

## MYTH AS SPIRITUAL ALLEGORY IN THE ART OF EVELYN DE MORGAN

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The majority of Evelyn Pickering De Morgan's mature works are allegorical, the figures being unrelated to identifiable literary sources and referring instead to such general spiritualist themes as the imprisonment of the soul within the body, the materialism of earthly existence, and the progress of the spirit towards divine light. But she also depicted a number of subjects in the traditional art-historical category of history painting, including those derived from classical mythology. By choosing these subjects, especially in the early stages of her career, she was making a clear statement about her abilities and aspirations as a professional artist, since history painting was considered the most difficult, and thus the most prestigious, category in the visual arts. As I analyze in this essay four paintings from different stages of her career, I shall reveal that even in seemingly straightforward illustrations of Greco-Roman myths she renegotiated the meaning of the classical narratives by focusing on female protagonists as agents of spiritual transformation. Each painting can be seen as operating on two levels, both as an illustration of a specific mythological character--Harmonia, a dryad, Flora, and Demeter – and as spiritual allegory. De Morgan's work is thus clearly distinguishable in its coherent, well-developed, and finely-tuned spiritualist agenda from that of her late Pre-Raphaelite, Aesthetic, and Symbolist peers (although she has often been dismissed as simply a follower of Edward Burne-Jones, G. F. Watts, or her uncle J. R. Spencer Stanhope).

The perceived superiority of history painting, especially mythological subjects, was based in part on the fact that education of a certain kind was required, and that education was traditionally seen as a male prerogative. Training in the classics, as well as extensive experience with more recent European literature, was considered the basic foundation of such a career, coupled with the kind of academic education in the arts that included years of drawing from the model, both draped and nude. The young Evelyn was fortunate to have had the same education at home as her brothers received, learning Greek and Latin as well as French, German, and Italian, and reading classical mythology and literature. Her persistence brought her the