

Alchemy as a symbolic framework in nineteenth-century Western art: a comparative analysis of Rossetti, Moreau, and De Morgan

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Abstract

Recent historiography cautions against describing alchemy as a failed science replaced by modern chemistry. Although institutional chemistry gradually separated from alchemical practice during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alchemical ideas continued to influence occult, literary, and artistic culture. This article examines how alchemical concepts clarify the visual organization of works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Gustave Moreau, and Evelyn De Morgan, representing Pre-Raphaelitism, Symbolism, and Spiritualist-oriented Symbolism. Using a qualitative comparative approach, the study combines formal analysis, iconographic interpretation, and historical contextualization, distinguishing direct alchemical reference, contextual association, and analogical interpretation. Findings show De Morgan's strongest explicit engagement through symbolic objects, chromatic structure, and themes of union. Rossetti's documented language of spiritual transformation supports analogy with the alchemical opus, while Moreau's Salome cycle reveals affinities with separation, polarity, and visionary transformation. Alchemy thus emerges as a historically situated symbolic framework rather than a uniform hidden code.

Keywords

alchemy, symbolism, pre-raphaelitism, western esotericism, visual analysis

Highlights

- The article distinguishes direct alchemical evidence from contextual association and analogical interpretation.
- Rossetti, Moreau, and De Morgan are compared as three different modes of visual engagement with transformation, polarity, and spiritual knowledge.
- Alchemy is defined as a historically situated interpretive framework rather than a universal code automatically attached to colors or motifs.

19. yüzyıl Batı sanatında simgesel bir çerçeve olarak simya: Rossetti, Moreau ve De Morgan üzerine karşılaştırmalı bir analiz

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Atıf

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Öz

Güncel tarih yazımı, simyanın modern kimyanın yerini aldığı başarısız bir bilim olarak tanımlanmasına karşı çıkmaktadır. Kurumsal kimya, on sekizinci ve on dokuzuncu yüzyıllarda simyadan giderek ayrışsa da simyasal düşünceler okült, edebî ve sanatsal kültürü etkilemeyi sürdürmüştür. Bu makale, simyasal kavramların Pre-Rafaelizm, Sembolizm ve Spiritüalist eğilimli Sembolizmi temsil eden Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Gustave Moreau ve Evelyn De Morgan'ın eserlerindeki görsel düzenlemeyi nasıl açıklayabileceğini incelemektedir. Nitel karşılaştırmalı yaklaşım; biçimsel analiz, ikonografik yorum ve tarihsel bağlamsallaştırmayı birleştirerek doğrudan simyasal referans, bağlamsal ilişki ve analogik yorumu ayırmaktadır. Bulgular, De Morgan'ın sembolik nesneler, renk düzeni ve birleşme temalarıyla en açık simyasal ilişkiyi kurduğunu göstermektedir. Rossetti'nin belgelenmiş ruhsal dönüşüm dili simyasal opus ile analogiyi desteklerken, Moreau'nun Salome dizisi hermetik-Sembolist çerçevede ayrışma, kutupluluk ve vizyoner dönüşümle benzerlikler göstermektedir. Simya böylece tek tip gizli bir kod değil, tarihsel bağlama yerleşmiş sembolik bir çerçeve olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler

simya, sembolizm, pre-rafaelit, batı ezoterizmi, görsel çözümleme

Öne çıkanlar

- Makale, doğrudan simyasal kanıtı bağlamsal ilişkilendirmeden ve analogik yorumdan ayırır.
- Rossetti, Moreau ve De Morgan; dönüşüm, kutuplaşma ve tinsel bilgiyle kurdukları farklı görsel ilişkiler üzerinden karşılaştırılır.
- Simya, renklere ya da motiflere kendiliğinden eklenen evrensel bir kod değil, tarihsel olarak konumlanmış bir yorum çerçevesi olarak tanımlanır.

Introduction

The history of alchemy is more complex than a linear narrative in which irrational speculation yields to modern chemistry. Early modern practitioners used overlapping terms for activities that joined laboratory operations, theories of matter, medicine, metallurgy, and religious or philosophical reflection. Newman and Principe therefore propose the historically specific term "chymistry" for the period before the modern separation of alchemy and chemistry, warning that retrospective disciplinary categories can distort the objects of study (Newman & Principe, 1998, pp. 32-65; Principe, 2013). In this article, *alchemy* refers to this historically heterogeneous field and to its later cultural reinterpretations; it does not denote a single timeless doctrine.

