AN ANDROGYNOUS ALLIANCE

Evelyn De Morgan and 'The Little Mermaid'

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ABSTRACT: Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919) was a second wave Pre-Raphaelite artist, best known for her large-scale paintings of female figures. In this article, I conduct a detailed study of her androgynous mermaid triptych based upon Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' (1837), taking into account the artist's biographical influences, as well as the cultural significance of the story itself. The three oil paintings, namely 'The Little Sea Maid' (1886), 'The Sea Maidens' (1888) and 'Daughters of The Mist' (1914), depict three different scenes in the tale, from the mermaid's transition into human form, to her sisters' plea for her to return to sea, to her eventual death and absorption into a purgatory-like state. I argue that these three paintings act both as a vehicle through which to support the ongoing fight for women's rights, and as a symbol for De Morgan's concept of theistic evolution. These two motives have been identified separately in the limited scholarship on these works, but the possibility that both exist simultaneously is as yet unexplored.

KEYWORDS: Mermaid, Evelyn De Morgan, Hans Christian Andersen, androgyny

De Morgan, Andersen and the Androgynous Mermaid

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, second-wave English Pre-Raphaelite artist Evelyn De Morgan (1855-1919) produced a richly symbolic and multi-dimensional triptych based upon Hans Christian Andersen's popular fairy tale 'The Little Mermaid' (1837). She used the three images – namely 'The Little Sea Maid' (1886), 'The Sea Maidens' (1888) and 'Daughters of The Mist' (1914) – to support the suffrage movement through highlighting Victorian female oppression and to put forward her own sophisticated ideas on theistic evolution and spiritualism. I intend to assess the reasons why De Morgan selected the mermaid as the vessel through which to present her sentiments and beliefs, and how these oil paintings work together to reflect her concept of theistic evolution, which was heavily inspired by the writings of her mother-in-law Sophia De Morgan. With the exception of Elise Lawton Smith and more recently Lucy Ella Rose, who produced extended discussions, analyses of these paintings have generally been fleeting, or only conducted in relation to several other works by De Morgan and her contemporaries. There is also very little on the relationship between the works and the story itself. To rectify this I am looking to expand the lens to look at the background and influences of De Morgan, and Andersen's fairy tale, in order to discover how and why the works of these two influential figures became a united force in the late 19th century.

De Morgan defied convention both in her life and in her art. Like her mermaid figures, she chose to adopt an androgynous appearance and character, demonstrating her distaste for conventional gender roles. She was involved in controversial endeavours, such as the spiritualist subculture and the suffrage movement, both of which advocated gender equality and counter-normative expression. She shunned the conventions of femininity, both in appearance and behaviour, donning masculine clothing and opting to be known by her gender ambiguous middle name 'Evelyn' rather than her first name 'Mary'. She was determined to demonstrate that she was on an equal plane to her male competitors, and mimicked them in dress, behaviour and even speech. In an obituary written by her close friend May Morris in 1922, she is described as possessing "masculine bonhomie… with a man's intelligence and something of a man's outlook" (1922, p. 17). She wished to cast off any links to "young-ladyism", and continually rejected her mother's relentless attempts to have her presented at court, writing "I'll go to the drawing room if you like… but if I go, I'll kick the Queen!" (Stirling, 1922, p. 180). Lucy Ella Rose refers to "Evelyn's subversive position as a Victorian masculine woman" and suggests that it made those around her rather uncomfortable, by forcing them to "reconsider… most basic assumptions about the functions, forms and representations of gender" (2019, p. 73). However, she found herself accepted by London's unconventional circle of Pre-Raphaelites and their associates, developing friendships with Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones, William, Jane and May Morris, and Rudyard Kipling and his sister Alice Fleming, among others. Many of these friends were members of the 'Swinburne School' – a radical group of artists and writers who championed masculine femininity and feminine masculinity, named so after Algernon Charles' Swinburne's ode to an androgynous statue 'Hermaphroditus' (1863). It therefore comes as no surprise that, like that of Edward Burne-Jones and his circle, her artwork is littered with androgynous figures; she shunned Victorian gender stereotypes, advocating self-expression and attempting to escape the strict bonds of gender binaries.

There are several motivators that may have spurred De Morgan to harness the power of the mermaid. The resurgence of mermaids, sirens, nymphs and nereids in the art and literature of the late Victorian era was a product of a range of complex societal issues, from a collective post-Darwin awareness of humanity's relationship with animals resulting in a new obsession with human-animal hybrids, to the disruption of fixed gender dichotomies and the subsequent emergence of the 'New Woman', to a cultural fear of sexual deviance brought about by the spread of venereal disease.[1] Despite the depiction of a host of different mythological water-women in the 19th century, under numerous titles, the physical features of each were fairly indistinguishable: by the late Victorian era, the Greek, Roman and Egyptian legends of sirens, mermaids, nymphs, naiads and nereids in art had merged into one seductive and frequently fatal entity.[2] Sometimes she was equipped with a fish tail, sometimes human legs and, occasionally, with bird wings or hair comprised of snakes and eels. Some, as in the case of French artist Adolphe Lalyre, were not grounded in a specific tale or legend at all, but were merely "personal fantasy figures … of the artist's imagination" (Butkus, Fleury & Raolux, 2018, p. 119). Attempts to identify one from the other were thus futile, and Emily Alder suggests that such ambiguity was deliberate (2018, p. 88). We are not supposed to understand these creatures, for doing so

[1] Grosz (2020) and Rasmussen (2001) explore the post-Darwin attitude to animals and the emergence of human-animal hybrids. For further information on mermaids and the New Woman see Rose (2019). For an in-depth analysis of the relationship between women, water and prostitution see Gates (1988), and for venereal disease statistics see Acton (1857).

