The Paintings of William Morris

by Janet Camp Troxell

In the accounts of William Morris's three oil paintings the pictures have become almost inextricably confused; from Aymer Vallance in *The Art of William Morris*, 1897, through J. W. Mackail's *Life of William Morris*, 1898, re-issued in 1950, to Philip Henderson's edition of the *Letters of William Morris*, 1950, the same errors have been repeated.

In Oxford, from 1857 to 1859, Morris painted first, according to D. G. Rossetti, 'Tristram recognised by Iseult's Dog' (to give a short title); second, according to Lady Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown, 'Tristram and Iseult'; and third, 'Queen Guenevere', now called 'La Belle Iseult'.

Whether the Dog picture ever existed is open to question. Rossetti wrote to William Bell Scott in June, 1857, that Morris 'had as yet done nothing in art, but is now busily painting his first picture, "Sir Tristram after his illness in the Garden of King Mark's Palace Recognised by the Dog he had given Iseult" from the Morte d'Arthur. It is all being done from nature of course, and I believe will turn out capitally.' No more is heard of this picture until 1897, when Vallance wrote that this was the picture commissioned by Thomas Plint, and a reviewer in the *Magazine of Art*, 1898, writing about an exhibition at the New Gallery, said that the statement of the catalogue that 'this [Guenevere] is the only picture by William Morris is a little unintelligible. Why then is no account taken of "Sir Tristram and Iseult's Dog"?'. Scott's *Autobiographical Notes* containing the Rossetti letter had been published in 1892, and both Vallance and the reviewer may have taken their cue from that. In 1934, Gerald Crow in *William Morris Designer* (Special Winter Number of *The Studio*) wrote: 'His first commission came in June, 1857, from Mr Plint of Leeds - £70 for "The Recognition of Sir Tristram by Iseult's Dog". It was unfinished in 1861 when Madox Brown informed the anxious patron "his (Morris's) picture is now at my house, and at my sug-
gestion he has so altered it that it is quite a fresh work.”' This
letter, dated April 23, (1861), continues: '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 turning out good
as though it were my own for, though it was not commissioned
at my recommendation, I have repeatedly since told you that
Morris is a man of genius.' (F. M. Hueffer, Ford Madox Brown
A Record of his Life and Work, 1896, p. 175)

Mr Crow, still clinging to the Recognition by the Dog title,
has been unconscious of the fact that the painting referred to by
Brown as now in his house was a Tristram and Iseult, begun by
Morris probably late in 1857. In January, 1858, D. G. Rossetti
had written Brown from London: 'Plint was here on Tuesday
evening ... He has bought Topsy’s picture for 75 guineas,' and
William Rossetti in his note on this letter (Ruskin: Rossetti: and
PreRaphaelitism, 1899, p. 194) says: "Topsy’s picture" was a
Tristram and Yseult'. Brown noted in his diary, January 27, 1858
'Plint has ... bought Topsy's (Morris) Tristram and Isult [sic].'
And the index of the Hueffer Life refers to the letter to Mr Plint
under Morris, Tristram and Iseult.

An additional allusion to this painting comes from Lady Burne-
Jones who, in writing of the year 1858, says: 'Morris was staying
on at Oxford almost permanently now, working at a picture of
Tristram and Iseult for which Mr Plint had given him a com-
mision.'

There seems to be no other authentic, contemporary mention
of the Tristram and the Dog picture except D. G. Rossetti's; in
fact, his letter to Scott suggests to any one familiar with his
methods, that he was simply trying, by writing of Morris's work,
to impress Scott, who was very sour about the Oxford project,
and Rossetti's new, young friends. No painting with such a title
appears in the catalogue of the Plint sale; in fact, though William
Rossetti lists 19 artists whose work did appear, he does not mention
Morris; it seems never to have appeared in a sales-room or in an
exhibition, and never to have been reproduced, nor are there any
studies for it. John Gere's catalogue in The Pre-Raphaelite
Painters, 1948, quotes the Rossetti letter to Scott, and continues:
'This picture [the Dog] was commissioned by Plint for £70 but
was very much altered under the supervision of Madox Brown
and never finished: it is not known what became of it.' The Gere
list makes no mention of a Tristram and Iseult, even though it
actually was the one commissioned by Plint, and for which a
pencil study, formerly in the possession of H. C. Marillier and now in the possession of the writer, exists and was reproduced in Gerald Crow's book in 1934.

All this evidence proves that the Plint commission was for Tristram and Iseult, but in J. W. Mackail's Life of William Morris he has confused this painting with the portrait of Jane Burden (Mrs Morris) called originally Queen Guenevere, and later La Belle Iseult, and the error has continued through other, later writings. Mackail wrote: '[Morris] even sold a painting for the considerable sum of £70 to Mr Plint of Leeds. The negotiation was conducted by Rossetti who liked making bargains for his friends as well as for himself. This picture which has now [presumably 1899, the date of publication of the Life], after many wanderings returned to the possession of his family is believed to be the only finished easel painting by Morris known to exist. It was exhibited at the New Gallery in 1898.'

