

La Belle Iseult

Jan Marsh

Described in 1874 as ‘unfinished’,¹ William Morris’s only easel painting was begun around the turn of the year 1856–1857, when he was dividing his time between London, where he shared lodgings with Burne-Jones at 17 Red Lion Square, and Oxford, where he was courting Jane Burden. She modelled for the figure, which depicts *La Belle Iseult* (Figure 1) from Thomas Malory’s version of the Tristram and Iseult (Isolde) legends. Their engagement was announced by March 1858 and their wedding took place in Oxford in April 1859.

Morris had taken the Tristram legend as his subject for the mural decoration at the Oxford Union debating chamber during summer 1857, and it appears that he began or at least conceived two other related compositions: ‘Tristram recognised by Iseult’s Dog (in a garden)’ and ‘Tristram and Iseult on the Ship’. The former was commissioned from Morris by the businessman Thomas Plint at Rossetti’s behest, presumably as a means of promoting Morris as a professional painter, although unlike his friends Morris did not need to earn money, and any advance payment made was refunded to Plint’s executors on his death in 1861. Both *La Belle Iseult* and ‘Tristram recognised by the Dog’ progressed as oil paintings, though no trace of the latter is now known.

It is not now possible to reconstruct fully the progress of the painting during the months after March 1858; customarily, artists prepared the background setting of a composition first, leaving space for the figures to be added, but Morris was formally untrained in art and it is not clear when or from whom he learned to paint in oils beyond the rather unskilled efforts on panels and pieces of furniture decorated at Red Lion Square. He may therefore have painted the figure of Iseult first, using Jane as the model and working in Oxford before moving the canvas to London. Philip Webb, a close companion of this date, recalled that the bed behind Iseult was painted from one in Red Lion Square, where it was ‘not disturbed for months’. This suggests that it was carefully left rumpled, as seen in the picture, although Webb also added that ‘one day we found Morris lying on it smoking. He said it was to make it look as if it had been slept in’,³ which rather contrarily suggests that the rumpled state was a later idea.



Figure 1—La Belle Iseult by William Morris, 1857–8. By permission, © Tate, London 2011.

The figure, the bed, the small dog curled up asleep on the sheets, the table covered with a woven or embroidered cloth and holding a mirror, illuminated missal, oranges etc, the brass ewer and wooden bowl are painted carefully and precisely, with the wealth of detail associated with the Pre-Raphaelite group during the 1850s, and are assumed to have been completed at this time. It is possible that the linen hangings, and the dark blue cloth on the rear wall, which resembles the stitched 'tapestries' Morris was producing at this time, also date from this period. The distant background and in particular the small minstrel figure on the right appear to have been painted at a later date, together with the brown passage immediately in front of the bed, which is unresolved.

Although the work is not large, the wealth of detail was ambitious for a beginner, and Webb also recalled that Morris laboured to complete it. '[A]fter struggling over his picture for months, "hating the brute", Morris threw it up'.⁴ It was thus left unfinished, though to what degree is unknown. The most probable date for him to have abandoned it is summer 1858, when Morris and Webb visited the cathedrals of northern France and began planning the house which Webb would design for the Morrises to occupy when married, but it is possible that the canvas remained with Morris, either in London or Oxford, until his wedding, when he vacated his lodgings in both cities. According to Webb, 'Rossetti took it to finish, and then Madox Brown'.⁵

Rossetti spent a large part of 1858 outside London, in Matlock, Derbyshire, where he worked on his translations from early Italian poetry and painted small watercolours on medieval, Malorian themes. His studio remained at Chatham Place, Blackfriars, in London. In August, he paid a swift visit to Oxford, calling on and drawing a large pen-and-ink portrait of Jane Burden.⁶ It is just possible that he found Morris's unfinished canvas and took it to London with him then. A few months later Rossetti would resume working in oils, but there is no direct evidence that he did paint any parts of *La Belle Iseult*. However, an opportunity to do so occurred around the time that he painted the diptych *Salutation of Beatrice* in oil on panels, as part of a promised wedding present for the Morrises; which were completed in June 1859.⁷ Both panels depict Jane Morris as Beatrice.