[2] For more information on the mermaid and siren as femme fatale, see Phillpotts (1980) and Lao (1999).

would detract from their symbolic power as representatives of the unknowable: the rising modern woman, the gender non-conforming individual, the force of female sexuality. Other Pre-Raphaelite artists such as John William Waterhouse, Frederick Leighton and Edward Burne-Jones addressed these perceived menaces by depicting the mermaid frequently as a 'femme fatale' – a monstrous female entity, who, as Isabella Luta explains in relation to Waterhouse's work, embodies "anxieties about women's sexuality and how it may be conceptualised as a threat"(2018, p. 127). In Europe too, symbolist painters such as Arnold Böchlin and Edvard Munch highlighted the sexual and dangerous nature of the sea-dwelling women of mythology.[3]

De Morgan strayed from this stereotype – she used the mermaid in a different way to indicate that the powerful woman is not necessarily a threat, but an asset. Mermaids, as androgynous mythological figures with attributes of both genders and of neither, were the perfect vessels through which to support the suffrage movement and non-conforming gender identities. One of the reasons for this is to do with their reproductive self-sufficiency. As Beatrice Laurent explained in her essay 'Monster or Missing Link? The Mermaid and the Victorian Imagination' (2017), there was much scientific interest in the potential for mermaid fertility in the mid to late 19th century. Some came to the conclusion that, if mermaids were fertile, they must be able to reproduce alone: "Punch [a popular Victorian magazine]… described the mermaid as 'a pneumono-branchiate animal that, as there are no males, constitutes an instance of true parthenogenesis'"(2017, p. 8-9). Parthenogenesis was a recently discovered phenomenon, whereby certain animals could reproduce asexually by producing an embryo that did not need to be fertilised. An alternative theory was that mermaids could not reproduce at all. Thomas Henry Huxley, who was researching the issue of the conception and reproduction of hybrids and mongrels, which at the time was a subject "at the core of scientific enquiry", concluded that mermaids were infertile (2017, p. 10). Mongrels were "crosses between distinct races" within the same species, whilst hybrids were "crosses between distinct species"(2017, p. 10). Mermaids, as presumably crosses between humans and fish, "would have to enter the category of hybrids – an aquatic version of the mule – and could not be fertile. Mermaid babies… were therefore purely fictional" (2017, p. 10). What these two Victorian mermaid reproduction theories have in common is that in neither case does the mermaid engage in sexual relations. They either reproduce without a partner, or do not reproduce at all, making them entirely asexual beings. The mermaid is therefore the ideal symbol for the fight for women's rights: they are entirely self-sufficient, strong, virile, women, who are capable of undertaking the role of men and the role of women simultaneously. They do not exist merely for the pleasure of men.

In the case of Andersen's little mermaid story, they do not pose any conflict or threat to the world of men either. Unlike the classic, 'femme fatale' Pre-Raphaelite mermaids, this sympathetic fairy tale character is a powerful yet kind-hearted, harmless creature, who spreads joy across the human world in her eventual purgatory. There is evidence to suggest that Evelyn De Morgan was very drawn to this unlikely heroine from an early age. In the De Morgan Foundation London archives, I came across a notebook containing works she had produced between 1868 and 1869, when she would have been 12 to 13 years old. It was entitled 'The Child's Own Book of Fairy Tales' (see Figure 1), and within it,

[3] For a discussion of Frederick Leighton's siren works as representations of femmes fatale see Hammerschlag, (2015), and for an analysis of the mermaids of Edward Burne-Jones see Kestner, (1984). Laurent (2021) offers an excellent overview of 19th century artists who specialised in mermaids and sirens as femmes fatale, as does Nead (1982).

alongside sea-themed poetry, she had started a short story (Figure 2), the beginning of which very closely resembles the beginning of Andersen's tale:

> *In the ocean, the monarch of the deep held his Royal Court. In his stately chair the sea king sat, his hair was of a greenish hue, his little eyes were piercing, and saline was his breath. And there I saw the graceful nymphs dancing in the wild waves' foam. The mermaids too with their fish-like tails sported here and there… The fishes gambolled in the boiling reef.* (De Morgan, 1868, p. 5).

For comparison's sake, here is an extract from the opening of Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid':

> *Far out in the ocean, where the water is as blue as the prettiest cornflower, and as clear as crystal, it is very, very deep; so deep, indeed, that no cable could fathom it: many church steeples, piled one upon another, would not reach from the ground beneath to the surface of the water above. There dwell the Sea King and his subjects … Fishes, both large and small, glide between the branches, as birds fly among the trees here upon land. In the deepest spot of all, stands the castle of the Sea King.* (Andersen, 2002, p. 10).

It seems unlikely to be coincidental that both tales open with an Edenic description of the ocean, alongside introducing a key character known as "The Sea King". Though De Morgan's tale has never been studied before, even from this brief extract, it is safe to assume that she was directly inspired by Andersen's work, which had been translated into English by Mary Howitt in 1846, and was of course extremely popular into the late 19th century and beyond; it is probable that Evelyn had been read the story by her parents as a young child, or had read it herself. To have composed her own version of the story indicates that she was very taken by it, and her interest in the tale, as we can see, lasted well into adulthood.

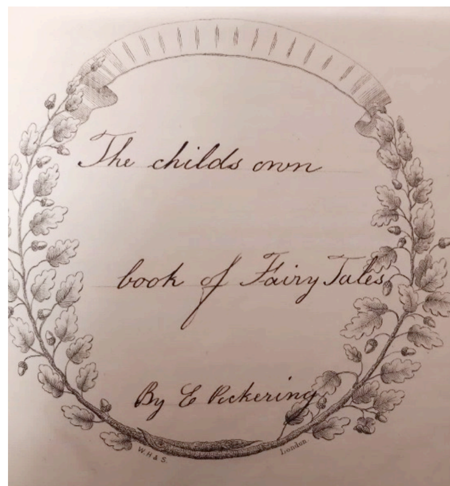
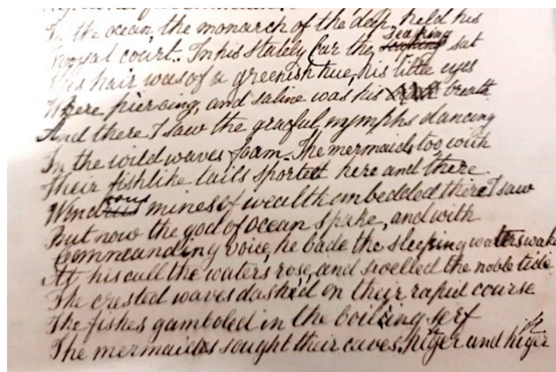


