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by JOHN CHRISTIAN

22. *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1872. Canvas, 182.8 by 279.3 cm. (Private collection).

THE FORTHCOMING PRE-RAPHAELITE exhibition at Tate Britain (12th September to 13th January 2013) will include a large unfinished oil painting by Edward Burne-Jones (Fig.22). Boldly worked in brown and ochre monochrome, it is still essentially an underpainting, with only hints of the colour glazes that would have built up the finished work. But the forms are already well established and the canvas clearly represents a major composition, conceived on a truly heroic scale.[1]

The picture is almost totally unknown. It seems to have been seen in public on only two brief occasions: when it was includ-ed in Burne-Jones's second studio sale, held at Christie's in June 1919,[2] and when it returned to Christie's for an anonymous sale in January 1975.[3] The only reproduction until now has been the one in the 1975 sale catalogue.

On its two saleroom appearances, the picture was entitled *The fountain of Youth*, and this is certainly a Burne-Jones subject. It was one of the many compositions, often allegorical in theme, on which he embarked in the early 1870s, when his imagination, stimulated by his last two visits to Italy in 1871 and 1873, was, even for him, unusually fertile. According to his autograph

[1] The canvas has been abandoned more or less at a stage described by Philip Burne-Jones in his account of his father's working methods: 'The design was [. . .] drawn in [. . .] in thin monochrome (burnt sienna, raw or burnt umber, or terre verte), and the real work of painting the picture would begin. My father [. . .] would start with the brighter portions in pure flake white, lumping it up, and patting it on and dragging it over, so as completely to cover the warp and woof of the canvas and form agreeable surfaces, which were allowed to get bone-dry before the final glazes were applied'; P. Burne-Jones: 'Notes on Some Unfinished Works of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bt.', *Magazine of Art* 24 (1900), p.160. Although unfinished, the picture is in fine condition. The canvas has been extended by about 16 cm. on the left, evidently at Burne-Jones's own request to allow him more space for the running female figure. The picture was relined following its sale in 1975, but the original stretcher was retained.

[2] Sale, Christie's, London, *Remaining Works of the late Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bart*, 5th June 1919, lot 162, as *The fountain of Youth*. Bought for 260 gns by Gooden & Fox.

[3] Sale, Christie's, London, 24th January 1975, lot 57, as *The fountain of Youth*, bought by Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox on behalf of the present owner.
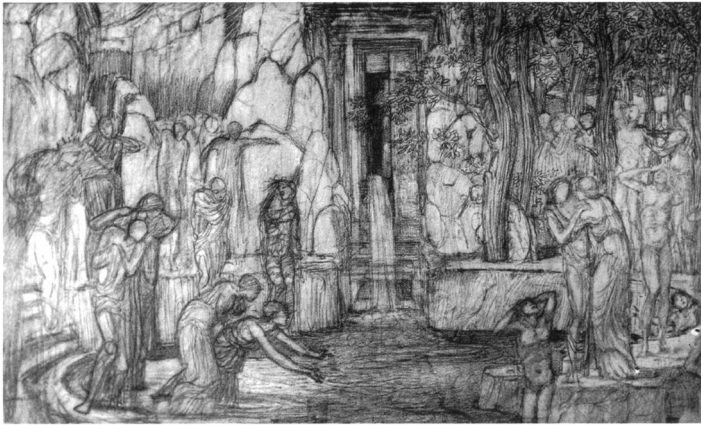
23. Study for *The fountain of Youth*, by Edward Burne-Jones. Probably 1875. Pencil, 58.4 by 103 cm. (Carlisle Art Gallery).

24. Study for *The fountain of Youth*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1875. Watercolour with bodycolour, 62.2 by 11.5 cm. (Tate Britain, London).

work-record,[4] he 'designed' the subject in 1873, 'to paint afterwards'; 'finished a design' in 1875; and 'worked on [a] design' in 1879. Further spells of work followed in 1881 and 1892.

These entries more or less correspond with the treatments of *The fountain of Youth* known to us today. The initial 'designing' in 1873 can be related to a group of experimental drawings in a sketchbook in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, which is devoted to compositional ideas conceived during the 1870s.[5] A more evolved pencil drawing in the Carlisle Art Gallery (Fig.23) and a monochromatic study in Tate Britain, freely handled in bodycolour (Fig.24), probably represent the 'finishing' of the design in 1875. Though very different in technique, the two versions are similar in composition and scale. The work done in 1879 and 1881 is less easily identified, but a large, extant drawing (Fig.25) seems to be a product of the last burst of activity, entered in the work-record under 1892. Executed in coloured chalks and showing only the figures on the right-hand side of the design, the drawing is in the mannered, abstracted style that the artist had developed by this date.

No trace exists of the painting that Burne-Jones had in mind from the outset, and it was probably never started. As his American friend Charles Eliot Norton observed in 1869, 'his fancy creates a hundred pictures for one that his hand can paint'.[6] But even without the final canvas we are left in no doubt of the composition, and it bears no resemblance to the picture published here.

Nor is it a case of a phenomenon common enough in Burne-Jones's work: two quite different designs treating the same theme. In the 'real' *Fountain of Youth* the subject is not in doubt.

The eponymous fountain dominates the composition, gushing from open doors in a massive central rock. On the left, elderly figures immerse themselves in its waters, while on the right other figures emerge, joyfully experiencing their rejuvenated state. But the iconography of our picture in no way suits this title. The detail that presumably suggested it is no more than a marble well-head at the far right of the design, while the idea of immersion in youth-restoring water is entirely absent. The figure who leans his elbows on the well-head, far from looking radiantly happy, seems sunk in glum despair.

The answer to the problem is that our picture represents an altogether different subject. Nothing to do with fountains, rejuvenating or otherwise, it is a painting that has long tantalised Burne-Jones scholars: a *Tristram and Iseult*[7] that the artist is recorded working on in 1871–72 but which seemingly had disappeared. It is true that this means rejecting the title the picture had acquired as early as 1919, when the artist's widow and two children, Philip and Margaret, any one of whom might have been expected to identify it correctly, were still alive. In fact it is just possible that doubts *were* expressed about the subject when the canvas was included in the second studio sale that year. The full title given in the catalogue – '*The Fountain of Youth*': *The meeting of a Knight and his lady in a grove; other figures on the right* [*sic*] – suggests that someone felt obliged to hedge their bets.[8] But the picture, to say the least, was a puzzle, nor was the ignorance displayed here without parallel. Philip Burne-Jones often misidentified studies when annotating his father's sketchbooks; and it seems that Margaret went to her

[4] 268 pp., 18.6 by 11.8 cm., 1872–98; presented to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, by Sir Philip Burne-Jones and Margaret Mackail, the artist's children, May 1921.