By the nineteenth century, chemistry had acquired stronger institutional, pedagogical, and professional boundaries, while the word *alchemy* was increasingly associated with metallic transmutation, secrecy, occult philosophy, or an obsolete science. This differentiation was gradual rather than absolute. It did not erase alchemical texts, images, or techniques; instead, it altered their cultural location and the claims made for them. Industrialization and positivism formed part of the broader environment in which measurable and specialized knowledge gained prestige, but they did not act as direct causes that simply eliminated alchemy. Within occultism, Spiritualism, literature, and alternative philosophies of nature, specific agents - including Éliphas Lévi, Mary Anne Atwood, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, members of the Theosophical Society, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn - reinterpreted alchemical transformation as a language of initiation, psychic development, and spiritual integration (Atwood, 1920; Faivre, 1994; Owen, 2004).

These reclassifications created conditions in which alchemical ideas could enter nineteenth-century visual culture without requiring artists to reproduce laboratory practice. English Pre-Raphaelitism and French Symbolism were not identical movements, nor can their relationship be reduced to direct influence. They nevertheless shared an investment in literary sources, medieval and Renaissance models, intensified color, visionary states, and forms of meaning that exceeded empirical description. Pre-Raphaelite works were visible in France from the mid-century onward, while later writers such as Joris-Karl Huysmans helped align English medievalism with Symbolist and Decadent sensibilities (Kotzin, 1966, pp. 347-350). The Salons de la Rose+Croix organized by Joséphin Péladan between 1892 and 1897 institutionalized one explicitly esoteric strand of Symbolism; Moreau should be understood as an admired precursor to this milieu rather than as a participant in those exhibitions (Dixon, 2017; Slavkin, 2019).

Rossetti, Moreau, and De Morgan are examined together because they make it possible to compare three different relations between image and alchemical thought. Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* transforms a literary and autobiographical experience of death into a pictorial state of transfiguration. Moreau's *Salome* compositions repeatedly reorganize a biblical narrative around vision, separation, erotic attraction, and spiritual threat. De Morgan's *The Love Potion* contains the most explicit alchemical evidence through named

books, a chromatic sequence, and a staged union of opposites. The cases therefore do not carry equal evidential weight; their difference is central to the comparison rather than a methodological defect.

The study asks: how can alchemical concepts be used to interpret the composition, chromatic organization, and figural relations of these works without treating every symbolic motif as proof of an artist's alchemical intention? It argues that alchemy is most productive when understood as a historically situated symbolic framework whose relevance must be established at different levels of evidence. In De Morgan, it approaches explicit iconography; in Rossetti and Moreau, it functions primarily as a contextual and structural analogy. This distinction permits comparison while limiting speculative overreach.

The article first defines its methodology and criteria of evidence, then reconstructs the nineteenth-century reclassification of alchemy within occultism and Symbolism. The three case studies follow a common analytical sequence: historical documentation, formal organization, iconographic correspondences, and an assessment of the limits of the proposed alchemical reading.

Methodology and analytical criteria

The research is designed as a qualitative, comparative case study. Its "art-historical analysis" comprises three related operations: formal analysis of composition, color, spatial organization, and visual emphasis; iconographic identification of literary, religious, mythological, and alchemical motifs; and historical contextualization through artist statements, contemporary reception, institutional history, and modern scholarship. In this respect, iconography identifies the subject and its conventional attributes, whereas iconological interpretation asks how those elements participate in wider cultural structures (Panofsky, 1955). Scholarship on Western esotericism is used to specify the historical meanings of terms such as occultism, Hermeticism, and spiritual alchemy rather than to posit an unbroken secret tradition (Faivre, 1994; Hanegraaff, 2012).

The analysis follows an explicit hierarchy of evidence. *Direct evidence* includes an artist's statement, inscribed text, documented reading, or clearly identifiable alchemical object. *Contextual evidence* refers to demonstrable participation in, or proximity to, literary, Spiritualist, occult, or Symbolist networks in which alchemical concepts circulated. *Analogical evidence* describes a formal or thematic correspondence between a work and an alchemical model, such as dissolution followed by clarification, separation followed by conjunction, or a chromatic movement from darkness toward red or gold. Analogical evidence can support an interpretation, but it cannot by itself establish intention.