Figure 1 - De Morgan, E. (1868), Evelyn De Morgan Childhood Notebook [Cover Page], De Morgan Foundation Archives (Box 1, MS_0006), Crown Fine Art, London



In the ocean, the monarch of the deep, held his
royal court. In his stately car the sea king sat
His hair was of a greenish hue, his little eyes
Were piercing, and saline was his breath
And there I saw the graceful nymphs dancing
In the wild waves foam. The mermaids too with
Their fishlike tails sported here and there.
Wondrous mines of wealth embedded there I saw
But now the god of ocean spake, and with
Commanding voice, he bade the sleeping waters wake
At his call the waters rose, and swelled the noble tide
The crested waves dashed on their rapid course
The fishes gamboled in the boiling surf
The mermaids sought their caves, higer and higher

Figure 2 - De Morgan, E. (1868), Evelyn De Morgan Childhood Notebook [Mermaid Story p.5], De Morgan Foundation Archives (Box 1, MS_0006), Crown Fine Art, London.

As De Morgan's interests in theistic evolution and the suffrage movement developed, it would have become clear to her that 'The Little Mermaid' reflected her views on both issues with a startling degree of accuracy. With many of his tales, Andersen uses the fate of his protagonist to comment on social injustices – in this case, female oppression. Many critics have noted that the mermaid losing her voice is symbolic of the silencing of women in the Victorian era.[4] The sea witch tells her that, in exchange for human legs, the mermaid must surrender her tongue, and never speak or sing again:

> *"But if you take away my voice," said the little mermaid, "what is left for me?" "Your beautiful form, your graceful walk, and your expressive eyes; surely with these you can enchain a man's heart. Well, have you lost your courage? Put out your little tongue that I may cut it off as my payment."* (2002, p. 15).

The male objectification of women, and the "young-ladyism" which Evelyn De Morgan despised, is put on trial through the witch's patronising words: she suggests that it is only the 'beautiful form' which men value, rather than any depth of character that could be expressed through speech or song. Women are seen to be mere ornaments, whose only purpose is to please and pleasure men. They have no autonomy – no say in their fates, either personally or politically. The answer to the mermaid's heart-rending "what is left for me?" is of course, as we discover later in the tale, nothing: she is not loved by the prince, nor accepted into human society. To the world into which she has entered, she is superfluous and irrelevant; she is fashioned into a 'voiceless artefact' (Talairach-Vielmas, 2007, p. 46). As Elise Lawton Smith argues, the story:

> *can be seen to function as a contemporary analogy for female subjectivity under patriarchy, describing the confined expectations of the role of women in society. The loss of the mermaid's voice has both a literal and figurative significance, in relation to the struggle for women's equality, and an equal voice in public life.* (2002, p. 235).

[4] See Drawmer, L. J (2001), Smith, E. L (2002), Yamato, L. (2017) and Rose, L.E. (2019)

Women are often not able to express their true natures but are typecast into the roles of 'angel in the house', 'fallen woman' or spinster. It becomes almost impossible to achieve any ambitions beyond the domestic sphere. One could even go so far as to argue that the story implies that women are barely treated as human beings – like the mermaid, they are perceived as the inferior 'other', who are denied a voice, a career, ownership of property and metaphorical immortality, in the form of a lasting legacy.

However, the Prince's attitude towards the little mermaid does, in some respects, signify support for female liberation. He does not merely value her for her body, and this is why he does not make her his wife. He requires character, conversation and an expression of intelligence, none of which she can provide in her mute state: "she was very soon arrayed in costly robes of silk and muslin, and was the most beautiful creature in the palace; but she was dumb" (2002, p. 20). The Prince's (proto-)feminist outlook, which values female power, is at odds with conventional Victorian perceptions of women: the sea witch and the little mermaid herself fully expect that being "the most beautiful creature" will be more than enough to seduce the prince, for women in general are only valued ornamentally. In the 1989 Disney adaptation, for instance, the mermaid achieves her goal of marriage because the prince only values her as a sexual object but Andersen deliberately leads us away from this course. Instead he presents her as "saint-like" – a martyr – and she is on track to achieve her higher goal of gaining an immortal soul (Mortensen, 2008, p. 439). Smith argues that, "it was the passivity of her voiceless state, the internalization of her being, that led her on the path away from physical desires and towards spiritual growth" (2002, p. 161). In the afterlife, she is liberated through her own acts of goodness; through suffering she becomes more empathetic and human in nature than her mermaid sisters. Perhaps the implication is that through their oppression, women become stronger. Auerbach describes the story as an "allegory of a good woman's mutilated power" (1982, p. 8) with "mutilated" being the key word here: the fact that the mermaid is stripped of her power suggests that she did once possess it. Her silence speaks volumes: Andersen seems to suggest that the power of women should not be inhibited, for they have much to give. His close friendships with women throughout his life, and his sympathetic depiction of powerful female characters, indicate a respect for the opposite sex that aligns with the aims and rhetoric of the suffrage movement. Through 'The Little Mermaid', he both criticises the oppression of women and argues for their liberation. The fact that children reading the story will inevitably "root for the mermaid" encourages his audience to support her cause – to be able to be herself, to be loved for who she really is, and to have agency over her fate (Yamato, 2017, p. 304). A tale with such a message is therefore the perfect basis for a triptych to be displayed in support of women's suffrage.