[5] No.1085. Cloth-covered boards half-bound in leather. 25 pp., 25.5 by 36 cm. The drawings in pencil and red chalk are of the 1870s. Presented to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, by Sir Philip Burne-Jones and Margaret Mackail, April 1923. The sketches for *The fountain of Youth* occur on pp.16 recto, 18 verso and 19 recto. The large red-chalk drawing on p.16 recto shows the composition still unresolved; indeed a sketch in the same medium facing it on p.15 verso may represent an even more preliminary idea. The drawings on pp.18 verso and 19 recto, nine pencil sketches in all, are much closer to the eventual solution. A further pencil sketch occurs on the back of a pen-and-ink drawing for the frontispiece of William Morris's poem *Love is Enough* (1872) in the Carlisle Art Gallery (inv. no.125-1949, 38).

[6] S. Norton and M.A. DeWolfe Howe, eds.: *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton*, London, Boston and New York 1913, I, p.346.

[7] Or *Yseult*; Burne-Jones is not consistent in his spelling.

[8] It is interesting in this context that at some stage Philip Burne-Jones does seem to

have known what *Tristram and Iseult* looked like; see note 41 below. He was also aware of the true appearance of *The fountain of Youth*, the composition with which *Tristram and Iseult* has been confused, since he correctly identified the drawings for this subject when annotating the Fitzwilliam sketchbook (see note 5 above).

[9] Margaret Mackail's sale, Christie's, London, 3rd December 1954, lot 44. The lot consisted of two items, sold for 26 gns to Brown & Phillips (Leicester Galleries). The painting was identified correctly when it was included in J. Christian: exh. cat. *Burne-Jones*, London (Hayward Gallery), Southampton (City Art Gallery) and Birmingham (City Museum and Art Gallery) 1975–76, no.23. It has since reappeared more than once in the saleroom, most recently at Christie's, London, on 12th December 2007, lot 50.

[10] Entitled *Portrait of Margaret, the artist's daughter* (unfinished, canvas, 57 by 44 cm.), the picture appeared at Sotheby's, London, *Victorian and Edwardian Art*, 16th December 2010, lot 23, unsold. It had always been in the Burne-Jones family. The sitter has the easily recognised features of Georgiana, and she seems to be in her late thirties. Since Georgiana was born in 1840, this would date the portrait to the late 1870s, which is indeed consistent with its style. To identify the sitter as Margaret Burne-Jones is untenable, not only because the portrait looks nothing like her but because

grave believing that a well-documented *Blessed damozel* in her possession showed nothing more specific than 'a saint in a garden'.[9] Even portraits have suffered from this familial amnesia. As recently as December 2010 a portrait by Burne-Jones of his wife, Georgiana, was offered for sale by their descendants as a likeness of Margaret, flatly contradicting the sitter's appearance and her age as indicated by what the picture's handling tells us about its date.[10]

The earliest references to the *Tristram and Iseult* occur in Burne-Jones's autograph work-record, a source already quoted. He notes that he 'designed' the subject in 1871 and 'began' a 'large' painting in 1872. Early writers who had access to the record also mentioned the picture. Malcolm Bell, a distant 'nephew' of the artist by marriage, referred to it in his pioneering monograph of 1892.[11] He describes it as 'never finished', information that, since it was not to be gleaned from the record alone, he must either have been given by Burne-Jones or gathered for himself by seeing the canvas in the artist's studio. As for Lady Burne-Jones in her *Memorials* of her husband, the 'official' biography published in 1904, she transcribes the whole list of works that engaged him in 1872, *Tristram and Iseult* among them.[12] She was discussing the 'tremendous impetus' that had been given to his productivity by his visit to Italy the previous year, and had already quoted a relevant letter to Norton, written soon after his return, in which he said that he had 'sixty pictures, oil and water, in [his] studio, and every day [. . .] would gladly begin a new one'.[13] The 1872 work-record provided her with further evidence since it lists no fewer than thirty-four items, including many which embrace a whole series of individual designs. Without exception, it was Burne-Jones's most productive year.

Even these random references support the identification of our picture. On stylistic grounds, it is clearly a work of the early 1870s; and Burne-Jones's own word for it – 'large' – is self-evidently apt. Both its enormous scale and its unfinished state are referred to in another early account: the record of studio conversation that was kept by T.M. Rooke, Burne-Jones's faithful assistant, in the closing years of his master's life. Rooke reports Burne-Jones telling him that *Tristram and Iseult* was painted at Little Campden House, a house 'near the reservoir' on Campden Hill, Kensington, that was tenanted at the time by his friend and fellow artist J.R. Spencer Stanhope. The picture was 'too big for my own room', Burne-Jones observed, 'I never finished it'.[14]

Burne-Jones also used Stanhope's Campden Hill studio to paint the well-known *Love among the ruins* (private collection), a colossal watercolour exhibited at the Dudley Gallery, London, in 1873. It is surprising that he had insufficient space to accommodate these works at The Grange, his own substantial eighteenth-

25. Study for *The fountain of Youth*, by Edward Burne-Jones. Probably 1892. Coloured chalks, 160 by 160 cm. (Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, New Zealand).

century house in North End Lane, Fulham, one of the chief attractions of which when he settled there in 1867 was 'a large room on the first floor with an east light' that was ideal as a studio.[15] But his pictures were certainly not getting any smaller in the early 1870s. On the contrary, it was then that he established the monumental scale to which he adhered for nearly all his major exhibition pictures from this time on.