Each case is examined through four recurring categories. First, the study identifies the work's documented narrative and historical context. Second, it analyzes compositional structure: axes, thresholds, framing devices, visual centers, and relations between

foreground and background. Third, it evaluates chromatic organization, especially the stages commonly designated *nigredo*, *albedo*, *citrinitas*, and *rubedo*. These colors are not treated as automatic symbols; a chromatic reading is accepted only when color participates in a broader pattern of transformation and is supported by textual or contextual evidence (Abraham, 1998, pp. 4, 42, 152, 174). Fourth, the analysis considers figural polarity and mediation, including Sol-Luna, sulphur-mercury, body-spirit, and death-renewal relations.

The corpus is limited to England and France from the mid- to late nineteenth century because these contexts allow comparison between Pre-Raphaelitism, Symbolism, Spiritualism, and the occult revival. Rossetti and De Morgan are represented by single works selected for analytical concentration. Moreau is represented by three closely related Salome compositions because serial variation is itself part of his method: the relation between dancer, apparition, ornament, and bodily inscription becomes visible only across the cycle. The unequal number of works thus reflects the internal structure of the material.

The method has two limitations. First, the survival of a motif in an alchemical lexicon does not prove that an artist consulted that source. Second, the category "Western esotericism" includes historically distinct currents and must not be used as a synonym for all forms of mysticism. The interpretations below therefore state whether a claim is direct, contextual, or analogical, and the conclusion is calibrated to the strongest evidence produced by each case.

From early modern chymistry to nineteenth-century occultism and Symbolism

Alchemy historically encompassed more than the quest to make gold. Its practitioners investigated the composition and transformation of matter, prepared medicines and pigments, developed furnaces and laboratory procedures, and embedded these operations within competing Aristotelian, Paracelsian, Christian, and Hermetic explanations of nature. The modern opposition between a rational chemistry and an irrational alchemy was not fully available to early modern practitioners. The later restriction of *alchemy* to metallic transmutation and occult speculation was itself a historical process of classification (Newman & Principe, 1998; Principe, 2013).

This classification intensified as chemistry entered academies, universities, industries, and professional societies. Practical chrysopoeia lost legitimacy within many learned institutions, but alchemical materials did not disappear. Texts continued to be edited and collected; images circulated in antiquarian, literary, and occult contexts; and the experimental past of chemistry remained entangled with alchemical procedures. The nineteenth-century transformation at issue is therefore not a simple movement from science to symbol. It is a redistribution: some material practices were absorbed into chemistry, some claims were rejected, and selected concepts were reinterpreted as metaphors of inward development.

The agents of this reinterpretation can be identified. Romantic and post-Romantic writers used the alchemist to dramatize dangerous knowledge, longevity, artistic creation, and divided subjectivity. Mary Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* shifted attention from laboratory success toward moral and psychic consequences (Hronček, 2016, pp. 47–50). Mary Anne Atwood's *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* interpreted the Great Work as a process of spiritual realization. Later, Éliphas Lévi's occult synthesis, the Theosophical Society founded in 1875, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded in 1888 reorganized alchemy alongside Kabbalah, ritual magic, comparative religion, and theories of psychic evolution (Faivre, 1994; Owen, 2004).

Occultism was not merely the opposite of modern rationality. Late nineteenth-century occultists frequently adopted the language of experiment, evolution, psychology, and invisible forces, presenting their practices as extensions or corrections of materialist science. Hanegraaff's history of "rejected knowledge" and Owen's account of a psychologized modern magic both show that esoteric currents developed within modernity rather than outside it (Hanegraaff, 2012; Owen, 2004). This distinction is important for art history: Symbolist recourse to myth and mysticism should not be described simply as retreat from the modern world, but as an alternative claim about how knowledge could be produced through image, intuition, and analogy.

In the visual arts, the Rose+Croix Salons provide a clear institutional example of this alternative claim. Péladan promoted an anti-naturalist and spiritually reformist art based on idealized bodies, sacred narratives, myth, and initiatory aspiration. The salons did not encompass the whole of Symbolism, and major figures admired by Péladan did not necessarily exhibit there. They nevertheless demonstrate that esoteric ideas were organized through manifestos, exhibitions, criticism, and audiences rather than circulating only as private belief (Dixon, 2017; Slavkin, 2019). Huysmans's writing performed a comparable mediating function by interpreting Moreau's painting as a visual language of psychic disturbance and spiritual desire (Cooke, 2009, pp. 31-318).