Feminism and Spiritualism

Most critics addressing these works, particularly Lucy Ella Rose and Elise Lawton Smith, believe them to be solely symbolic of De Morgan's support for gender equality in the lead up to the emergence of the suffrage movement. This is certainly one dimension of the tryptic, but themes of spiritualism and theistic evolution also feature heavily. Evelyn De Morgan's interest in the interrelation between feminism and evolution has its roots in the spiritualist movement. She was first introduced to this world in the early years of her marriage. William's mother Sophia De Morgan was a renowned medium who heavily influenced her daughter-in-law's beliefs, and subsequently her artwork. In Sophia's book, *From Matter to Spirit* (1863), she draws on the idea of spiritual evolution, put forward by Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, and combines it with Darwinian and

Lamarckian concepts. Swedenborg had already "entered the mainstream of nineteenth century culture", and had influenced a range of renowned literary figures from Coleridge to Tennyson and Browning (Gibbons, 2001, p. 85). He viewed the afterlife "more as a continuation than a negation of this life", made up of three heavenly spheres: the natural, the spiritual and the celestial (2001, p. 83). The natural was similar to earthly existence, whilst the spiritual was a more idealised form, and the third was a form of spiritual perfection. However, in all three one possesses the same body, lifestyle and mundane earthly elements such as schools, homes and families – all are just made more and more perfect as one moves through each sphere. He claimed that heaven was much closer than many presumed, and contacting the dead was an important element of his work. It is a model that can work in tandem with Christianity but equally can be perceived as a departure from conventional biblical notions of heaven and hell.

Sophia De Morgan incorporates some of Swedenborg's ideas of an evolving spiritual identity and engaging in mediumship, but retains her Christian belief and factors in the existence of a maker. She essentially produces a model of theistic evolution, similar to that of Alfred Russell Wallace, in which the religious notion of a soul striving for immortality works in tandem with Darwin's theory. Whilst many feared that Darwin attacked the credibility of a Creator, Sophia De Morgan argued that, "it is electricity that moves the arm, but there is a spirit that guides the electricity" (Drawmer, 2001, p. 75). She used the evolutionary metaphor and applied it to the progression of the soul, implying that we evolve both physically and spiritually. Evelyn De Morgan was convinced by Sophia's ideas, and Judy Oberhausen tells us that, "it is just such… notions that ultimately formed the basis of [her] belief system" (1994, p. 37). As Trowbridge points out, though raised Christian, "De Morgan's fantasy afterlife does not depict conventional Christian theology with an emphasis on redemption and salvation, and it is worth noting that God is rarely mentioned" (2022, p. 23). She subscribed more to Sophia's and Wallace's religious notions: the focus is on the individual and their soul's evolutionary journey. Many of De Morgan's paintings reflect these concepts of biological and spiritual progression, including her mermaid triptych, but it is usually on a subliminal level: to be too open about one's spiritualist leanings was, as I will go on to explain, not advisable.

Many members of the upper and middle classes, particularly those in creative professions, were drawn to the spiritual movement, believing that there was something beyond the rational science of the age. Spiritualism, originating in America in the 1850s and spreading across the Atlantic, proposed a "hitherto undiscovered form of rarified matter that allowed spirits to manifest on the worldly plane", promising contact with loved ones beyond the grave in a time in which death remained an inescapable and frequent visitor (Owen, 2004, p. 18). Both Christians and non-Christians alike engaged with the movement, as "it did not require any orthodox sense but equally did nothing to injure the concept of divine intervention" (2004, p. 19). However, the movement expanded to incorporate other acts such as palmistry, clairvoyance and occultism, which generally attracted those who experienced a loss of Christian faith in light of Darwin's revelations. The De Morgans, as a couple, restricted themselves to contact with the spirit world, but the movement in all of its manifestations became extremely popular. In his in-depth study on the reach of the movement in the late 19th century, Alex Owen tells us that by the 1870s, "there can hardly have been a household in the land that had not been touched by the spiritualist fever" (2004, p. 18). However, despite its popularity, it was not the most reputable of past times, and most were compelled to keep their interest a secret:

> *Most scientists, including those involved in psychical research, were more likely to dismiss the results of seances, automatic writing, and other spirit manifestations as fraudulent rather than enlightening… while many… dabbled in spiritualism, or even occasionally devoted themselves more seriously to its practice, few were willing to admit publicly to any serious involvement.* (Smith, 2002, p. 41-42).

The discretion required led to a number of secret spiritualist societies forming, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society.

It was in this climate of spiritualist discretion, then, that William and Evelyn De Morgan started their automatic writing experiments. Each evening they would set aside some time to connecting with the spirit world and receiving messages from various dead relations or strangers:

> *One person holds a pencil as though writing, and the second places his or her hand on the wrist of the writing hand of the first… Under these circumstances the hands usually move after a while; each operator believing in most cases that his or her hand is pulled by the other. If the experiment is persevered in, writing not infrequently results.* (De Morgan, 1909, p. 12).

After several years, they published their findings anonymously in a volume entitled *The Result of an Experiment* (1909). It is interesting to note that there is very little mention of their interest in spiritualism in *William De Morgan and His Wife*: Stirling only briefly refers to their experiments, calling them "trivial", seemingly in an attempt to "downplay their involvement" (Smith, 2002, p. 42). It seemed that the family, as well as the couple themselves, wished to keep their spiritualist side under wraps, preferring to focus on their feminist endeavours. However, there was a definite overlap between the two. The spiritualist underground sub-culture was propelled and orchestrated largely by women. As Oberhausen explains:

> *Due to its lack of dogma and hierarchy, spiritualism became a new form of female empowerment. Victorians generally perceived women to be better mediums than men because of their keen sense of intuition. Consequently, many women played prominent roles in the movement.* (2009, p. 1).

Through mediumship, "these women could channel a spirit of any temperament or character, embody, and in some sense, become whomever they might choose"(Tromp, 2001, p. 68). This suddenly gave women, who possessed "little or no access to university education or political power", a platform from which to speak on societal and political issues; the spiritualist movement therefore became closely aligned with the suffrage movement (Butler, 2011, p. 168). Women like Sophia and Evelyn De Morgan were respected and revered by the spiritualist community, and in supporting spiritualism they were also supporting feminism. Some of the messages William and Evelyn De Morgan supposedly received from spirits also seem to subtly support the rhetoric of the suffrage movement. In one entry, an anonymous female complains about her life as a woman on earth in these terms:

> *Why did I die with life untasted? It is unjust… Put yourselves in my place; all grey and dull, no life… Put my life against what it ought to have been, and tell me where the justice is.* (De Morgan, 1909, p. 35).

