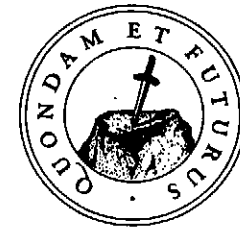


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Plate 7. William Morris. Study for *King Arthur and Sir Lancelot*, design for Harden Grange Windows. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Company, 1862. Courtesy of William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, London.

## Problems with the Pattern: William Morris's Arthurian Imagery

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An examination of William Morris's role in the Arthurian revival in Victorian imagery and the slippage between his involvement with the legend and our desire to impose an Arthurian pattern on his life and work. (DNM)

One finished oil, its subject under debate; one, perhaps two, unfinished paintings, location unknown; a ruined mural, documented in one rough sketch; a painted ceiling, now obliterated, known only through description; plans for an illustrated volume of Malory, never fully explained and never undertaken: This meager list—nearly the whole catalogue of William Morris's contribution to Arthurian imagery—is an art historian's nightmare. What do we make of these projects tentatively begun, quickly abandoned? How do we understand works we can never see? Why is there a lack of clarity in the visual expression of subjects by a poet who so admirably advanced the literary tradition? And these questions lead to the one we least wish to raise: Why is William Morris so strongly positioned in the legend's visual tradition when the material evidence of his contribution seems so slim?

Taken as a whole—adding to the list a handful of drawings, designs for the decorative arts, and a few posthumous publications from the Kelmscott Press—Morris's production of Arthurian images mystifies more than illuminates his connection with the legend. Unlike his Arthurian poetry, this odd body of work occupies no precise position in his life or career. Morris's returns to the legend for visual imagery are sporadic; there is a concentrated burst of activity that coincides with his early Arthurian writings, but the subject reappears on occasion, all the way to the end of his life. Even more telling as a contrast to his published poetry, most of his visual production was private, designed to furnish his own home or in response to the request of an individual client.

Few people saw his Arthurian images, and while this is fully in accord with Morris's role as a domestic designer, it forces us to question whether they, like the poems, had public as well as personal significance.

These issues of placement and privacy have led scholars to search for a code of self-conscious identity in Morris's Arthurian images. The speculations are based on the events of Morris's youth, courtship, and marriage. But, the slippage between the production of text and image suggests we may be looking for the wrong clues.<sup>1</sup> While no assessment of William Morris's contribution to the Arthurian tradition would be complete without a consideration of his work in the visual arts, to revisit the old debates risks the redundancy of reviving the old issues. I make no claim to have developed a theory that will supplant a mode of analysis that seems to me, in great part, inadequate, but in my desire to interrogate the imposition of an Arthurian pattern on a body of works that may be too fragile to support it, I hope, in some small way, to subvert our prevailing suppositions.

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In the summer of 1856, Morris abandoned his plans for a career in architecture and set about reinventing himself as a figure painter by sheer force of will. The decision seems to have been the result of Rossetti's demanding encouragement.<sup>2</sup> Writing to his friend Cormell Price in July 1856, Morris expressed both compliance and reservation. 'Rossetti says I ought to paint, he says I shall be able. I don't hope much, I must say, yet I will try to do my best' (Kelvin 1.28). After testing his powers with a few figure studies in pencil—two small self-portraits survive in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum—he attempted a full scale easel painting in oil depicting *Sir Tristram after his illness in the Garden of King Mark's Palace recognised by the Dog he had given Iseult*.

Morris's choice of subject is loaded with personal significance. The *Morte Darthur* served as an emblem of his friendship with Burne-Jones, and now, it bound him to Rossetti. Fiona MacCarthy claims that after Morris purchased the Southey edition of Malory's text, he and Burne-Jones 'horded the book as if it were a secret,' until Rossetti ranked it with the Bible as 'the greatest books in the world' (97). As a touchstone of mutual understanding with his friends—one an aspiring painter whose undergraduate ideals he had shared, the other an accomplished artist whose faith in his abilities he hoped to confirm—the *Morte Darthur* offered more than a source for romantic subjects. It provided validation of the seriousness of his ambitions.

Morris labored at his work through the spring of 1857. Contemporary accounts record that Morris adhered to the Pre-Raphaelite practice of painting from nature, using a tree in Archibald Maclaren's garden in Oxford as the centerpiece of his composition (Doughty and Wahl 325; Burne-Jones 1.39), but no visual evidence survives to allow us to assess Morris's endeavor. The painting, now lost, was abandoned before completion, when Morris turned his attention to a new project formulated by Rossetti: the decoration of the new Oxford Union Debating Hall.

The anecdotal history of this project has always been, and will perhaps remain, an obstacle to analysis. The story has been told repeatedly.<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 1857, Rossetti negotiated a deal with architect Benjamin Woodward to decorate the upper story interior of the new Debating Hall with murals. Woodward granted all of Rossetti's demands: to choose the artists, to choose the subjects, and to exercise full artistic autonomy. Rossetti's crew—mostly novice painters with no experience in large scale wall painting—worked for housing and expenses. In choosing subjects from Malory's *Morte Darthur* Rossetti saw his work as a public challenge to the frescoes in progress in the Queen's Robing Room at the House of Lords, painted by William Dyce and funded by the government.