Intriguingly, there are points of comparison between *La Belle Iseult* and the right-hand panel of the *Salutation*. These include the garland of spiky leaves on the head of both Iseult and Beatrice, the stringed musical instrument held by the background minstrel in *Iseult* and two female musicians in the *Salutation*, and the distinctive red notes of both compositions. The minstrel playing a stringed psaltery would become one of Morris's favourite motifs in stained glass, but Rossetti had been the first to employ it, notably in a watercolour version of the *Salutation*, completed in 1854.⁸ In *Iseult* the motif is not identical, but the similarity is suggestive. And as there are some indications from careful inspection of the picture that Iseult's red sleeves are overpainted, it seems possible that this could

have been added, together with the minstrel, if the canvas was with Rossetti during the summer of 1859.

By his own report, it remained unfinished, however; and Webb's recollection transferred it from Rossetti to Madox Brown. In view of its later history, this was an accurate account, so when and why was the canvas moved from Chatham Place to Brown's studio? The most likely date is summer 1860, after Rossetti had married Elizabeth Siddal and returned from honeymoon to lodgings in Hampstead. For some weeks Rossetti searched for a suitable new home before deciding to remain at Blackfriars and enlarge the apartment. At this stage, a nearly-finished picture of Janey Morris, with whom Rossetti had flirted in Oxford sufficiently to alarm Lizzie, would not have been a good item to keep on the premises. Conjecturally, therefore, Rossetti moved the canvas to Brown's hospitable home in Kentish Town.

Or the move may have been prompted by Morris's desire to resume painting under Brown's guidance. By inference, he had *Iseult* delivered to Kentish Town, together with one or both of the other projected 'Tristram' subjects. By April 1861, he was working on the canvas depicting 'Tristram recognised by the Dog', commissioned by Plint. 'The picture is now at my house', Brown told Plint, 'and at my suggestion he [Morris] has so altered it that it is quite a fresh work. There is still a figure in the foreground to be scraped out and another put in its place ... I take as much interest in Morris's picture ... as though it were my own'.⁹

This is a curious episode, since no such canvas survives, whereas a few years later *Iseult* appears to have been lying half-forgotten in Brown's new studio in Fitzroy Square. What happened to 'Tristram and the Dog'? And though Brown's letter implies that Morris was painting in Brown's studio, the actual words state only that the picture was there, and that Brown was advising Morris on how to proceed.

Morris at this date was still living at Red House, miles away in Kent, and was currently establishing a workshop for the newly-established firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, back in Red Lion Square. Did he move his own studio there from Red House, in order to work on his unfinished paintings as well as the painted furniture which the firm planned to produce? The business brought all the partners into regular contact, and it is just possible that Morris's two canvases were then delivered to Brown, who offered to assist their completion by, for example, altering the composition of 'Tristram and the Dog'. Webb, we may recall, claimed that Brown took *Iseult* 'to finish' in succession to Rossetti. Was his perhaps a 'holding message' to Plint, to explain the picture's non-delivery? There is no firm evidence that he worked on it, unless one wishes to attribute the minstrel and red sleeves to Brown's intervention. My own unsubstantiated guess is that perhaps Brown painted in the sleeping dog, which is rendered with a good deal more skill and sophistication than Morris could muster.