Pre-Raphaelitism and Symbolism intersected through reception rather than through a single line of descent. Rossetti's fusion of poetry, medievalism, eroticized spirituality, and emblematic color offered a model for later Symbolist readings; Moreau's mythological and biblical images displaced narrative clarity in favor of visionary intensity; De Morgan inherited Pre-Raphaelite craft and color while developing a Spiritualist and allegorical language centered on the soul's progress. Across these contexts, the female figure often became the site where purity and desire, knowledge and danger, matter and spirit were negotiated (Schubert, 1980, pp. 29-34; Smith, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, an alchemical symbolic framework consists of three linked operations: staged transformation, the differentiation and mediation of opposites, and the organization of matter or color into a meaningful sequence. These operations may appear as explicit alchemical iconography, as in De Morgan; as hermetic and visionary structure, as in Moreau; or as a second-order analogy grounded in a documented

language of transfiguration, as in Rossetti. The framework is therefore comparative and graded, not a claim that all three artists followed the same doctrine.

Love, death, and transformation in Rossetti's Beata Beatrix

Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* (Figure 1) was developed from Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova* and from the artist's memory of Elizabeth Siddal, who died in 1862. The painting joins two forms of mourning: Dante's literary account of Beatrice's death and Rossetti's personal commemoration of his wife and model. The work is therefore already structured by a translation from biography into literary allegory and from loss into an image of altered consciousness (Drew, 1996; Bristow, 2001).

The most important documentary evidence is Rossetti's own explanation of the subject. He insisted that the image should not be understood as a literal death scene, but as an idealized moment represented by "a trance or sudden spiritual transfiguration." He also identified the radiant bird as a messenger of death, the white poppy as the sign of the supreme change, the mourning city as Florence, and the sundial's ninth hour as a number mystically connected with Beatrice (Rossetti Archive, n.d.). This statement establishes transformation, mediation, and symbolic time as intentional components of the painting. It does not, however, name alchemy.

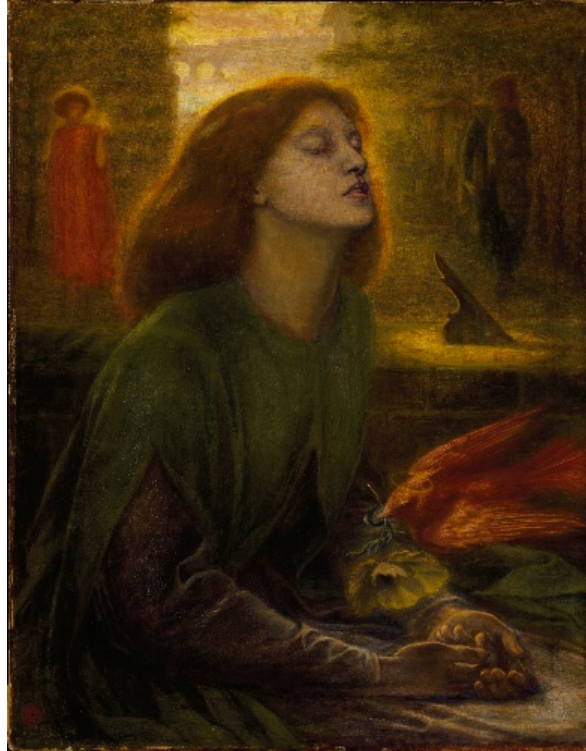


Figure 1. *Beata Beatrix*, oil on canvas (Rossetti, c. 1864-1870).

Formally, Beatrice occupies the threshold between an enclosed foreground and a luminous exterior. Her closed eyes and open hands suspend ordinary action, while the diagonal movement of the dove carries the viewer from the upper field of light toward

the poppy and the figure's receptive body. The sundial introduces measured time, but the trance interrupts chronological narration. In the background, Dante and the personification of Love are reduced to distant signs, so that the historical city becomes a mental and memorial space rather than a naturalistic setting.