It seems that through their interest in spiritualism, they were also raising awareness of the plights of women.

The spiritualist movement also appealed to those who did not conform to either gender, and who belonged to the wider LGBTQ+ community. It attracted the likes of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, due to its divergence from respected norms: gender and sexuality were irrelevant, as the movement grappled with phenomena far beyond earthly and bodily matter. This attitude was particularly prevalent in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. William Wynn Wescott, who penned the rules to which members agreed upon entering the Order, made it very clear that gender must be entirely disregarded:

> *Unless while with us you can conceive and act both as a sister and a brother at once, you will become a curse to yourself and a stumbling block unto us. Unless you forget your sex – by the Holy Tetragrammon, I beseech you to be absent.* (Owen, 2004, p. 109).

Such a fierce mandate acted in favour of those who did not conform to gender and sexual stereotypes. Nothing could be allowed to hinder talent in the spiritual arts: "What mattered … was the quality of adeptship regardless of sexual difference or even a certain degree of sexual non-conformity" (2004, p. 111). In fact, possessing both feminine and masculine characteristics, acting "both as a sister and a brother" at once, was seen as a strength (2004, p. 111). Swedenborg had spoken of an "androgynous divinity", and both Theosophists and Members of the Golden Dawn believed in the concept of the "Divine Hermaphrodite" (2004, p. 109-110). To harness elements of both sexes was revered, allowing women to behave like men, and vice versa. Evelyn De Morgan's association with the spiritualist movement is therefore not unrelated to her own androgyny and belief system regarding societal gender norms. She aligned herself with a movement that regarded sexual difference as immaterial, and androgyny as superior. Her mermaid triptych combines both spiritualism and androgyny, with the little mermaid seen as a spiritually superior being who refuses to conform to gender stereotypes.

The Triptych

The first painting she produced, 'The Little Sea Maid' (Figure 3) is also the first in terms of the chronology of the tale: the scene appears soon after her transformation from mermaid to human. A curse has been attached to the exchange of a mermaid tail for human legs and feet:

> *Every step she took was as the witch had said it would be, she felt as if treading upon the points of needles or sharp knives… While at the prince's palace, and when all the household were asleep, she would go and sit on the broad marble steps; for it eased her burning feet to bathe them in the cold sea-water; and then she thought of all those below in the deep.* (Andersen, 2002, p. 13).

Figure 3 - De Morgan, E. (1886-8*) 'The Little Sea Maid'* [Oil on canvas], De Morgan Foundation, London. Source: De Morgan Collection.

De Morgan has altered the narrative slightly; she does not sit on the marble steps of the castle, but has instead distanced herself from the Prince's home, which can be seen to the right far behind her. Rose suggests that her separation from the human domain in this image "represents the oppression, marginalisation and abjection of women by patriarchal society" (Rose, 2019, p. 217). She is now sexually available with the acquisition of a vagina, and therefore is viewed by the prince as a mere plaything, rather than a strong and powerful androgynous marine entity. For her 'seat at the table' she has to endure immense pain, both physically and emotionally.

However, her separation from the castle in this image is not just about the oppression of women; it is also about evolution. De Morgan places her back in her natural habitat – on the rocks rather than the castle steps – to acknowledge her wild origins. She may have taken human form and entered civilised society but her dejected, downward glance into the water, and the abandonment of her human garment, suggest that she rejects her human identity and longs for home. Even the title of the picture, 'The Little Sea Maid', hearkens to both her struggles as a woman and her homesickness. 'Little' as an adjective is patronising and pejorative, when she is no smaller than the average woman; it serves as a reminder that she is not perceived as an equal in society. However, it is the inclusion of 'Sea' that is of most interest here: though she is physically fully human, with no fishy attributes, she remains a 'Sea Maid' within. This concept is reinforced in the story itself, notably entitled 'The Little Mermaid'; though for much of the story she is not physically a mermaid, to the writer and to the reader she is known and perceived throughout as 'The Little Mermaid'. Butkus, Fleury & Raolx comment upon the symbolic nature of the rocks in La Lyre's work, suggesting that they are "stand-ins for a phallic, masculine force" (2018, p. 121). Perhaps the same can be said for the rocks in 'The Little Sea Maid': the land is an overtly masculine domain, whilst women have been banished to the seas. She is in a world to which she does not belong, and the phallic outcrop on which she sits is a reminder of her rejection, and the rejection of all women who attempt to enter a patriarchal society.

The second image in the triptych, 'The Sea Maidens' (1888) (Figure 4) produced around the same time, is a more difficult moment to pinpoint in relation to the tale. It has received the most scholarly attention of the three, perhaps owing to its complexity, as well as the striking nature of the image. It could depict the instance soon after the little mermaid's transformation when the five siblings come to visit her:

> *Once during the night her sisters came up arm-in-arm, singing sorrowfully, as they floated on the water. She beckoned to them, and then they recognized her, and told her how she had grieved them*. (2002, p. 13).

However, it could also depict a moment later in the tale, when the sisters visit again to persuade their sister to kill the prince and return to mermaid form:

> *She saw her sisters rising out of the flood: they were as pale as herself; but their long beautiful hair waved no more in the wind, and had been cut off. "We have given our hair to the witch," said they, "to obtain help for you, that you may not die to-night. She has given us a knife: here it is, see it is very sharp. Before the sun rises you must plunge it into the heart of the prince; when the warm blood falls upon your feet they will grow together again, and form into a fish's tail, and you will be once more a mermaid.* (2002, p. 15).

The absence of a knife in the painting, and the fact that the five mermaids still possess long beautiful hair, suggests that the former scene is more likely. However, the sisters are not "singing sorrowfully", but stare unmoved at the viewer with closed lips. Smith even goes as far as to describe their manner as one of "psychological flatness" (2002, p. 159). Once again we must assume that De Morgan has strayed from the tale ever so slightly in order to portray her intended message.

