

JUDY OBERHAUSEN

## Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and Spiritualism: An Interpretive Link

Despite the intense interest in Victorian art in the past thirty years, there has not been a comprehensive study of the career and work of the ambitious painter Mary Evelyn Pickering De Morgan (1855-1919). The De Morgan Foundation in London, established in 1968 according to the will of the artist's sister Anna Maria Wilhelmina Pickering Stirling (1865-1965), owns a treasure trove of approximately sixty paintings and over 300 drawings by Evelyn De Morgan (Wandsworth Borough Council, 5-6). It has recently redoubled its effort to support research by a group of American and British scholars that will provide an assessment of the scope of the artist's work.<sup>1</sup> This recent research has revealed, among other things, an important interpretive link between the artist's work and the nineteenth-century theosophical movement of Spiritualism that prompts a re-appraisal of the view that De Morgan was merely a late Pre-Raphaelite, whose ideas and artistic style were derivative and out of step with her times. A more accurate picture emerges of an artist who responded sharply to many of the major moral and intellectual issues of her time: materialism, spiritualism, religious doubt, and warfare. While working within the stylistic framework of late nineteenth-century literary and allegorical painting, De Morgan demonstrated originality in fashioning a response to contemporary issues that was based upon her own strongly held spiritual belief system. This belief system was forged not only from her study of mythology, the classics, and visionary literature, but also by her lengthy involvement with Spiritualism and its practices. While it was common for prominent nineteenth-century writers to record their reactions to Spiritualism in their work,<sup>2</sup> there seem to have been few visual artists to do so in an explicit way.<sup>3</sup> Evelyn De Morgan, however, left a rich legacy of symbolist works documenting her own spiritual and aesthetic

quest and providing new evidence of Spiritualism's influence on the nineteenth-century artistic community.

Despite initial parental disapproval of her chosen career, Evelyn De Morgan was a woman who had many advantages: an aristocratic upbringing in London; an excellent home education; training at the Slade School of Art under Edward J. Poynter; the moral support and aesthetic mentoring of her uncle John Roddam Spencer-Stanhope; travel and study in Italy; early exhibition success at the Grosvenor Gallery; and last, but not least, a happy and mutually supportive marriage to fellow artist William De Morgan (1839-1917) (Stirling, *W. D. M. and his Wife*, 144-52; 173-96). These advantages, when combined with De Morgan's prodigious talent and early decision to devote her life to art, created an artistic temperament that was confident and not easily deterred by obstacles or critical indifference. After leaving the Slade in 1875 to pursue an independent course of study in Italy, she returned to London in 1877 to begin her career as an active painter and exhibitor (Stirling, *W. D. M. and his Wife*, 180-93). After her marriage to William De Morgan in 1887, she provided financial and moral support for his precarious pottery business. Furthermore, in the interest of his health, she willingly accompanied him on extended stays in Florence every winter from 1893 until 1914 (Stirling, *W. D. M. and his Wife*, 204-17; 350). Though she continued to exhibit and cultivate patrons during this period, these distractions and her social reticence may have isolated De Morgan from the London art world and greater public and critical acclaim. On the other hand, the social and professional isolation of these years seems to have provided a crucible for the contemplation of intellectual and spiritual ideas that found expression in her paintings.