The project was a disaster. As a site for decoration, the design of the upper story walkway lined with book shelves, was ill-suited for painting. Arches, running the length of the wall from floor to ceiling, divided the narrow gallery into ten bays, each pierced with two six-foil windows. To facilitate the work, these were covered. The artists, using distemper and a stipple technique formulated by Rossetti, painted directly on a fresh—and slightly damp—white-wash laid over the brick of the arch segments. Although the luminous color was widely praised during the course of the project, the steady absorption of paint into the wall, and the flooding of light in the space when the windows were uncovered, made the works indecipherable (Socki 24). Few artists even finished the murals; Rossetti left two bays blank when he departed Oxford in November, to be later filled in by local artist William Riviere. The condition of the murals immediately deteriorated, as dust settled on the uneven surfaces and smoke rose from the gas lamps used to illuminate the space below.<sup>4</sup>

It is not clear whether Rossetti allowed the artists to select their subjects. So, by either choice or request, Morris again interpreted the legend of Tristram. His mural *How Sir Palomydes Love La Belle Iseult with great love out of measure, and how she loved him not again but rather Sir Tristram* was the first to be finished. He then turned his hand to decorating the ceiling.<sup>5</sup> The mural image, situating the pair of lovers in a garden while Palomydes looks on with dejection,

invented upon passages in Book VIII of the *Morte Darthur* (Socki 43-45). The results of Morris's efforts, with nine foot tall figures obscured by huge sunflowers, struck even his companions as odd. Valentine Prinsep, another novice painter recruited for the project, admitted that Morris's work was 'artistically not unpleasing' (169), but he likened Iseult's appearance to that of an ogress (170).

Again, Morris's skill is of less interest than his association with the subject, and much has been made of the issue of self-identification. Mackail, Morris's official biographer, assigned special meaning to Palomydes's dejected presence, claiming that Morris 'felt a singular and almost a morbid attraction' to the character of 'the despised lover' (1.119). The alternative reading, based on Morris's desire to court the local 'stunner' Jane Burden, who had been drawn into the project to model, suggests that Morris saw himself in the character of Tristram, yearning to be loved. Similarly, it is at this point that the anecdotal history of the love triangle of Morris, Burden, and Rossetti begins to be imposed on the work of both artists (MacCarthy 130). While it is plausible that Morris, a young man with little experience in the romantic arena, would see himself as a rejected or yearning lover, it is only hindsight that confirms the Arthurian parallel in the later disaffection in the marriage. And there remains a bit of missing evidence: Who chose the subject, Morris or Rossetti? Unlike the abandoned painting, we can, with some difficulty, see the iconography of the mural, but our desire to make the Arthurian metaphor illuminate Morris's history has made us read into it far too much. As for the role of the *Morte Darthur*, it served once again to ennoble the bonds of work and friendship rather than to point to the path of romantic demise.

A very different problem of identity surrounds Morris's single finished oil painting (1858; Tate Gallery; Color Plate). The depiction of the silent and somber woman, alone in her medieval chamber, is known by two titles: *Queen Guenevere* and *La Belle Iseult*. With no documented references made to the work when it was in progress, scholars have built persuasive cases over the years for each identity. The work was first exhibited at the New Gallery in 1898 and first published in reproduction in the early biographies of Morris (Vallance 1897; Mackail, 1899), each time under the title *Queen Guenevere*. In recent decades, this attribution has come into question, based on new readings of the iconography and overlooked documentary evidence.

In 1989, Christine Poulson used the presence of the little dog curled on the unmade bed to link the subject to Iseult's confinement in the tower after her attempted suicide (*Morte Darthur* Book IX).<sup>6</sup> Certainly the sense of isolation and enclosure, as well as the gaunt and ill appearance of the woman, allies this

image with the text. But, as recently as 1991, Lynn Pearce saw in the privacy of the setting not just a domestic or historical space, but a 'sexual one,' in which the woman, looking in the mirror while fastening her belt takes 'possession of herself' and with that all her attendant desires (126). To Pearce, the figure is Morris's Guenevere, not a victim of male confinement, but an 'Emergent Heroine,' who assumes responsibility for what she has done.

The paucity of early documents concerning the title of this work has prompted scholars to trace its history of ownership. It is believed to have hung in Morris's Red House in Bexleyheath, but not in his next residence at Queen's Square in London (Parry 103). By 1874, it was in the hands of Ford Madox Brown's son Oliver, who sold it to Rossetti. When Rossetti died, it passed to his brother William, who eventually traded it to Jane Morris for three Kelmscott Press books. In 1901, Jane wrote to her daughter May concerning the painting, and raising the issue of the title. '*La Belle Iseult* is what the dear father always called the picture, and I think we ought to keep to that' (as quoted in Marsh 577). When May died in 1938, she willed the work to the Tate Gallery, again, using the title *La Belle Iseult*.<sup>7</sup>