Obviously Mackail is referring to the portrait; the index under Mrs Morris refers to this page although Mackail does not mention her name in the text, and in the review of the New Gallery exhibition of January, 1898, mentioned before, the reviewer wrote: 'Among [Rossetti's] pictures is set one from the brush of William Morris—a practical joke of the Directors, one would say, upon the public. This powerful little work, Queen Guinevere [sic]...'. Finally, it was the portrait that was returned to the family by William Rossetti, who wrote in 1904: 'After my Brother's death a painting by Wm. Morris named Queen Guenevere, remained in my hands—my Brother's property. Then it got mislaid for a long while—on its recovery I assented to the request of M's Trustees that it be handed over to them—they then thro' Mr Cockerell presented me with this Kelmscott Press Book (Sidonia the Sorceress) and 2 others.' The books were sold at Sotheby's 16 May, 1950.

Philip Henderson in his preface to Morris's Letters carries on the confusion by writing: 'Apart from La Belle Iseult, now in the Tate Gallery, Morris was next year at work on his first commission, The Recognition of Sir Tristram by Iseult's Dog. Studies for another picture, Tristram and Iseult on the Ship, exist...'.

When the title La Belle Iseult was given to the former Queen Guenevere, and by whom, is not apparent; the Tate Gallery uses that form and perpetuates the error of its original destination with a further peculiar twist of its own: '. . . sold by Rossetti to his wealthy Leeds client, Mrs Plint.' This unfortunate lady had her
hands full without collecting pictures; her eleventh child was born two weeks before Mr Plint's death in 1861, and she died almost immediately after her husband. The change of title adds one more element of confusion by giving another Isult.

To return to Mackail's statement; the picture sold to Plint was not the portrait, but the portrait was the picture returned to the Morris family 'after many wanderings'. As this is by far the most interesting of the paintings it is worth following its career. In 1883, John Ingram wrote the Life of Oliver Madox Brown. Oliver, or Nolly as he was always called, was the gifted son of Ford Madox Brown who died at the age of 19 in 1874. In this book there is a correspondence between Rossetti and Nolly which is most enlightening. Nolly visited Rossetti at Kelmscott in March, 1874, and caused his host some hours of acute anxiety by disappearing in the boat and not returning until late at night. After he had left for home, Rossetti discovered that the boat had been damaged and a book left in it had suffered. When he wrote Nolly about this, he received a most abject reply from the boy promising to repay him as soon as he could get some money. Rossetti answered that no assaults would be made on his purse but that if he were needing funds, and would like to sell 'the unfinished picture by——I will give £20 for it'. To this he added a postscript that he did not by any means want to press Nolly to sell, but that he should like to buy it and was not making the offer merely in case it should be convenient to Nolly. Nolly replied with an offer to give the picture to Rossetti 'as a present as far as any ownership of my own is concerned. Mr——certainly told me I might have it. (I rather suspect he is hard-up himself at present in which case he might like you to pay the money to him instead.) Anyhow, if the picture really does belong to me, you shall have it'. Mr Ingram here interjects that the allusion to Mr——being hard-up must have been intended as irony as it was scarcely likely that even Nolly could 'have deemed the gentleman alluded to to have been in want of money'. (Morris, of course, was still alive when this book was published, hence all the discretion.) Actually in the sixties and seventies Morris was sometimes in straits to pay the weekly wages of his workmen, a fact which Nolly might well be aware of from his father's connexion with the Firm. On the other hand Nolly may have been being impertinent, knowing that Rossetti would not have wanted to buy the picture direct from Morris for personal reasons.

Rossetti declined to accept the painting as a gift; Nolly then
proposed to exchange it for something of Rossetti's own work, to which Rossetti replied: 'My wish to possess the latter 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. From what you say of the picture, however, it strikes me that I might not be able with any sort of fairness to meet its value by such an 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.'

Ingram says that, of course, Oliver did send it and as a present, and of course it remained the property of his friend.

Mr Crow in his essay wrote: 'Long afterwards, this, his only known finished painting, was in Rossetti's hands, who proposed repainting it to do the sitter better justice!' Aymer Vallance seems to be the authority for this idea, as he wrote in 1897 that 'Rossetti kept it by him with a view to repainting it because he was not satisfied that it did justice to the lady it portrayed'. It was not Rossetti, but young Nolly who proposed to tamper with the painting and Rossetti who stopped him.

To sum up, there is no proof that Sir Tristram and the Dog ever existed; Tristram and Iseult was the picture commissioned by Plint, still unfinished at the time of his death, for which at least a pencil study is known, though the painting has disappeared; and there is Queen Guenevere or La Belle Iseult, which remained in Morris's hands until in some informal way he gave it to Oliver Brown. It then passed to Rossetti: after his death Mrs Helen Rossetti Angeli says that she rescued it from a closet and it hung in her bedroom. Eventually William Rossetti gave it back to the Morris Trustees and it is now in the Tate Gallery.