Tristram and Iseult was not the largest painting that Burne-Jones planned at this time. He would probably have described the figures as 'small life size', a term he used for another design developed in 1872,[16] whereas two more compositions of this year were to be the size of life itself.[17] The concept is almost unique, however, in that it did not remain a pipe dream. So many of these grandiose schemes were to be drastically modified,[18] not committed to canvas until many years later, or (like *The fountain of Youth*) abandoned altogether. *Tristram and Iseult* was actually started and, if not finished, at least taken to a point where the artist's intentions are abundantly evident. Nothing testifies more vividly to his aspirations and self-confidence at

she would have been a child when it was painted. She was born in 1866.

[11] M. Bell: *Sir Edward Burne-Jones: A Record and Review*, London and New York 1894, 3rd ed., pp.43 and 47.

[12] G[eorgiana].B[urne]-J[ones].: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, London 1904, II, pp.29–30.

[13] *Ibid.*, p.23.

[14] M. Lago, ed.: *Burne-Jones Talking: his conversations 1895–1898 preserved by his studio assistant Thomas Rooke*, London 1981, pp.77 and 80, note 7; see also C. Dakers: *The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society*, New Haven and London 1999, p.53.

[15] G.B.-J., *op. cit.* (note 12), I, p.306.

[16] *The sirens.* Conceived in 1870, the design was listed by Burne-Jones in 1872 as one of '4 subjects which above all others I desire to paint, and count my chief designs for some years to come'. Nothing more is heard of it until 1880 ('designed picture of Sirens'), and only in 1891 did he begin an enormous canvas (213.4 by 305 cm.) Still unfinished at his death seven years later, the picture is now in the Ringling Museum of Arts, Sarasota FL.

[17] *The chariot of Love* and *The vision of Britomart*. Both were among the '4 subjects' he saw as his 'chief designs for some years to come' (see note 16 above). Studies for *The chariot of Love* (by then re-named *Love's wayfaring*) were made in 1881, but the colossal canvas itself was not started until the mid-1890s and remains unfinished. It now hangs on the library staircase at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *The vision of Britomart*, better known as *The masque of Cupid*, was never carried out as a painting, although drawings were produced in 1872–73 and Burne-Jones was still toying with the idea as late as 1898; see also note 40 below.

[18] The obvious case is the so-called 'Troy Triptych', an ambitious attempt to tell the story of the Fall of Troy in terms of a series of narrative and allegorical paintings set into a massive Renaissance-style frame. So challenging was the scheme, in fact, that the artist's wife feared it would 'break his heart' (reminiscence of T.M. Rooke in *City of Birmingham Art Gallery: Catalogue of the Permanent Collection of Paintings . . .*, Birmingham 1930, p.31). Designed in 1870, the triptych was never completed as an entity, but several designs for it were developed as independent pictures. *The wheel of Fortune*, which exists in several versions, is the chief example.

26. Sketch for *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1871–72. Pencil, 25.5 by 36 cm. (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).
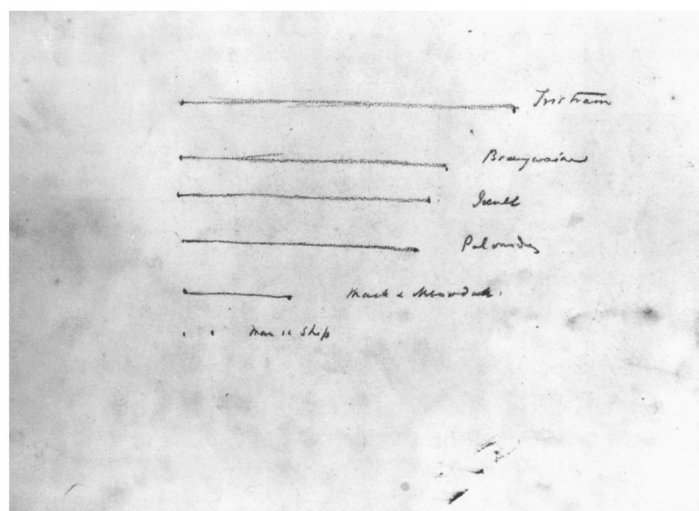
27. Diagram relating to *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1871–72. Black chalk, 25.5 by 36 cm. (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

the age of thirty-nine, a mere sixteen years after he had embarked on his career as a talented but almost totally untrained amateur.

But we are talking of the picture as if its subject was established when in fact we have only considered data that is *consistent* with our theory. The clinching argument lies in another source already mentioned, namely the sketchbook in the Fitzwilliam Museum in which Burne-Jones jotted down compositional ideas in the 1870s, intending to develop them in the course of time. Several pages before the studies for *The fountain of Youth* there occurs a double-page spread on the right side of which is a rough compositional sketch clearly related to our picture (Fig.26).[19] Philip Burne-Jones, who identified a number of drawings in the book, has no annotation here, presumably being as baffled by the design in this form as he was by the painting itself.

However, to the right of the sketch are two sets of marks in Burne-Jones's own hand. They are arranged like notes on a stave of music and seem to refer to the chief features of the composition, showing this, as it were, in cross section. The lower set of marks is clearly the more considered statement, a sort of 'fair copy' of the one above, and may therefore be taken as a better index of the artist's intentions. It also seems likely that Burne-Jones made the marks after he had executed the sketch in order to clarify certain aspects of the design before he transferred it to canvas. This explains why the significance of the marks is in some ways clearer in relation to the painting (Fig.22) than to the rough sketch.

Reading from left to right, we can equate the first horizontal stroke to the female figure running into the picture space on the left. The three ascending u-shaped marks that follow would seem to correspond to the receding space, punctuated by smaller figures and a distant ship, to the right of the running figure; while two more horizontal strokes, moving downwards (or, in cross-sectional terms, forwards) appear to represent the nude female figure seen from behind and the embracing couple in the centre-right foreground. After these strokes comes another group of

ascending u-shaped marks, apparently denoting the trees, the skirts of a wood or forest, to the right of the amorous couple.[20] Finally, two more horizontal strokes seem to stand for the despondent figure and the well-head on which he leans at the composition's right-hand edge.

On the facing page of the sketchbook is another set of marks, at first sight equally enigmatic but again related to the composition and for the first time providing positive evidence of its subject (Fig.27).[21] It consists of a series of parallel lines drawn one above the other between two dots, with the longest line at the top and the shortest (merely a pair of dots that the artist has not bothered to join up) at the bottom. The longest line is marked 'Tristram', while the shortest has 'man in ship' written against it. These words establish a link with the design drawn opposite; for while the longest line ('Tristram') would seem to represent the armoured knight placed prominently in the foreground, the shortest ('man in ship') can only refer to the ship in the left-hand distance.