Figure 4 - De Morgan, E. (1886), '*The Sea Maidens'* [Oil on Canvas], The Queen's House Greenwich, London. Source: De Morgan Collection.

What is not in dispute is that the five sisters are a united force with dangerous potential. Both Smith and Rose interpret 'The Sea Maidens' as a display of virile women united in strength and support for one another. Smith claims that De Morgan's figures in this painting are less sexualised than other 19th century depictions of mermaids, specifically those by male artists: "the interlocked loops of the five mermaids' arms create a graceful but emphatic barrier that precludes any suggestion of invitation or allure" (2002: 159). Rose takes this idea further, explaining the reasons behind their sexual unavailability, citing the "phallic" tail as a physical barrier to "penetration or any potential for sexual gratification" (2019, p. 234). The cold, intense gaze of one of the five sisters (second from the right) has also been noted by both critics as a challenge to the lustful male spectator:

> *She seems to stare down the male gaze with a look direct, defiant and devoid of desire… They are not passive and docile but pernicious and deadly.* (2019, p. 228).

Here a comparison is implied between the sisters and the "deadly" legendary sirens, who have the ability to seduce but never to gratify; they retain power over men, and the strength to destroy them. The sisters are certainly more threatening than their innocent younger sibling. In the catalogue entry for the image in Catherine Gordon's *Evelyn De Morgan: Oil Paintings* (1996), Patricia Yates compares 'The Sea Maidens' with 'The Little Sea Maid', noting that "'The Sea Maidens' are rather heavy and quite different from their delicate sister", who sits dejected and weak on a rock in human form (1996:, p. 61). The model for the five sisters, Evelyn's maid Jane Hales, dominates several of her works, playing "beautiful but robust women in contrast to the delicate, waif-like Pre-Raphaelite model Elizabeth Siddal" (Rose, 2019, p. 227). This is a curious observation: male Pre-Raphaelite artists like Rossetti selected overtly feminine models, typically fairly delicate and fragile. De Morgan's mermaids, on the other hand, are at the other end of the spectrum, to counteract stereotypes of the weak and subservient female. It seems that De Morgan used 'The Sea Maidens' to show that women are grossly underestimated, and are more capable than their male counterparts, particularly when united.

However, once again, there is an evolutionary dimension to this image. The tails act as "complex phallic objects", which show how well the mermaids have adapted to their aquatic environment, as well as how mermaids have evolved into self-sufficient, androgynous beings (Hayward, 2017, p. 22). The tail begins above the waist, with this division placed strategically across the centre of the image, drawing our attention to their lack of genitalia and their status as non-humans. There is also no castle in the background for the mermaid siblings: they are wild creatures, with no ties to civilised human society. Though physically impressive specimens, they have not evolved spiritually, displaying no emotion in contrast to their humanised sibling; they are what she once was, but she has evolved both as a creature and as a woman. Her siblings, with their wild hair and soulless gaze, conform to the seductive, dangerous, 'femme fatale' Victorian stereotype of women, associated with prostitutes and ladies of loose morals. However, they do not have the capacity to gratify the lust of men, which makes them even more problematic and detestable. 'The Little Sea Maid', on the other hand, seems to show women as they ought to be perceived – misjudged, capable innocents seeking their rightful place in the world. Perhaps De Morgan wants the perception of women to evolve while women themselves are evolving; evolution is not just a scientific process, but a psychological one too. However, for this evolutionary comparison to be evident to spectators, the pictures must be displayed together, which has been more of a challenge than one would expect, as I will discuss later on.

The third image in the triptych is a bit of an anomaly, firstly in terms of the fact that it is the only one of the three that is not in a marine setting, and secondly because it was not completed until 1914, 28 years later than the first two. Such a large gap has led some critics to question whether 'Daughters of the Mist' (Figure 5) is actually related to 'The Little Sea Maid' and 'The Sea Maidens' at all, or whether it is a stand-alone piece on an entirely different subject matter. However, the title, and a clear correlation with the ending of Andersen's tale, seem to suggest otherwise. When the little mermaid has failed to kill the prince and throws herself into the foam of the sea, expecting to die, she is instead raised up to what most English translations term 'the daughters of the air'; however, the 'daughters of the mist' is an equally credible, though underused, translation of the Danish. De Morgan depicts the purgatory-like state in which the little mermaid finds herself in the tale, among ethereal spirits who welcome her as a beacon of goodness:

> *The sun rose above the waves, and his warm rays fell on the cold foam of the little mermaid, who did not feel as if she were dying. She saw the bright sun, and all around her floated hundreds of transparent beautiful beings; she could see through them the white sails of the ship, and the red clouds in the sky; their speech was melodious, but too ethereal to be heard by mortal ears, as they were also unseen by mortal eyes. The little mermaid perceived that she had a body like theirs, and that she continued to rise higher and higher out of the foam. "Where am I?" asked she, and her voice sounded ethereal, as the voice of those who were with her; no earthly music could imitate it. "Among the daughters of the air," answered one of them. "You, poor little mermaid… have suffered and endured and raised yourself to the spirit-world by your good deeds; and now, by striving for three hundred years in the same way, you may obtain an immortal soul"* (Andersen, 2002, p. 25).

Figure 5 - De Morgan, E. (1914), *Daughters of the Mist*, [Oil on Canvas], The Watts Gallery, Surrey. Source: De Morgan Collection.

Unlike the other two images in the triptych, 'Daughters of the Mist' is very loyal to the source material; though the protagonist is not present, we seem to see her vision through her eyes. The beings are indeed wispy and transparent in nature, and the addition of a mountainous region behind highlights the fact that the little mermaid has risen to a new height, both literally and spiritually. The daughters are joyous and welcoming, with the central figure opening her arms wide as if to welcome the mermaid into an embrace.