Clearly, however, it remained uncompleted and apparently untouched. In November 1865, when the Morrises finally left Red House for Queen Square, the Browns also moved, to Fitzroy Square and the *Iseult* canvas presumably went with them. Nothing more is recorded of it until 1874, when Brown pencilled a note explaining that the picture was 'left at my house & never finished. William Morris gave it subsequently to Nolly'.¹⁰

Oliver (Nolly) Madox Brown had been born in 1856, and in November 1873 published a full-length novel entitled *Gabriel Denver*, which Rossetti read and commented carefully on. The following spring Nolly was invited to Kelmscott Manor, where Rossetti was now living after his mental collapse of 1872. During this visit, Nolly borrowed and damaged the boat belonging to the Manor. This will entail 'sending the boat to Oxford for repairs', Rossetti told him.¹¹ Nolly's reply does not survive, but a few days later Rossetti wrote again, saying he would not tell Nolly's father of the misdemeanour, nor ask for the cost of the repair. 'If you are needing funds,' he continued, 'and like to sell the unfinished picture by [Morris] I will give £20 for it almost immediately – not just at this moment but in a few weeks' time'. A postscript elaborated: 'Mind, I don't in the least want to press you to sell the picture if you prefer keeping it, but should like to buy it if you are willing, & am not making the offer merely in case it should be convenient to you'.¹² This suggests that the survival of *La Belle Iseult*, and Morris's otherwise unrecorded gift of it to Nolly, had been spoken of during Nolly's stay at Kelmscott. Possibly, at some date Brown had asked Morris what he wished to do with the picture, noting that it was a favourite of his son's, and was told Nolly could have it.

Nolly evidently replied in the affirmative, for on 3 June Rossetti responded, thanking him for his 'letter about the picture. My wish to possess [it] is solely as an early portrait of its original of whom I have made so many studies myself – thus, as long as there is any question of the work becoming mine, please don't touch the figure on any account in the least'.¹³ Evidently, Nolly had also offered to 'touch up' or maybe finish off the painting. Also, Nolly had both asked where the canvas should be sent, and declined the offered cash in favour of a reciprocal work of art by Rossetti, who continued; 'From what you say of the picture, however, it strikes me that I really might not be able with any sort of fairness to meet its value by such exchange as would be in my power, which could merely be represented by some chalk head or other or something of that sort. I fancy we had better let the subject remain pending till I could see it at your house, but if sent anywhere at present, better to Euston Square only I don't know when I should be there to look at it. I am writing Wm a line on the matter in case you do send it to his house'.¹⁴ Brown's later annotation on the back of the first letter confirms the financial arrangement: 'DGR offered Nolly 20 guineas for it on account of its being from his favourite model Mrs Morris. Nolly refused the money but gave him the picture',¹⁵

although it is also clear that some exchange value had been agreed.

The proposed destination for the painting was determined by the facts that as Morris's work it could not hang at Kelmscott without his knowledge and permission, and that Rossetti had no current plans to return to Cheyne Walk, where in addition it would upset Fanny Cornforth. His family's house in Euston Square was a useful alternative. 'Dear Wm', wrote Rossetti the same day, 'Nolly has a picture (unfinished) by Morris which there was some talk between him (Nolly) & me of my making some exchange for & thus acquiring. He seems to have looked it up & and to propose sending it here or to Chelsea. I fancy Euston Square wd [*sic*] be best & have told him so, unless he likes to keep it till I happen to be able to see it at Fitzroy Sq. If it comes to you, please put it away & I'll look at it whenever there. I don't want to noise abroad my bargain for it'.¹⁶ This confirms that Rossetti wished to keep his acquisition secret from Morris, and maybe others who might interpret it as further evidence of his own intimate relationship with Jane. At this stage, it appears to have been known as *Queen Guinevere*, perhaps by identification with Morris's early poem about this figure, but no title is given in the extant correspondence.

It is not known exactly when the canvas was delivered to Euston Square. William Rossetti and Lucy Brown married in March 1874, and on return from honeymoon on 13 May moved into the Euston Square house, temporarily vacated by the Rossettis' mother and sister Christina. One small bedroom was allocated for Gabriel's use,¹⁷ and it is possible that *La Belle Iseult* was moved there from Fitzroy Square with Lucy's possessions. Later in the year, however, it was probably sent to Cheyne Walk after Rossetti's return there in July – although no-one recorded seeing it there and it featured neither in Rossetti's (rather hasty) will nor in the inventory of possessions after his death in April 1882.