It follows that the remaining figures also correspond to the parallel lines. Beneath 'Tristram' are three lines of similar but not quite equal length marked, in descending order, 'Brangwaine', 'Iseult' and 'Palomides'. These must refer to the three figures placed more or less in the same plane somewhat further back from the embracing couple, namely the girl running in from the left, the nude seen from behind, and the forlorn figure on the right. The last must be Palomides, not only because he is the only male of the trio but because his position in the picture, a little further back than the others, accounts for why his line is a fraction shorter than theirs. For reasons that will become clearer, the running figure on the left may be identified as 'Iseult', making 'Brangwaine' correspond to the standing female nude.

This still leaves three figures unaccounted for: the girl being embraced by Tristram and the two men, one standing and draped, the other seated and nude, in the middle distance on the left. This couple must be represented by the short line between 'man in ship' and 'Palomides', the length of which relates exact-

[19] p.10 recto of Sketchbook no.1085 (see note 5 above).
[20] Burne-Jones's account of this wood is based on studies of olive trees that he had made in autumn 1871 during his third visit to Italy. The studies occur in the sketchbook he kept at the time, described in Christian, *op. cit.* (note 9), no.345. Henry James

once made the perceptive comment that for all their cerebral qualities, what he called their 'reminiscences of Oxford', Burne-Jones's paintings 'could not have been produced without a vast deal of "looking" on the painter's part'; J.L. Sweeney, ed.: *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts by Henry James*, London 1956, p.145.
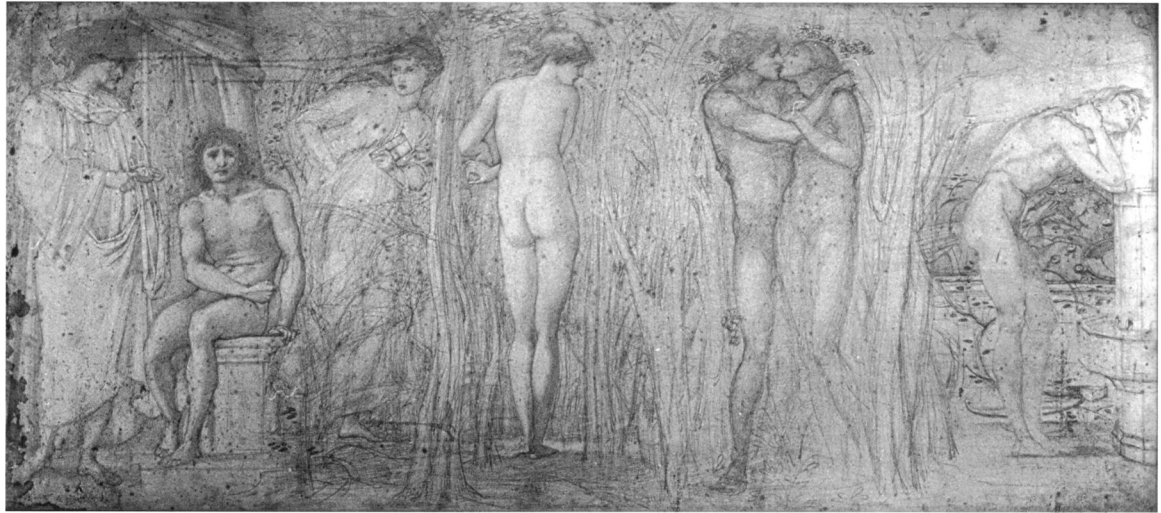
28. Study for *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1871. Pencil, 52 by 119 cm. (Torre Abbey, Torquay, Devon).

ly to their position in the picture space. Against the line is written 'Mark &', followed by a word which is not easy to decipher but is almost certainly 'Alisander'. As for the tall girl in the foreground, she, it seems, has no line to herself, despite her compositional importance. For reasons which will again emerge, she is subsumed in the figure of her armour-clad lover, and the line marked 'Tristram' stands in effect for them both.

A version of the composition exists in the form of a large pencil drawing at Torre Abbey, Torquay (Fig.28). With the exception of the 'man in ship', all the figures seen in the canvas are present, but they are arranged like a frieze in the foreground plane, with little sense of recession. The subject does not really 'work' on these terms, and the drawing almost certainly pre-dates both the Fitzwilliam sketch (Fig.26) and the canvas (Fig.22), rather than being an afterthought or later variant. At some stage Burne-Jones must have decided to rearrange the figures in a deeply receding landscape, made the Fitzwilliam sketch and drawn the related diagrams to clarify still further the three-dimensional articulation of the new pictorial space. Once this had been determined, he was free to proceed with the canvas itself; and smudges of oil paint on the sketchbook pages suggest that it lay open beside him as he worked.

The evidence of the Fitzwilliam sketchbook seems to prove beyond doubt that the picture is the long-lost *Tristram and Iseult* on which Burne-Jones was working in 1871–72. But it is clearly no orthodox treatment of the subject, and to understand who the figures are and what they are doing, we need to look more closely at the literary context.

The story of the star-crossed lovers is one of the most celebrated in medieval secular literature. Tristram is a brave but psychologically flawed knight errant, among the doughtiest champions at King Arthur's court; La Belle Iseult is the daughter of King Anguish of Ireland. Their love had already been kindled when Tristram was sent to Ireland by his treacherous uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, to seek Iseult's hand in marriage; and it flared into undying passion on the sea-voyage back to Cornwall when, by a fatal mistake, they drank the love-potion that Iseult's mother had prepared for her and Mark. Iseult was condemned to a loveless marriage with the king, and the adulterous affair at the heart of the romance was launched.