Because no surviving statement documents an alchemical program, the chromatic reading proposed here is analogical. Its rationale lies not in isolated color correspondences, but in the convergence between Rossetti's documented theme of transfiguration and a composition organized as movement among differentiated chromatic zones. The deep green-brown enclosure surrounding Beatrice can be compared with *nigredo* as a condition of obscurity, dissolution, and mourning. The white poppy marks interruption and passage; in relation to the opus, its whiteness can be compared with *albedo*, the stage of purification after dissolution. The diffuse yellow-gold field behind the figure suggests illumination and can be related to *citrinitas*. The red dove, already documented within Rossetti's iconography as a non-naturalistic messenger associated with love, passion, the Holy Spirit, and death, can be compared with *rubedo* as the return of vital and spiritual intensity (Abraham, 1998; Rossetti Archive, n.d.).

This sequence is not literal. The red bird does not "prove" *rubedo*, and the white poppy retains primary meanings connected with sleep, opium, death, peace, and Siddal's biography. The alchemical model is persuasive only because it explains how the painting converts these already documented meanings into a visual transition from enclosure toward radiance. It is a second-order account of organization, not a replacement for Dantean, Christian, or autobiographical iconography.

The painting therefore supports a limited but useful claim. Alchemy does not appear as an encoded set of laboratory emblems; rather, the opus provides a comparative grammar for a work in which death is represented as a threshold, color differentiates stages of passage, and the image mediates between material loss and imagined continuity. *Beata Beatrix* exemplifies the analogical end of the article's evidential spectrum.

Moreau's Salome cycle: visionary separation and symbolic polarity

Moreau transformed mythological and biblical narratives into densely organized images in which description gives way to inward vision. His academic training, study of Renaissance art, ornamental surface, and dramatic illumination did not produce historical reconstruction; they became components of a personal Symbolist language. Moreau's writings and critical reception repeatedly emphasize the invisible, the mysterious, and the interior idea as the true object of art (İndirkaş, 2006, pp. 55-76; Cooke, 2008, pp. 394-416). This documented aesthetic provides contextual support for a hermetic reading, although it does not establish adherence to a specific alchemical doctrine.

The Salome subject is particularly suited to comparative analysis because Moreau returned to it across paintings, watercolors, and drawings. In *Salome Dancing before*

Herod (Figure 2), the palace is organized as a vertical, hieratic chamber rather than a historically coherent interior. Architecture, precious surfaces, and ritual objects slow the biblical narrative and convert Salome's movement into a ceremonial gesture. Her extended arm links her body to the enthroned power at the center, while the depth of the chamber separates the dancer from the audience of Herod, Herodias, and attendants. The work establishes a polarity between mobile body and immobilized authority, sensual display and sacred architecture, surface ornament and hidden intention (Cooke, 2008; Jullian, 1971).

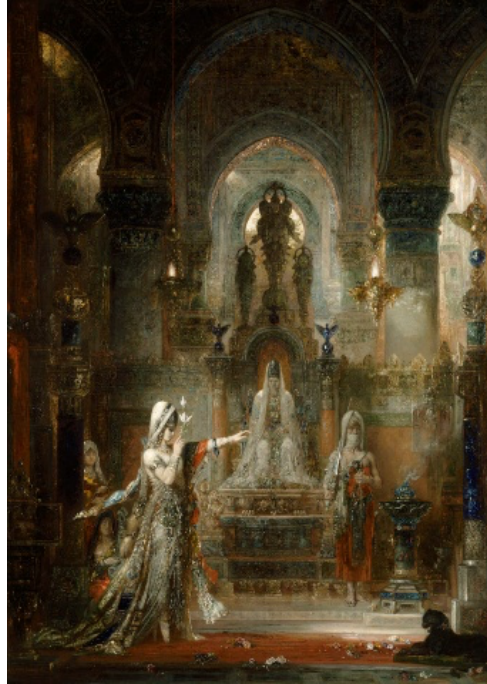


Figure 2. *Salome Dancing before Herod*, oil on canvas (Moreau, 1874-1876).

In *L'Apparition* (Figure 3), narrative sequence is further displaced by a visionary event. The severed head of John the Baptist is detached from gravity and from the temporal logic of execution. Its frontal suspension, luminous halo, and direct relation to Salome's gesture create an axis that dominates the surrounding court. The head is simultaneously a remnant of bodily violence and an image released from the body. Salome's response is neither simple triumph nor horror; her arrested pose makes vision itself the scene's principal action.