Fifteen years later, William claimed that 'Gabriel, at the time of his death had in the house a "Queen Guenevere" oil-painting by Morris,' adding that 'Watts-Dunton (Gabriel's friend and legal adviser) told me that the intention of G. had been to return it to M. or his wife, and I gave instructions to that effect'.¹⁸ Whether such instructions were actually given is open to conjecture; certainly they were not acted upon, as William confessed: 'but from time to time I have had reason to observe that the picture never reached the Morrises, & was supposed to be still in my hands'.¹⁹

A few weeks after Morris's death in October 1896, a memorial exhibition was proposed. 'There has lately been a scheme mooted for an exhibit of the works of William Morris and D.G. Rossetti in the coming winter to be organised by the Directors of the New Gallery & a Committee under the presidency of Sir E.B.J.' wrote Sydney Cockerell to Jane Morris.²⁰ Someone involved – perhaps Burne-Jones or Philip Webb – recalled *La Belle Iseult*, and during summer 1897 Cockerell, who had been secretary to the Kelmscott Press and as one of the execu-

tors was responsible for winding up Morris's estate, asked Jane about this 'lost' painting. She replied that it was probably with William Rossetti, a logical deduction regarding an item formerly owned by Gabriel. On 11 August, assuming he now owned the work, Cockerell wrote to William, asking if he would exchange it, perhaps for a book from the Kelmscott Press. William replied saying he had given instructions for the picture to be returned to Morris. Cockerell asked Jane again. 'It is curious about the Guenevere picture,' she replied, 'the only other person likely to throw any light on the subject is Fairfax Murray. He might be consulted on his return to England, but I fancy it was he who told me that William Rossetti had it, or most likely had it'.²¹

Then, on 27 November 1897, William, now living in St Edmund's Terrace, Primrose Hill, wrote to Cockerell to say he had found it.

Dear Sir, you will be agreeably surprised to learn that the picture by William Morris (about which you and I were in correspondence in August last) has after all turned up in this house. This morning I happened to enter the bedroom vacated by my eldest daughter (who went off to Florence on the 18th prior to marrying) and there to my astonishment I saw the picture. Had not set eyes on it since June or July 1882. My eldest daughter being gone, I cannot enquire of her how or whence the work was found; but she was rummaging about after many things before her departure, and I learn that somewhere or other she found it. All's well that ends well.²²

The same information was recorded in William's diary: 'this morning, on going into Olive's vacated bedroom, there I find the work displayed. I gather from Mary that O. found this picture *perdu* somewhere or other, & fetched it out. I wrote to Cockerell apprising him of the facts & inviting him to fetch the picture away'.²³

To Cockerell, William also stated that 'in your letter of 11 August you assume that this picture is my property; and in fact I believe that it was my property at the time of his death, but that he intended (though the intention was not put into writing, nor expressed to me direct) that it should return to Mr or Mrs Morris. I therefore make no claim upon it whatever'. But, he added in respect of Cockerell's offer of a Kelmscott Press book, 'I don't expect anything at all: but, if you like to allot to me some such thing as a goodwill gift, I see no reason for saying No. It can be anything – or, as you might prefer, nothing'.²⁴

The picture was duly removed to Kelmscott House, Hammersmith in early December. Jane probably did not see it, as she was by then staying at Lyme Regis for the winter. On 14 December she replied to an enquiry from Cockerell regarding the forthcoming exhibition. 'I shall be very glad to show the picture at the New Gallery', she wrote. 'Will it be at once?'.²⁵ A week later she wrote 'Thanks for letter and all you have done about the picture'.²⁶ The exhibition 'Pictures Ancient and Modern by Artists of the British and Continental Schools Includ-

ing a Special Selection from the Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, opened at the very end of the year.

This was the painting’s first public appearance. If still as ‘unfinished’ as in 1874, it was either displayed as such, or with some hasty infilling of blank spaces. Such infills could be the brown passages below the bed and in the background, if done simply to cover bare canvas. There was no time for any more extensive additions or alterations.