The tale occupies well over a third of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. It is by far the longest of the stories which, following the discovery of the Winchester College manuscript in 1934, are now seen as separate books rather than parts of a single text, the form in which Caxton sought to re-cast them when he published them in 1485. It is also in many ways a dislikable work, Malory's 'uninspiring' and 'least attractive' production in the words of his apologist Eugène Vinaver.[22] Based on a particularly unwieldy example of the French thirteenth-century prose romances from which the writer drew his material, it has little form, exhausts the reader with its discursiveness, and is even without the benefit of a sympathetic hero. The reviewer of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* who complained that 'length – interminable length – is the bugbear inseparable from the name of Arthur',[23] might have had Malory's *Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones* specifically in mind. So might Philip Morville, the 'villain' of Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, when he observed of the *Morte d'Arthur* that it was 'very curious, [. . .] a book no-one could read through', marred by 'a great sameness of character and adventure'.[24]

Yonge's Anglo-Catholic novel appeared in 1853, the year Burne-Jones and William Morris went up to Oxford. They identified closely with Guy Morville, its ardent, idealistic young hero; and his robust defence of Malory against Philip's sneering assertions did much to inspire the two artists' lifelong passion for Arthurian romance. In the summer of 1855 they eventually acquired the text in the form of Robert Southey's 1817 edition; and when they met D.G. Rossetti the following year, it was Malory, rivalled only by Froissart, who provided the chief literary inspiration for the orgy of medievalism to which this unique pooling of talents gave rise.

The story of Tristram and Iseult was one of their favourites. They overlooked its more tiresome aspects, responding to the lyricism, vivid imagery and dramatic intensity which, for all its faults, it undoubtedly possesses. Morris was particularly drawn to it, perhaps from some deep-seated sense that it held personal

The wood in *Tristram and Iseult* is a good example.

[21] p.9 verso of Sketchbook no.1085 (see note 5 above).
[22] E. Vinaver, ed.: *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, Oxford 1954, p.viii; and *idem*: 'Sir Thomas Malory', in R. Sherman Loomis, ed.: *Arthurian Literature in the Middle*

Ages, Oxford 1959, p.545.
[23] Quoted in G. and K. Tillotson: *Mid-Victorian Studies*, London 1965, pp.93–94.
[24] C.M. Yonge: *The Heir of Redclyffe*, London and New York 1888, p.117.

29. *Alys la belle pèlerine*, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1858. Pen and black ink with grey wash and some white bodycolour on vellum, 25.5 by 14.5 cm. (Courtesy of Christie's Images).

launched the previous year. The designs for the thirteen panels, commissioned by the Bradford merchant Walter Dunlop for the entrance hall at Harden Grange, his home at Bingley, were divided between Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, Burne-Jones, Arthur Hughes, Val Prinsep and Morris himself. Brown, Rossetti and Burne-Jones all painted easel versions of their cartoons, and it may be that Swinburne too was thinking of the project when he embarked on *Tristram of Lyonesse*, a second and much more ambitious re-casting of the story, in 1869. Writing to Burne-Jones at the time, he told him that he was 'stimulated' by 'the thought of your painting and Wagner's music'.[26] *Tristram of Lyonesse*, which Swinburne considered his masterpiece, was not published until 1882, and by then Morris himself had been tempted to return to the theme. According to his biographer J.W. Mackail, he was planning a 'long narrative poem on the story of Tristram', 'the episode of the whole Arthurian cycle that held his imagination most strongly', in the summer of 1870.[27] The poem never materialised, but the fact that Burne-Jones was designing our picture only a year later may not be coincidental.

Swinburne's reference to Wagner, whose *Tristan und Isolde* had received its premiere at Munich in 1865, is a reminder, if any were needed, that the story cast its spell far beyond the Pre-Raphaelite circle. As so often in such contexts, Sir Walter Scott had fired the opening salvo, publishing an edition of the Middle English *Sir Tristrem* by Thomas of Ercildoune as early as 1804. William Dyce used the legend to illustrate two virtues, Courtesy and Hospitality, in the Arthurian frescos in the Queen's Robing Room at the Palace of Westminster that he began in the late 1840s and was still working on at his death in 1864. Meanwhile Matthew Arnold's *Tristan and Iseult* had appeared in 1852, and Tennyson's account of the story in 'The Last Tournament', one of the *Idylls of the King*, followed in 1871. Burne-Jones may have shared Swinburne's high regard for Arnold's poem and reservations about Tennyson's, which, like Morris's unwritten version of 1870, was close in date to his picture.[28] What he would not have known is that in March 1870 the young Thomas Hardy had paid a momentous visit to Cornwall, setting eyes for the first time on his future wife ('an Iseult of my own') and conceiving the idea of treating yet again the famous legend. Well aware that he was working at the end of a long and distinguished tradition, Hardy let the scheme hang fire, but he finally set to work on a play in 1916. *The Queen of Cornwall* was performed for the first time seven years later.[29]

To draw these parallels does more than evoke our picture's cultural background. Nearly all the other treatments are essentially narrative, albeit sometimes, as with Dyce's or Tennyson's, having a moral or symbolic dimension. Even Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*, in which the tribulations of the lovers acquire an almost cosmic significance, allowing the poet to expand in his most high-flown style on the metaphysics of Fate, takes the form (in his own words) of 'a succession of dramatic scenes or pic-

significance for himself. He illustrated it in his contribution to the murals in the Oxford Union, carried out under Rossetti's supervision in the Long Vacation of 1857. It also found reflections in his early poetry, and during the brief, frustrating period when he was trying to be an easel painter, at least two of his pictures took their subjects from this source. They included *La Belle Iseult* (1858; Tate Britain), the only canvas he was ever to complete.