The alchemical concept of *separatio* is relevant here because the composition makes literal division - the severed head - into the precondition for a new mode of visibility. In alchemical texts, separation differentiates components so that they may be purified, recombined, or elevated; Abraham also records the head as an image associated with sublimation and transformation (Abraham, 1998, pp. 96-97). The correspondence is structurally strong but historically indirect. Christian martyrdom, Decadent eroticism, and Moreau's Symbolist aesthetics remain the primary documented contexts. The red-gold luminosity around the apparition may recall *rubedo*, but color alone is insufficient to claim a completed alchemical stage.

In *Salomé Tatouée* (Figure 4), Moreau shifts the problem from a separated object to an inscribed body. Ornamental signs spread across Salome and the surrounding surface until body, costume, architecture, and pictorial decoration become difficult to disentangle. The figure functions as a threshold between sensual presence and unreadable knowledge. Rather than identifying the marks as a stable occult alphabet, the analysis treats their density as a visual model of secrecy: meaning is displayed and withheld at the same time.



Figure 3. *L'Apparition*, watercolor (Moreau, 1876). Figure 4. *Salomé Tatouée*, oil on canvas (Moreau, 1874).

Across the three works, repetition produces transformation. The dancer in the palace becomes the witness of a disembodied vision and then a body covered by signs. The cycle therefore moves among embodiment, separation, and inscription without resolving them into a single doctrine. These relations resemble an alchemical logic in which opposed states are intensified before any possible reconciliation. Yet the Moreau case is best described as *hermetic-visionary* rather than explicitly alchemical.

Contemporary reception supports this contextual designation. Huysmans used Moreau's Salome images in *À rebours* to articulate erotic fixation, hysteria, spiritual malaise, and the instability of modern subjectivity. His characterization of Moreau as a "pagan mystic" helped place the paintings within a fin-de-siècle discourse in which myth, occultism, and psychology overlapped (Cooke, 2009, pp. 313-316). The alchemical framework clarifies the cycle's visual operations of division and polarity, but the conclusion must remain proportionate: the works demonstrate structural affinity with alchemical transformation, not an independently verified alchemical program.

Explicit alchemical structure in De Morgan's *The Love Potion*

De Morgan provides the strongest case for an alchemical interpretation because the visual evidence is supported by her Spiritualist context and by identifiable texts within

the painting. Her work combines late Pre-Raphaelite precision and chromatic intensity with allegories of the soul's progress, bodily constraint, death, and liberation. Scholarship on De Morgan has shown that her female protagonists frequently negotiate the relation between material embodiment and spiritual transcendence, while also revising the restricted roles available to women in Victorian visual culture (Smith, 1997, pp. 3-10; Smith, 2002).

The Spiritualist dimension is historically documented rather than inferred from style alone. Evelyn and William De Morgan participated in Spiritualist inquiry and published *The Result of an Experiment* in 1909. In *The Love Potion* (Figure 5-6), the books beside the central figure bear names associated with occult philosophy and alchemy, including Paracelsus and Agrippa; the De Morgan Foundation also identifies a volume marked "A-Z Opus" as an allusion to Azoth. The cumulative presence of these inscriptions, the learned interior, and the action of preparing a red liquid establishes direct iconographic evidence (De Morgan Foundation, n.d.; Gannon, 2018, pp. 57-64).



Figure 5. *The Love Potion*, oil on canvas (De Morgan, 1903).



Figure 6. *The Love Potion*, detail of the books.

The painting is organized around a seated woman whose intellectual control contrasts with the conventional image of the irrational or demonic witch. She occupies the compositional foreground and controls the central action: the measured transfer of liquid into a silver vessel. Books, furniture, and textile patterns define the interior as a study. The black cat at her feet introduces the stereotype of witchcraft, but its domestic scale and subordinate position prevent it from controlling the figure's identity. Through the window, a second scene shows an armored man and a woman in white embracing on a terrace. The interior and exterior are therefore linked as two stages of a single symbolic process: learned preparation in the foreground and conjunction in the distance.

The chromatic sequence is more securely grounded here than in the Rossetti and Moreau cases. Black appears in the cat and the dark lower zone; white in the cloth, silver vessel, and distant female figure; red in the potion, the woman's hair, and the lions woven into the textile; yellow-gold dominates the alchemist's robe and the illuminated room. The De Morgan Foundation explicitly relates this sequence to stages of spiritual enlightenment and alchemical color symbolism (De Morgan Foundation, n.d.). Within the terms of the opus, black can be associated with *prima materia* and *nigredo*, white with purification or *albedo*, red with transformative intensity and *rubedo*, and gold with realized spiritual value.