Here, as in many of her other large-scale oil paintings, such as 'The Angel of Death' (1880) and 'Love's Passing' (1883), we witness De Morgan's desire to depict a comforting and pleasant afterlife. What probably sparked the initiation of this piece so much later in life was the onset of the First World War – an event that "had a profound effect on Evelyn and her art work" (Harding, 2019). A vehement pacifist, she used her symbolist approach to raise awareness of the plight of those fighting, as well as those mourning at home, and exhibited a series of war-themed pieces in 1916 to raise money for the Red Cross. The most

famous of these was 'Save Our Souls' (1914) (Figure 6), which depicted a woman, representative of the country as a whole, in a stormy sea surrounded by dragons, looking up to heaven for assistance. However, another on display in the exhibition was, interestingly, 'Daughters of the Mist'. De Morgan's colour palette in the latter painting is particularly telling: unlike the rich blue of the first two, the dominating shade in this piece is a warm lavender, descending into darker shades of purple here and there. Light purple was a colour worn in the Victorian times to indicate "half-mourning" – a period in which one is still affected by the death of a loved one, but is beginning to move on with their life and emerge from the shadows (Schloz, 2018). The use of this colour here seems to indicate that though death and war have gripped the nation, there is still hope, and citizens must reside in this mid-place between despair and optimism.

Figure 6 - De Morgan, E. (1914), *'Save Our Souls' [*Oil on Canvas], The Watts Gallery, Surrey. Source: The De Morgan Foundation.

The hope I refer to has its roots in the spiritualist movement. Andersen's unconventional idea of the afterlife subscribes to the Swedenborgian notions which so inspired De Morgan: there is not so much a distinct Heaven and Hell, but levels of perfection that can

be reached as the soul progresses through good deeds. As Patricia Yates notes, references to this model appear throughout her and William's mediumship project:

> *The continual striving from one state to another and finally to the Kingdom of God to which Andersen's daughters of the air aspire is emphasised continually in* The Result of An Experiment. (Yates, 1996: 61).

De Morgan therefore projected her spiritual beliefs onto the final painting of the mermaid triptych, at a time when the afterlife was at the forefront of her mind.

In fact, across the triptych, we can track the spiritual growth of the little mermaid across three spheres: sea, earth and sky. Smith has noted that the siblings in 'The Sea Maidens' are "expressionless", and poses the question "Is it simply an unsuccessful painting, or is there a reason for this psychological flatness?" (Smith, 2002, p. 159). Taking into account De Morgan's interest in theistic evolution, it is possible to read the siblings as figures inhabiting a lower plane of existence – as literally soulless. They have obtained no moral high ground through their actions, with the most memorable of the tale being a sinister attempt to aid the murder of the prince. They are not on the same spiritual level as their sister, who gradually ascends through the ranks, first by obtaining human form. 'The Little Sea Maid' in contrast is not entirely "expressionless": her downcast eye, frown and hunched body language are all clear signs of sorrow and reflection. She is beginning to feel human pain, and to feel the weight of a human soul, even if it is not yet immortal. Her emotional intelligence is evolving along with her form, whereas her sisters' are fixed in a flat and immovable state. However, it is not until she becomes a daughter of the mist that her spiritual journey reaches its peak in the tale: their expressions are somehow victorious and benevolent simultaneously, and their forms are insubstantial and ethereal. They have attained the second sphere of Swedenborg's afterlife template – the spiritual ideal. The faint rainbow in the lower half of the image is a symbol of their occupancy of a higher spiritual ground: in art it was frequently representative of the Greek rainbow goddess Iris, who passed messages from the gods to the mortals below (Doble, 2022). It may seem far-fetched to suggest that De Morgan was channelling Iris through this work, but it seems likely when taking into account the fact that her friend and contemporary G.F. Watts had completed a portrait of Iris in 1904 – the year of his death, which no doubt affected De Morgan personally. Iris was the link between Heaven and Earth, and therefore inhabits this image as a reminder that the 'Daughters of the Mist' are somewhere in between the two: they have not yet reached the kingdom of God, or Swedenborg's perfect sphere, but are above the mortals they are called to assist. Like Iris, and perhaps like De Morgan herself, through their high moral and spiritual form they have established a connection between the two worlds.

The idea of humanity being a 'higher form' also contributes to the evolutionary discourse explored in these paintings. Lois Jane Drawmer is the only critic to have briefly identified the parallels between the triptych and evolutionary ideas:

> *The set of three paintings… actually conform to an evolutionary progression of our species, beginning with the primeval origins of human species from a rudimentary marine genealogy, represented by the fish/woman sirens seen in 'The Sea Maidens' proceeded into human, material status, seen in 'The Little Sea Maid', and culminating in the highest expression of development, that of the attainment of an immortal soul… in 'Daughters of the Mist.'* (Drawmer, 2001, p. 228).

Whilst Drawmer describes these images in biological evolutionary terms, it is also possible to see them in relation to De Morgan's concept of theistic and spiritual evolution – and the use of both in the promotion of gender equality. Theistic evolution is the key concept here; De Morgan believed that as the body evolves, so does the soul. The physical metamorphosis of the body represents the changing moral compass of the little mermaid. Interestingly the figures in 'Daughters of the Mist' are the most flexible and animated; they can fly and flit wherever they like, and look as though they are dancing around one another. For three of the figures, the breasts and genitalia are covered, again making them ambiguous as to gender: they have reached the androgynous higher plane, which places them above physical distinctions of sex. They are, in essence, free, and are not confined by the capabilities of the corporeal human form. In fact, when they are welcoming the little mermaid into their way of life, it becomes clear that, physically, they can do almost anything:

> *"We fly to warm countries, and cool the sultry air that destroys mankind with the pestilence. We carry the perfume of the flowers to spread health and restoration… After three hundred years, thus shall we float into the kingdom of heaven."* (Andersen, 2002, p. 25).

Equipped with divine power, they can "fly", "warm", "carry" and "float", exhibiting a level of dexterity that humanity can only dream of. This physical adeptness reflects their spiritual climax; they have evolved towards moral and bodily perfection. In this respect De Morgan is suggesting that we continue to physically and mentally evolve in the ethereal spheres.