During the late 1850s Morris's enthusiasm for the legend touched other members of his circle. A.C. Swinburne, who had contemplated an 'epic' on the subject since boyhood, was inspired to take it up in earnest in a never-to-be-finished poem called 'Queen Yseult'. Meanwhile Burne-Jones was devoting one of his meticulous pen-and-ink drawings to Alys la belle pèlerine, endowing this obscure heroine in the Tristram and Iseult saga with the status of a full-blown Pre-Raphaelite 'stunner' (Fig.29).[25]

Morris seized the initiative again in 1862 when he made the tale the subject of a scheme of stained glass executed by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., the firm of 'fine art workmen' he had

[25] For Swinburne's 'Queen Yseult', see A.H. Harrison: *Swinburne's Medievalism*, (Baton Rouge and London) 1988, p.80. Burne-Jones's *Alys la belle pèlerine*, although listed in the artist's autograph work-record and other early sources, was lost for many years, but reappeared when it was offered at Christie's, London, *Important British and Irish Art*, 9th June 2004, lot 17.
[26] C.Y. Lang, ed.: *The Swinburne Letters, II (1869–1875)*, New Haven and London 1959, p.51.
[27] J.W. Mackail: *The Life of William Morris*, Oxford 1950, I, p.215, and II, p.80.
[28] Harrison, *op. cit.* (note 25), pp.81 and 101. For useful comments on the different approaches adopted by Swinburne, Tennyson and Arnold, see J.P. Eggers: *King Arthur's Laureate: A Study of Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King'*, New York 1971,

pp.109–15 and 131–36.
[29] These are not the only treatments of the story in Victorian literature; for others, see *ibid.*, pp.215–52. Perhaps the most relevant is Frederick Millard's *Tristram and Iseult*, a retelling of the entire tale in Tennysonian blank verse that was published in 1870, a year before Burne-Jones conceived his painting. Laurence Binyon's poem 'Tristram's End', included in his *Lyric Poems* of 1894, is also of interest, rounding off the tradition in much the same way as Hardy's *Queen of Cornwall*.
[30] *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, London 1904, I, p.xviii, in the poet's 'Dedicatory Epistle'.
[31] See H.E. Wroot: 'Pre-Raphaelite Windows at Bradford', *The Studio* 72 (November 1917), repr. p.71, fig.5.

tures'.[30] But Burne-Jones, who had contributed to just such a scheme in the Dunlop glass panels, opts for a radically different approach in *Tristram and Iseult*.

It has been established that Tristram is the heavily armed knight who stands in the picture's foreground. He embraces a female figure, and the natural assumption is that she is La Belle Iseult. However, we have seen that another figure is identified as Iseult in the diagram listing the picture's dramatis personae (Fig.27), namely the girl running in from the left. Who, then, is Tristram embracing? The answer must be the confusingly-named Iseult of the White Hands, the daughter of King Howell of Brittany, whom Tristram marries when La Belle Iseult (too trustingly, perhaps, given that her lover, like his uncle, is prone to treachery) sends him to her to be cured of a wound inflicted by a poisoned arrow. Today this 'second' Iseult tends to be over-looked, possibly because she is ignored by Wagner; but she appears in the *Morte d'Arthur* and the Victorians were keenly alive to her presence. Her marriage to Tristram is the subject of one of the Dunlop panels, the scene falling to Burne-Jones himself.[31] She inspired an unpublished early poem by Morris, and Ten-nyson, Arnold, Swinburne and Hardy all introduce her, some-times to powerfully dramatic effect. The entire third section of Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult* is devoted to her ruminations follow-ing the deaths of her husband and his paramour, while in Swin-burne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* she becomes their implacable nemesis, the obsessively vengeful instrument of their doom.[32]

Any idea that the figure labelled Iseult in the diagram might her-self be Iseult of Brittany, leaving us free to see the girl embraced by Tristram as La Belle Iseult, can be dismissed. It is no accident that the running figure is identified while the other is not. Despite the narrative importance that Iseult of Brittany is sometimes accorded in Victorian poetry, there is never any doubt that La Belle Iseult is the heroine of the story, and Burne-Jones's system of labelling merely reflects this status. Moreover the action of the figure he identifies as Iseult is only intelligible if she is La Belle Iseult herself. This detail, like so many others, still lacks definition in the unfin-ished painting; but light is shed on the subject by the Torre Abbey drawing (Fig.28), and even more by another preparatory study (Fig.30).[33] In both accounts of the figure, she is carrying a letter.

Many letters are sent and received in the course of the story; it is a marked characteristic of the narrative. Both Iseult and Tris-tram are busy correspondents, Iseult, for example, writing to Queen Guinevere to complain of her lover's unfaithfulness, Tristram to Sir Lancelot to 'excuse' his behaviour on the ungal-lant grounds that his marriage has remained unconsummated. The letter Iseult is holding here is probably the one she writes to Tristram when she hears of his deceit, inviting him, as Malory puts it, 'to com to hir courte and brynge with hym Isode le Blaunche Maynys; and they shulde be kepte als well as herselff'.

As a courier for this magnanimous missive, Iseult employs her faithful maid Dame Brangwaine, that is to say the nude figure

30. Study for La Belle Iseult in *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1872. Pencil, 21.1 by 17 cm. (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge MA).

viewed from behind, centre-left. Her pose is very similar to that of the nude Andromeda in *The doom fulfilled*, one of the Perseus series on which Burne-Jones embarked in 1875,[34] but Brang-waine is naked only because she is unfinished. Burne-Jones invariably began the figures in his larger works by studying them nude, not adding drapery until he had established the underlying forms,[35] and one reason for dating the Torre Abbey drawing ear-lier than the painting is that it shows most of the figures nude, or at least very lightly draped. Even in the painting, however, some are still unclothed, Brangwaine being the obvious example. Her action in the painting, like that of her mistress, is a little ambigu-ous, but in the drawing, where the figures are much closer together, she seems to be preparing to take Iseult's letter in her extended right hand. Meanwhile her glance is directed at the embracing couple to whom the letter relates.

The other figures play lesser roles in the story's central drama: Sir Tristram's betrayal of the code of courtly love. The melan-choly character on the far right we know to be Palomides, the Saracen knight who nurses a hopeless passion for La Belle Iseult and is condemned to an endless pursuit of the Questing Beast. It is no accident that he is seen bemoaning his fate at a well, for wells are another recurring image in the story. They are places where knights meet for combat, or rest and recover their strength. They can be the scene of coarse buffoonery, as when Sir Dagonet, King Arthur's court jester, is soused in one by Sir Tristram. But above all they attract those who need to vent their sorrows. Wishing to represent the woebegone Palomides, it was

[32] Morris's poem is mentioned by May Morris in her introduction to *The Collected Works of William Morris*, London 1910, I, p.xix. She promised to print the 'interest-ing fragment' that survived 'in the last volume of this series' but never did so, although she included another early poem by her father that is linked to the legend thematically, 'Palomydes' Quest' (*ibid.*, XXIV, 1915, pp.70–71). For Arnold's treat-ment of the subject, see B.F. Leavy: 'Iseult of Brittany: A New Interpretation of Matthew Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult"', in *Victorian Poetry* 18/1 (Spring 1980), pp.1–22.
[33] Although the drawing has traditionally been entitled 'Iseult', it has not, unsurpris-ingly, been connected with our painting until now. It was given to the Fogg Art Museum in 1972; see the Museum's *Annual Report* (1972), pp.62 and 90.