Individual motifs nevertheless remain multivalent. Abraham's lexicon associates the red lion with sulphur and with the active, solar principle, while the De Morgan Foundation also notes Christian meanings of strength and wisdom (Abraham, 1998, pp. 166–167; De Morgan Foundation, n.d.). The motif should therefore not be reduced to one code. Its alchemical force emerges from its relation to the black, white, red, and gold sequence, to the inscribed books, and to the action of mixture. The interpretation depends on cumulative evidence rather than on the lion alone.

The composition's strongest structural principle is the relation between preparation and conjunction. The embracing figures visible through the window recall the paired king and queen of alchemical imagery: Sol and Luna, sulphur and mercury, fire and water. Their union is positioned above and beyond the red liquid, allowing the potion to function visually as the material or symbolic result of a conjunction rather than merely as a tool for manipulating desire.



Figure 7. King Sol and Queen Luna (folio 10) illuminated manuscript (*Splendor Solis*, 1582).

The comparison with *Splendor Solis* does not require a claim that De Morgan copied folio 10 directly (Figure 7). It identifies a recognizable visual formula in which male and female

figures embody complementary principles and their union promises renewal. In *The Love Potion*, the foreground woman is not one half of the distant couple; she is the intellectual agent who understands and mediates their relation. This compositional decision is crucial. The alchemist is neither apprentice nor passive object of desire, but scholar, maker, and interpreter.

Gannon reads the figure as a model for the woman artist, and this interpretation is strengthened by the painting's arrangement of creative knowledge. The female protagonist transforms matter, controls the pictorial center, and occupies a room defined by authoritative books. Alchemy thus supports a gendered revision of intellectual authority: the Great Work becomes an analogy for artistic making and for the difficult movement from social constraint toward spiritual and creative autonomy (Gannon, 2018, pp. 62-64; Smith, 2002).

De Morgan's painting consequently demonstrates the article's strongest form of alchemical structure. Direct textual evidence, documented Spiritualism, chromatic sequencing, figural polarity, and the visual logic of conjunction reinforce one another. Unlike the Rossetti and Moreau readings, the interpretation does not depend primarily on analogy, although the exact meaning of every motif remains open to multiple historical and iconographic associations.

Conclusion

The historical transformation examined in this article should not be described as the simple retreat of alchemy from science followed by its rebirth in art. Historiography shows a more differentiated process: early modern chymistry was divided and reclassified as chemistry developed stronger institutional boundaries; practical and theoretical elements were absorbed, rejected, or marginalized; and nineteenth-century writers, occultists, Spiritualists, critics, and artists selectively reinterpreted alchemical ideas. The movement from material practice to symbolic language was therefore produced by identifiable actors and media rather than by "alchemy" acting as an autonomous force.

The three case studies demonstrate different degrees and modes of visual relevance. In *Beata Beatrix*, Rossetti's own account establishes a scene of spiritual transfiguration, while the sequence from shadow through white and gold to red permits an analogical comparison with the opus. This reading explains compositional transition but does not prove alchemical intention. In Moreau's *Salome* cycle, separation, suspended vision, bodily inscription, and unresolved polarity are consistent with a hermetic-Symbolist structure; the contextual evidence is substantial, but the specifically alchemical claim remains interpretive. In *The Love Potion*, named occult authors, the Azoth reference, the chromatic sequence, and the distant conjunction create a cumulative and comparatively explicit alchemical program.

These findings refine the article's central claim. Alchemical thought can operate beyond isolated iconography by shaping relations among color, spatial threshold, figural polarity, and narrative transformation, but it does not do so uniformly. The concept of a "symbolic framework" is therefore more accurate than a universal visual code or a single method shared by all three artists. Its methodological value lies in making the level of evidence visible: direct, contextual, or analogical.

The study also confirms that intellectual and institutional networks facilitated the translation of esoteric concepts from text into image, thereby granting alchemy legitimacy as an alternative epistemological framework positioned against modern rationalism. These findings open avenues for future research into other geographical contexts and into the relationship between alchemical symbolism, exhibition practices, and viewer experience, reinforcing the nineteenth-century "rebirth" of alchemy as a durable key to understanding the creative tension between spirit and form in modern art.

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