

# A Note on Morris and Van Eyck

## Jan Marsh

Some years ago I published a short article on William Morris's Painting and Drawing in the *Burlington Magazine*, which discussed *inter alia* the canvas then on display at the Tate Gallery under the title 'Queen Guinevere' – the only extant oil painting by Morris – explaining why it should properly be called *La Belle Iseult*. Recent work on the National Gallery's painting by Jan van Eyck currently known as the Arnolfini Marriage Portrait has suggested that comparable mistitling has confused understanding of this image also.

That isn't all the pictures have in common. Visual links and everything we know of Morris's admiration for van Eyck surely indicate that *La Belle Iseult* was conceived in direct homage to the so-called 'Arnolfini' picture, which when purchased by the National Gallery in 1842 was identified by the director Sir Charles Eastlake as a self-portrait of the artist and his wife, painted in 1434 (according to the Latin inscription on the canvas). The Arnolfini theory came much later, in 1953, and it therefore isn't necessary to enter into the debate over its correct title in order to show that, as far as Morris and his contemporaries were concerned, this was a picture of van Eyck by van Eyck. As such, it was of particular interest to Morris, whose interest in van Eyck developed as an integral part of his interest in medieval art and architecture.

In 1854, visiting Belgium with his sister Henrietta, Morris had seen van Eyck's work on its home ground, so to speak. He went again in autumn 1856 and on his return adopted van Eyck's motto 'Als ich kanne' as his own.<sup>1</sup> This was shortly after he had decided to try his hand at art and had moved to London, sharing lodgings with Burne-Jones who was already embarked on his chosen career. "Rossetti says I ought to paint, he says I shall be able", wrote Morris, diffidently. "I don't hope much, I must say, yet will try my best."<sup>2</sup> But, comparing the two younger men, Rossetti commented: "Morris, though without practice as yet, has no less power, I fancy."<sup>3</sup>

Among the immediate results of this endeavour are two pencil self-portraits, now in the V&A, that date from late 1856 to mid-1857 (self-portraits are commonly set as beginners' exercises). There is also the painted decoration for the furniture Morris had made for the lodgings in Red Lion Square, for which he and Rossetti each painted two panels with single female figures in medieval dress, now also in the V&A. By summer 1857, Burne-Jones was at work on his *Blessed Damozel* (now in Fogg Art Gallery, Harvard), travelling out to Essex to paint cherry blossom in the grounds of Mrs Morris's house.<sup>4</sup> On the same or a similar occasion, Morris painted the lichen-covered garden wall – perhaps in preparation for his first canvas, showing a scene from *Morte d'Arthur*, 'Sir Tristram after his illness in the Garden of King Mark's Palace recognised by the Dog he had given Iseult'.<sup>5</sup> Some of this was also painted in the Maclarens' garden in Oxford, according to Georgie Burne-Jones,<sup>6</sup> but the work seems to have been laid aside, at least temporarily, after Rossetti's arrival in Oxford

as leader of the jovial crew who were to decorate the new Union debating chamber – a project that proceeded over the summer and autumn of 1857, and incidentally led to Morris’s meeting with Jane Burden.

Philip Webb recalled that *La Belle Iseult* was “done in 1858”, and the rumped bed in the background (in Red Lion Square) was “not disturbed for months” as Morris struggled with his task<sup>7</sup>. This is plausible, and brings us to the first point of comparison with the van Eyck painting in the National Gallery, where the female figure is placed in a comparable position in front of a (very tidily made) bed with looped-up curtains. There are similar carpets in the floor, and both figures are shown in a similar posture.

There are little dogs in both pictures too, and a pair of slippers (two pairs of pattens in the van Eyck, to be precise) and also some oranges – all of which suggest that Morris had the earlier painting strongly in mind when composing his own, and that at some level his image was intended as homage to the artist with whom he most actively identified. Moreover, in the background of *La Belle Iseult* may be seen a tapestry hanging with a tree-and-scroll motif similar to those designed by Morris at this period, such as the ‘If I Can’ panel designed and worked by Morris in 1857 (with van Eyck’s own motto, translated) and the ‘Heron’ fragments that later adorned Penkill Castle in Scotland, which are also presumed to be a product of the 1857–9 period.<sup>8</sup>

It seems possible, therefore, that when Morris came to paint Jane in the character of Iseult he consciously modelled his composition on that of the van Eyck marriage portrait, equally consciously modelling himself on the artist, as well, perhaps, as on the luckless Tristram, the Arthurian figure who seems to have meant most to him at this time.

#### NOTES

My thanks, as ever, to Ray Watkinson, for reading and commenting on the first draft of this.

<sup>1</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, 1994, p.116.

<sup>2</sup> Morris to Cormell Price, July 1856, quoted *ibid.*, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p.122.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones*, 2nd edn, 1989, p.26.

<sup>5</sup> Rossetti to William Bell Scott, June 1857; O. Doughty & J. R. Wahl (eds), *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Oxford, 1965, I, p.325.

<sup>6</sup> Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 1904, I, p.39.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in W. R. Lethaby, *Philip Webb and His Work*, 1935, pp.33-4.

<sup>8</sup> See Christie’s, London, 16 February 1994, lot 25. My thanks to Linda Parry for discussion of this work.