[34] Versions in the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (unfinished oil, begun 1876), Southampton City Art Gallery (gouache, c.1884–85), and Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (oil, exhibited 1888). For an illustration of the Southampton version, see S. Wildman and J. Christian: exh. cat. *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1998, p.231, no.96.
[35] Examples are the nude studies for the figures in *The masque of Cupid* (designed 1872, never finished) in the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, and those for *The golden stairs* (Tate Britain; designed 1872, completed 1880) in the Ashmolean Muse-um, Oxford, and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Some comments by Burne-Jones about the need to 'get in the bones of a picture properly' before worry-ing about superficial details are quoted in G.B-J., *op. cit.* (note 12), II, p.323.

31. *The tomb of Tristram and Iseult*, cartoon for stained glass, by Edward Burne-Jones. 1862. Sepia wash, 62.2 by 58.5cm. (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery).

natural for Burne-Jones to show him leaning melodramatically on the head of a well.

As we have seen, it was probably this feature that led to confusion at a later date, causing the picture to be identified as *The fountain of Youth*. It might have been even more misleading if Burne-Jones had not re-thought it after making the Torre Abbey drawing (Fig.28), where it is considerably closer to a conventional fountain in shape. Thematically the change is hardly significant, wells and fountains being more or less synonymous in Malory's text; but the solid well-head on which Palomides leans in the painting undoubtedly closes the composition on a more positive note than the elegant tiered structure it replaces. Its sarcophagus-like form may have been suggested by the tomb bearing the recumbent effigies of Tristram and La Belle Iseult that can be seen behind Palomides in the drawing. Burne-Jones had already handled this motif when designing one of the Dunlop stained-glass panels some nine years earlier (Fig.31),[36] and he now repeated it with little variation. But in its new context, in which it causes the artist to disrupt his frieze-like formula and place it, uniquely, in the middle-distance, as if he hardly knew where else to put it, it looks slightly apologetic. Unsurprisingly, it failed to re-appear in the painting, surviving only as a ghost in the form of the well.

The two figures in the distance on the left have been identified as 'Mark' and 'Alisander' in the sketchbook diagram (Fig.27). Mark, La Belle Iseult's egregious husband and Sir Tristram's mortal foe, must be the heavily draped man standing on the left, and Alisander the powerfully built youth (nude, but presumably, like Brangwaine, to be clothed in due course) seated beside him. Alisander le Orphelin – Alexander the Orphan – was the son of Mark's popular brother, Bodwyne. Mark murders Bodwyne in a fit of jealousy and tries to kill Alisander too, although he only succeeds after his nephew has grown up, proved himself a worthy knight and won the esteem of his peers at King Arthur's court. Alisander's connection with Tristram and Iseult is hardly central to the story, but he falls in love with and has a child by the self-same Alys la Belle Pèlerine who was the subject of one of Burne-Jones's early pen-and-ink drawings (Fig.29), and this is perhaps enough to explain his presence. In fact even Burne-Jones's interest in Alys is mysterious. Perhaps it sprang from nothing more substantial than the tongue-in-cheek desire to puzzle that was intrinsic to the circle's medievalism in the late 1850s.

What the villainous king and his nephew are doing is far from clear. Between the Torre Abbey drawing (Fig.28) and the canvas (Fig.22) the pair undergo a more dramatic change than any other figures in the composition, shooting backwards in space from foreground to far distance; but even the drawing, so helpful elsewhere, is unenlightening here. Indeed, it almost adds to the confusion. True, it confirms the Michelangelesque physique of Alisander, corresponding to Malory's description of him as 'bigge and stronge'; but the action of Mark, who seems to be lecturing his companion, ticking off his arguments on the fingers of his right hand, remains opaque. Neither this nor the tent-like structure behind the couple, which is omitted in the painting, seem to bear any relation to Malory's text.

This is certainly not the case with the final and most distant figure to feature in Burne-Jones's diagram, the 'man in ship'. Anonymous himself, he serves to remind us of the vital part ships play in the Tristram and Iseult story. The obvious example is the one on which the lovers make their fateful journey from Ireland to Cornwall, but many other voyages – between Cornwall, Brittany and various parts of the English coast – take place in the course of the narrative.[37]

It is probably significant that no hint of the ship is found in the Torre Abbey drawing. It was evidently an afterthought, indicating a desire on Burne-Jones's part to emphasise a certain approach to his subject in re-thinking it on canvas. For his purpose, already emerging in the drawing but only fully developed in the painting, seems clear: to evoke the whole ethos of the tale in a single comprehensive (and hauntingly poetic) image, rather than focusing on a specific incident as Morris,

[36] For the stained-glass panel itself, see Wroot, *op. cit.* (note 31), p.73, fig.11.

[37] The 'man in ship' passage may represent another case of the artist's 'looking' (see note 20 above), although this time based on a distant memory rather than a recent experience. Burne-Jones later told his assistant T.M. Rooke that he got 'all [his] strongest impressions of the beauty of ships and the sea from [. . .] seeing the great three-masted ships sail past Menai and Bangor' during a youthful visit to North Wales in about 1850 (unpublished section of Rooke's notes, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, National Art Library, p.529).

[38] Perhaps the most obvious examples are *Phyllis and Demophoön* (watercolour, 1870; Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery), *Love among the ruins* (watercolour, 1870–73; private collection) and *The beguiling of Merlin* (oil, 1873–77; Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight). All three paintings treat subjects that offer parallels to the lovers' predicament, and in each case Maria was the model for the female protagonist. The themes of betrayal and divided loyalty that Burne-Jones handles in *Tristram and Iseult*

place the picture firmly within the same context. In the picture's unfinished state it would stretch the imagination to read Maria's very distinctive features into those of her alter ego, Iseult of Brittany; but it is not impossible that the figure would have grown to look more like her as the canvas developed.