In a bid to support feminism, 'Daughters of the Mist' also reflects the evolution of the little mermaid *as a woman*. In human form she is powerless, and can only be rewarded for good deeds in the afterlife; on earth no human woman is valued as she should be. However, in the final image of the triptych we are shown women's full potential: their potential to inhabit positions of authority and excel in them, their potential to do good across the world with their numerous gifts, and to thrive without a male presence. 'Daughters of the Mist' can therefore be read as a metaphor, not just for the progression of the soul in the afterlife, but for all that women could achieve were they not held back by a restrictive society. The cosmic symbolism in the corner of the three images supports this idea. In 'The Little Sea Maid', a waning crescent looms behind the little mermaid, casting light over the sea: the moon has long been associated with womanhood, fertility and the menstrual cycle, emphasising the physical form she inhabits, which makes her weaker in the eyes of society. However, the fact that the moon is a waning crescent, close to the end of its cycle, suggests that perhaps one day this will no longer be the case; society is changing, and women shall prove that they are no longer the weaker sex. The time for gender-based discrimination is almost over – but not quite yet. In 'The Sea Maidens', we have the setting sun, perhaps insinuating that the stereotype of the dangerous, seductive woman is also coming to an end. The little mermaid is fully human and beginning to enter society now; the time for perceiving women as animalistic, or bound to a separate realm, is over, and the sun is metaphorically setting on that chapter of history. For 'Daughters of the Mist', we have a star – a symbol of divine enlightenment, guidance and protection. The little mermaid has reached spiritual enlightenment, and has herself become a figure of guidance and protection for mortals on earth. It is interesting that she is surrounded only by other 'daughters'. Either we are led to believe that no men have achieved such a spiritual height or we are simply invited to acknowledge the power of a sisterhood; in any case, the focus is on the spiritual, physical and mental potential of women.

Thus Evelyn De Morgan's triptych can be read to track the evolution of the soul and the evolution of women's role in society simultaneously – but, of course, this can only be understood if the paintings are viewed together. Unfortunately the three were separated early on. In the 1910s, 'The Sea Maidens' was purchased by Lord Lovelace as a gift for his wife, Lady Mary Lovelace (1848-1941). Lady Lovelace was at The Slade with Evelyn De Morgan, and subsequently trained as an architect at a time when the profession was practically inaccessible to women; she was also a strong supporter of the suffrage movement. Her husband, who was a close friend of William De Morgan and a fellow women's rights campaigner, would have known that a piece by a familiar artist, known for her affiliations with feminism, would have appealed to his wife, who was reportedly deeply attached to the painting. In the Yorkshire De Morgan archives, I discovered a series of letters relating to the purchase of this painting after Lady Lovelace's death. She had promised Evelyn De Morgan's sister Wilhelmina Stirling the painting after she died, but unfortunately the letter in which the promise was made was not legally binding, and Lovelace's heir therefore refused to give it up. Stirling was desperate to have the painting, as she had the other two images in the triptych and wanted the complete set; after a long process and several disputes, Lord Lovelace's niece Lady Wentworth eventually agreed to sell her the painting for £40 – a significant sum in 1941, and one Stirling could barely afford. Stirling sent a series of pleading letters to Clare Stuart-Wortley, another niece of Lady Lovelace, asking her for help in securing the painting:

> *It really is a bitter disappointment to me about the picture, as it is one I love, and I have always counted on being able to get the companion pictures together for the public in the future… Of course, from a legal point of view she* [Lady Wentworth] *is quite right, but not from a moral!… I am not a rich woman but… I do feel I want to secure the picture at all costs! I am so desperate to have it!* (Stirling, 1941).

What is striking here is Stirling's reference to the importance of having the images displayed together. She knew that the full message and symbolism could not be conveyed whilst the images were apart. After her last companion pieces, 'Helen of Troy' and 'Cassandra' (1898), were sold to different owners, De Morgan reportedly said "she would never paint twin pictures again, as they always become separated" (Drawmer, 2001, p. 231). Unfortunately, the mermaid triptych is still divided: 'The Sea Maidens' resides at the Queen's House in Greenwich, 'The Little Sea Maid' is in storage at the London De Morgan archives in Brixton, and 'Daughters of the Mist' is at the Watts' Gallery in Surrey. Such distribution is unfortunate, when the element concerning the evolution of our species and of gender itself can only be understood when viewing the progression of the mermaid figure from one image to the next.

I hope to have demonstrated that, while scholarship on these paintings has identified and explored De Morgan's commitment to depicting the injustices of gendered inequalities concerning women's power, voice and agency, the triptych also expresses a more hopeful future through the concept of theistic evolution. Though there is substantial evidence to suggest that these images were related to De Morgan's solidarity with women, this is just one semantic layer of what is a highly complex and sophisticated triptych. The three paintings also use the androgyny of the mermaid figure to illustrate Sophia De Morgan's, and subsequently Evelyn De Morgan's, concept of theistic evolution. As a keen spiritualist, Evelyn De Morgan put forward her belief that the physical evolution of our species did not discredit the evolution of the individual soul. The idea of moral and spiritual progress in the afterlife was one that undoubtedly brought comfort in the onset

of the First World War, when the triptych was eventually completed. The metaphor is multi-layered, combining theistic evolution with the evolution of gender in the Victorian era: as our species and our individual souls evolve, the Victorian woman was evolving from a weak and passive entity into a strong and powerful one. Gender roles themselves were also evolving: the lines between male and female were becoming blurred, signalling the emergence of androgynous and non-binary identities. Andersen's mermaid, as a female character who undergoes physical and spiritual change, was the perfect vessel through which to demonstrate both evolutionary concepts, as well as to support the suffrage movement. She transforms from a voiceless, powerless sea maid into a divine, all-powerful being – from a nude woman sat alone into a member of a dexterous androgynous army. De Morgan's work explores the conflicts between science and religion, between life and death, and between gender and societal expectations. 'The Little Mermaid' triptych introduces audiences to a way in which these conflicting concepts can live in harmony, through a combination of logic, faith and acceptance.

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