Entitled *Queen Guenevere*, it was no. 24 in the New Gallery catalogue, which carried the following description:

Small full length figure to left wearing pink embroidered white dress with red sleeves, a wreath of flowers on her head; she stands before a toilet table and is putting on a girdle; in the background is a bed, on which sleeps a dog; and on the right a man playing a lute. / 28 x 19½ ins./ This is the only oil painting by William Morris/ Lent by Mrs William Morris.²⁷

Jane Morris may well have missed the exhibition, as she had not visited the New Gallery by 9 March, having not been to London. After the exhibition closed, the painting was presumably returned to Hammersmith, though probably not to Kelmscott House, which was to be let. It was photographed by Emery Walker’s firm Walker & Boutell, and reproduced both in Aymer Vallance’s 1897 book on Morris’s career and in J. W. Mackail’s official *Life of William Morris*, published in April 1899. Here it was captioned ‘Queen Guenevere, from the picture painted by William Morris in 1858’ and its history given as follows:

Much the greater part of the year [1858] was spent by him at Oxford, either in his rooms in the city or at Summertown with the Maclarens. There he went on painting hard, but with continued dissatisfaction. He even sold a picture for the considerable sum of £70 to Mr Plint of Leeds. The negotiation was conducted by Rossetti, who loved making bargains for his friends as well as himself. This picture, which has now, after many wanderings, returned to the possession of his family, is believed to be the only finished easel-painting by Morris certainly known to exist. It was exhibited in London at the New Gallery in January 1898.²⁸

Perhaps Philip Webb or Georgiana Burne-Jones queried the title; they were virtually the only members of the Morris circle surviving from 1858 besides Jane, who does not seem to have challenged the ‘Guenevere’ name. Until, that is, their daughter May began work around 1901 on the edition of the *Collected Works* which appeared from 1910–1915.²⁹ Then, in response to a question from May, she wrote: “‘La Belle Iseult’ is what the dear father always called his picture, and I think we ought to keep that’.³⁰ And it was presumably around this period that Jane wrote the label which was formerly on the back of the painting, which reads ‘La Belle Iseult, painted by William Morris 1858...’. The photogravure by Walker & Boutell was

reproduced in Volume 16 of the *Collected Works*, on p. 451, and captioned ‘La Belle Iseult from the picture painted by William Morris in 1858’.

The work remained in Jane’s possession until her death in 1914, when it passed to May, who in turn bequeathed it to the Tate Gallery in 1938. In her will it was named ‘La Belle Iseult’. On accession the work was cleaned and re-lined, and some paint losses restored. Despite Jane’s label, in 1965 it was re-catalogued as ‘Queen Guinevere’,³¹ presumably by reference to the New Gallery catalogue, or the reproduction in Mackail’s biography. As such it appeared in the 1984 Tate Gallery exhibition *The Pre-Raphaelites* with a catalogue entry by John Christian, who noted that ‘all the earlier records’ called the subject ‘Guenevere’, although ‘the title is unimportant, since it is essentially a portrait in medieval dress of Jane Burden’.³² Following the present writer’s article in the *Burlington Magazine*, on Morris’s shortlived career as a painter,³³ it was re-titled *La Belle Iseult*, which it remains, despite an ambiguous caption from 2004, which opens with somewhat misleading information: ‘The inspiration for this painting was Thomas Malory’s “Morte d’Arthur” (1485), in which Guinevere’s adulterous love for Sir Lancelot is one of the central themes. The model is Jane Burden who became Morris’s wife in 1859’.³⁴