[39] Giorgione was a pervasive influence on Burne-Jones, and the rediscovery of *Tristram and Iseult* significantly enhances our perception of this phenomenon. In 1871, the very year the picture was conceived, Charles Eliot Norton gave Burne-Jones a fragment of a *Rape of Europa* attributed to Giorgione, and there are striking resemblances between *Tristram and Iseult* and the artist's speculations about the composition from which the fragment had been cut – a composition which he even thought of painting himself, copying the fragment and adding the missing parts. The possibility that he knew of just such a painting, a lost *Rape of Europa* attributed to Giorgione of which an engraving appears in David Teniers the Younger's *Theatrum pictorium* (1660), adds a further dimension to this intriguing line of inquiry. Burne-Jones's continued inter-
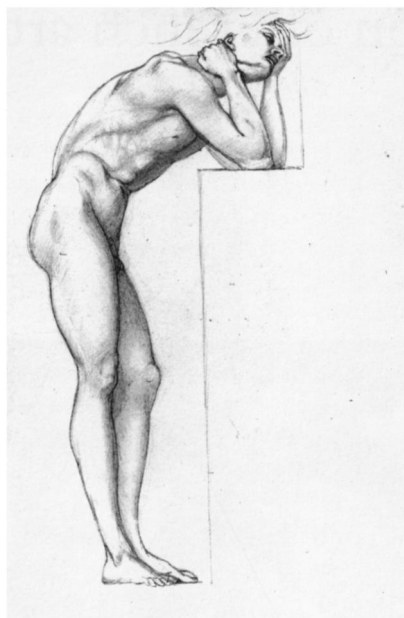
32. Study for Palomides in *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1872. Pencil, 24.1 by 16.5 cm. (Photograph courtesy of Agnew's, London).

33. Study for La Belle Iseult in *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1872. Pencil, 24 by 16.2 cm. (Sheffield City Art Galleries).

34. Study for Tristram and Iseult of Brittany in *Tristram and Iseult*, by Edward Burne-Jones. c.1872. Pencil, 18.4 by 12 cm. (Courtesy of Christie's Images).

Swinburne and others had done before him. Inevitably he bases his conception on the triangular relationship between Tristram and the two Iseults; but he makes almost equal use of the secondary players and those recurring stage-props – ships, letters and wells (to which he might have added harps and hounds, attributes of Tristram as skilled minstrel and mighty hunter) – which contribute so much to the story's distinctive character. The result is curiously theatrical, which is perhaps why words such as 'player' and 'stage' come readily to mind. It is as if we are watching a masque or *tableau vivant*, a stately ritualised dance in which everything has symbolic value over and above its narrative significance.

The picture does, of course, have wider implications. It makes an important addition to the group of works from the early 1870s in which Burne-Jones seems to comment, with astonishing lack of reticence, on his affair with the Greek beauty Maria Zambaco.[38] And it tells us much about his debt, never so apparent as in the early 1870s, to Italian art. Particularly fascinating is the homage it seems to pay to Giorgione, the painter of mysterious landscapes, peopled by inscrutable figures, that tease the imagination and are open to multiple interpretations.[39]

This is not the place to pursue these themes, but three more preparatory studies must be noted. An exquisite head study in the Sheffield City Art Galleries seems to be for La Belle Iseult

(Fig.33),[40] and working drawings exist for Palomides and the kissing heads of Tristram and Iseult of Brittany (Figs.32 and 34).[41] It is hard to say whether these studies, or indeed the one for La Belle Iseult already discussed (Fig.30), pre-date the Torre Abbey drawing or fall between it and the painting.

Nor can we end without asking why, after so much thought and preparation, the canvas was abandoned. Norton's diagnosis of a hand that could not keep pace with an over-active imagination may be true up to a point, but it does not explain why some designs resulted in finished works and others stalled. Since Burne-Jones later claimed to dislike the 'break in unity' when figures were different in scale due to perspective,[42] the recession for which he had opted in *Tristram and Iseult* may have vexed him in the long term. There is also a hint of compositional difficulty; an awkward 'hole' exists between the separated figures of La Belle Iseult and her maid, and his attempts to fill it by introducing a variety of motifs (a spray of foliage, a mound of earth, the stump of a felled tree) are not altogether successful. Or perhaps he simply lost confidence; after all, he had set himself a daunting task in attempting something so experimental on such a colossal scale. We shall probably never know the full answer, but then that is true of so much about this picture. As wilfully enigmatic as its Giorgionesque antecedents, it puzzled the artist's family; and in some ways it puzzles us still.

est in Giorgionesque images owed much to the taste of his patron William Graham, and it is possible that he embarked on *Tristram and Iseult* with Graham in mind. There are also wider considerations. It was in his essay 'The School of Giorgione' (published 1877 but probably written some years earlier) that Walter Pater made the famous claim, central to Aesthetic ideology, that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'. Burne-Jones's work reflects this notion on several levels, and the combination of Giorgionesque references and the music-like jottings that occur alongside the Fitzwilliam sketch (Fig.26) suggests that *Tristram and Iseult* is a particularly illuminating example.

[40] On the basis of the close correspondence with the head of La Belle Iseult, the drawing is here associated with the painting for the first time. When it was lent by a previous owner, F.A. White, to the exhibition of Burne-Jones's drawings and studies held at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, in 1899 (no.151), it was simply

entitled *Study of a head*. Later, according to a label on the back, it was identified as a study for *The masque of Cupid*. However, although this fits in terms of the date, *The masque of Cupid* being designed in 1872 and the drawing clearly belonging to this period, there is no correspondence between the head and any of the figures in the composition drawings for this never-completed project. Three are illustrated in Wildman and Christian, *op. cit.* (note 34), pp.164–65.

[41] The nude study for Palomides is identified and published here for the first time. The drawing of the two heads kissing has an inscription by Philip Burne-Jones on the mount stating that it is 'for Tristram and Iseult'; it was sold as a study for the picture at Christie's, London, 29th March 1996, lot 73. The inscription is valuable evidence that at some point Philip knew what *Tristram and Iseult* looked like, despite his failure to identify either the drawing in the Fitzwilliam sketchbook (Fig.26) or the painting itself (Fig.22).

[42] G.B-J., *op. cit.* (note 12), II, p.331.