, according to which the alchemical quest is what Arthur Edward Waite calls “psycho-chemistry,” which is all about the gradual purification and elevation of the soul. The only difference is that spiritualism projects the attainment of this quest into the afterlife. The alchemists depicted can therefore be viewed as time-transcending figures of identification for 19th century spiritualists. This anachronistic approach also justifies the figure’s sex. Spiritualism served as an arena for female empowerment as Alex Owen has shown.

41 “Paintings of the chymical scholar portray the alchemist removed from the splutter of the spitting furnace, sitting in quiet meditation, surrounded by books and papers [...] Gradually developed into a distinctly formulaic vision of alchemical endeavor, the image of the lone male student gained momentum through the seventeenth century, surviving in bastard form for a further two hundred years.” O’Mahoney, “Representations of Gender,” 77. O’Mahoney correctly refers to the few 19th century depictions of alchemists standing in the same tradition. I would like to add Sir William Fettes Douglas’s The Alchemist, 1855, oil on canvas, 130.7 × 100.3 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. It was bequeathed to the V&A in 1873 and could therefore have inspired the De Morgans. See Ronald Parkinson, Catalogue of British Oil Paintings, 1820–1860 (London: HMSO, 1990), 71–72.

42 Waite, Lives of Alchemystical Philosophers, 36f: “In the facts and possibilities of mesmerism and in the phenomena of ecstatic clairvoyance, in ancient magic and modern spiritualism, in the doctrines and experiences of religious regeneration, we must seek the raison d’être of the sublime dream of psycho-chemistry—that, namely, there is a change, a transmutation, or a new birth possible to embodied man which shall manifestly develop the esoteric potencies of his spiritual being [...]”

43 Alex Owen, The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England (London: Virago Press, 1989). Evelyn showed a preference for strong female individuals carrying out occult practices. See also her paintings Medea (1889) and Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamund (ca. 1903).
Empowerment was also sought by female artists in the Victorian art world that largely excluded or particularly categorized women artists. As a student, Evelyn experienced the difficulties that women had to face when trying to enter a professional artistic career. Later, she and her husband were supporters of Women’s Suffrage and signed the Declaration in Favour of Women’s Suffrage in 1889. Thus the female alchemist must be understood as a visual claim to power through her placement in a formerly strictly male-dominated sphere—which is true for both the female spiritualist and the female artist.

The messages the De Morgans received from two angels, which they published in *The Result of an Experiment*, allow one to examine their theoretical reflections on the function and purpose of art. Art is described as fostering harmony. A passage reads as follows:

You are not to think that the only reason for doing Art is to make life beautiful. The reality it teaches is true as well as beautiful [...] I think the best thing to strive for is the realization that Art should be Harmony. The second thing to grasp is that Harmony is the creative force, and Discord the power of dissolution [...] Out of Harmony comes growth. Out of Discord death and destruction [...] 45

For Evelyn, spiritualism and art production are inseparably intertwined. Her role of the medium and that of the artist are thus being conflated and can allegorically be joined in the figure of the alchemist and sorceress. William’s artistic approach, as described in a passage in his biography, is indeed somewhat alchemical and may have contributed to the artist’s self-perception as a modern alchemist:


44 On the sexual difference and female public presence in the Victorian art world, see Cherry, *Painting Women*, chapters 4 and 5.

45 *The Result of an Experiment*, 78.

46 Art production itself can be seen as a kind of alchemy, a topos emphasized by a figure already mentioned: Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub and Norbert Miller, *Kunst und Magie: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Hamburg: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1991), 259–74.
these [paintings] were principally done with the object of experimenting in pigments—to test some novel chemical process which often resulted in peculiar brilliance and beauty of coloring […] Of these the “Alchemist’s Daughter” was one of the most successful […] 47

William possessed chemical knowledge that he applied to mixing paints. He invented a technique, which he mysteriously called “the process,” a technique that Evelyn employed as well. 48 Casteras has briefly hinted at the possibility of interpreting the sorceress in art as “an archetypal image of the artist.” 49 I argue that this is the case in The Love Potion. From this interpretation results a triadic relationship between spiritualism, alchemy, and art production. Evelyn’s spiritualist-artistic quest for harmony can be seen in analogy with the alchemical opus attained in the reunification of opposites, as indicated by the chymical wedding that is aptly illustrated in the background of her painting.

In conclusion, it must be said that the new iconographic formula of the female alchemist proves to be a fruitful tertium comparationis for the 19th century female spiritualist and artist. Placing the woman in a decidedly male environment and stripping her of the traditional denigrating allusions to black magic, Evelyn sheds light on the female potential to question and overcome existing ideological and social norms. The female alchemist is the archetype of the learned woman and, as I have demonstrated, also the artist. She thus becomes a figurehead for female emancipation in the art world and society in general.

47 Stirling, William de Morgan, 83f.
48 Evelyn, however, only applied this technique twice as the colors took too long to dry: The Soul’s Prison House (1880–88) and Clytie (1887). I am grateful to Claire Longworth, curator of The De Morgan Foundation, for drawing my attention to this aspect.
49 Casteras, “Malleus Malificarum,” 170n12.
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