NOTES

1. D.G. Rossetti to Oliver Madox Brown, No day given but certainly April 1874. Letter no. 74: 86, William E. Fredeman, ed, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Vol. 6, The last decade, 1873–1882, Kelmscott to Birchington: 1873–1874*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2006, p. 444. (Afterwards Fredeman)
2. W.R. Lethaby, *Philip Webb*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935, p. 34.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. Virginia Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1828–1882: the Paintings and Drawings*, Vol.1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, no. 364. Now National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. (Afterwards Surtees)
7. Surtees, no. 116. Now National Gallery, Canada, Ottawa.
8. Surtees no. 116D. Now Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
9. Ford Madox Brown to T.E. Plint, 23 April 1861, as quoted in Ford M. Hueffler, *Ford Madox Brown*, London: Longmans Green & Co., 1896, pp. 174–175.
10. Undated note on back of letter from D.G. Rossetti to Oliver M. Brown; Fredeman Letter no. 74: 86, n. 4, p. 444. As the MS of this letter, according to Fredeman, is unlocated, it is not clear where this information originates.

11. D.G. Rossetti to Oliver M. Brown, 21 April 1874; Fredeman, Letter no. 74: 77, p. 438.
12. D.G. Rossetti to Oliver M. Brown, ca 25 April 1874; Fredeman, Letter no. 74: 86, p.444. The text is from J.H. Ingram, *Oliver Madox Brown. A biographical sketch*, 1855–1874, London: E. Stock, 1883, pp. 154–155.
13. D.G. Rossetti to Oliver M. Brown, 3 June 1874; Fredeman, Letter no.74: III, pp. 469–70.
14. *ibid.*
15. Fredeman, Letter no. 74: 86, n.4, p. 444.
16. D.G. Rossetti to W.M. Rossetti , 3 June 1874; Fredeman, Letter no. 74:II2, p. 470.
17. Fredeman, Letters nos 74: 99, 74: 101, pp. 459–460, 461–462.
18. W.M. Rossetti, *Diary*, 27 November 1897, as quoted Fredeman, Letter no. 74: 86 n.4, p.444.
19. *ibid.*
20. S.C. Cockerell to Jane Morris, 19 February 1897; British Library Add. Ms. 52378.
21. Jane Morris to S.C. Cockerell, 17 August 1897. In Frank Sharp & Jan Marsh, eds, *The Correspondence of Jane Morris*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming 2011, Letter no. 291. (Afterwards Sharp & Marsh)
22. W.M. Rossetti to S.C. Cockerell, 27 August 1897; in Roger Peattie, ed, *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, University Park, PA: Penn. State University Press, 1990, pp. 603–604. (Afterwards Peattie)
23. W.M. Rossetti, *Diary*, 27 November 1897; quoted Fredeman letter no. 74: 86, n.4, p. 444.
24. W.M. Rossetti to S.C. Cockerell, 27 November 1897; Peattie p. 604.
25. Jane Morris to S.C. Cockerell, 14 December 1897; Sharp & Marsh , Letter no. 298.
26. Jane Morris to S.C. Cockerell, 20 December 1897; Sharp & Marsh Letter no.299.
27. *Pictures Ancient and Modern by Artists of the British and Continental Schools Including a Special Selection from the Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, London: New Gallery, 1897–8, pp. 66. Catalogue printed by Richard Clay & Sons, Bungay, for New Gallery, Regent St, London.
28. Aylmer Vallance, *William Morris, His Art, His Writings and His Public Life*, with line drawings by H.P. Clifford, London: George Bell & Sons, 1897, pp.42–53; Mackail, J.W., *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols, London: Oxford University Press, 1899, Vol. I, pp. 135–6. The painting is reproduced on p. 137.
29. May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, London: Longmans, Green, 1910–15, 24 vols.
30. Jane Morris to May Morris, 7 July 1901; Sharp & Marsh Letter no. 368.

31. Tate Collections, accession file no. 4999. Note dated 30 November 1972: 'Queen Guinevere/La Belle Iseult by William Morris, which was the original title before it was changed on 8.12.1965'.
32. John Christian, in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, Exhibition Catalogue, London: Tate Gallery, 1984 (catalogue entry no. 94).
33. Jan Marsh, 'William Morris's Painting and Drawing', *Burlington Magazine* August 1986, pp. 571–577.
34. <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=10322&searchid=2018>; as accessed 9 August 2010.