While it is hard to dispute the claims of both the artist's wife and daughter, it must be remembered that the artist's attribution is still based on the evidence of hearsay. Without a word from Morris, these documents may also be read as Jane's desire to revise the identity of the image from unfaithful wife to star-crossed lover; the painting was always understood to be her portrait. Adding to the confusion are the words Morris is said to have written on the back of the painting: 'I cannot paint you, but I love you.' Evidence for this is even slimmer, for the first account of this declaration appears in Gerald Crow's *William Morris Designer*, published in 1934 (39). It cannot be documented earlier and is likely apocryphal. John Christian, who favors the early records and calls the work *Queen Guenevere*, offers a sensible compromise. Describing the work as 'essentially a portrait in medieval dress of Jane Burden, whom Morris married in 1859,' he regards the work as a personal emblem of an important stage of Morris's life, rather than an Arthurian narrative (169-70). I, too, favor the title *Queen Guenevere*, for taken in tandem with the Pre-Raphaelite belief of poetry and painting as sister arts, the work expresses a pictorial evocation of the mood of 'The Defence of Guenevere' The figure's quiet introspection suggests the Queen preparing herself, both physically and psychologically, to face her accusers. If we relinquish the narrative and view the painting as an image of sense and feeling rather than an illustration of incident, we can better understand Morris's goals and accomplishments as a

painter. The expressiveness of his poetry—rather than the story line—seems the more apt connection.

After his marriage to Jane Burden, Morris turned his artistic interest to domestic design, using his own first home, the Red House, as an experimental showcase. He worked with friend Philip Webb on the architectural plans and recruited his friends and family to produce the furniture and decorative works for the interior. According to May Morris:

The story of how he built a beautiful home to receive his wife and friends... will never grow stale in the telling, laughter sounded from the half-finished rooms where young people painted the walls with scenes of from Round Table histories. (CW 1.xiv)

Here we can see how the Arthurian legend became so entangled with Morris's personal history. A survey of the motifs used at Red House, known through the extant works and the drawings and documents that have survived, reveals that the 'Round Table histories,' played a very minor role. While in residence at the Red House in July 1860, Burne-Jones produced several sheets of sketches for wall paintings featuring scenes from the fifteenth-century romance *Sir Degrevaunt* (Parry 103). The story—known to be a favorite of Morris and Burne-Jones, which they read in the 1844 Camden Society edition, edited by James Thornton—begins in Arthur's court, but follows the romance tradition and takes the knight on adventures far from Camelot and its king.

Fiona MacCarthy mentions painted panels begun but never finished by Morris on a canopied cupboard conceived by Webb (159). She calls two panels, 'designed to be read through, as a narrative,' 'Arthurian,' a 'reworking of a convivial scene from Malory in which Sir Lancelot brings Sir Tristram and La Belle Iseult to the Castle of Joyous Gard.' This attribution, however, is not confirmed anywhere else in the literature. Other subjects were far more prominent than 'Round Table histories' in the Red House; favored were scenes from the works of Chaucer and the legend of St. George. Perhaps May Morris's designation of subjects was meant to be understood as a catch-all phrase for images from medieval sources. Whatever the case, the comment has led us to look for images that might never have been there and an Arthurian identity Morris likely never sought.

Traces of what Jan Marsh has so aptly called 'phantom easel paintings,' (573) also haunt the investigation of Morris's Arthurian imagery. It is known that early in 1858, Thomas Plint of Oxford paid an advance for a commission. Ford Madox Brown remembered the work as a *Tristram and Iseult* (Surtees 200) and Georgiana Burne-Jones agrees (1.175). Although long thought to be

otherwise, Marsh suggests that this commission did not prompt a new work by Morris, but was instead applied to the earlier image of *Tristram, Iseult, and the little hound* begun before he left for Oxford (573). But Janet Camp Troxell challenges the existence of the earlier work, wondering whether the 'dog picture' ever even existed (4; 8). And there is more confusion. A drawing of a woman in medieval dress, clinging to what appears to be the side of a boat has traditionally borne the identity of 'Iseult on the Ship,' (produced, perhaps for a wall painting design at the Red House?). But it has recently also been described as a subject from Chaucer: Helen boarding the boat of the Greek heroes (Parry 102).<sup>8</sup>

In 1862, shortly after founding 'The Firm,' (Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Company, Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture, and Metals), Morris took on a commission to design and produce a set of stained glass panels for Harden Grange, the Yorkshire home of Bradford merchant Walter Dunlop. Free to select the artists and the subject, Morris recruited his friends Arthur Hughes, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Prinsep, and Brown. For the subject, he returned to the romance of *Tristram and Isoude* (Morris's own change in spelling).

The Harden Grange windows (now in the Bradford City Art Gallery) demonstrate Morris's strong abilities in design direction and story telling. He organized 'The Firm' as an artists's collective; each artist paid a small fee into the general operating costs and received payment for their designs as well as a share of the profits. Through similarly careful planning, Morris narrated *Tristram's* saga with clarity and economy. Hughes undertook *The Birth of Tristram*, presenting Queen Elizabeth and a single attendant caring for the infant in the wood. Rossetti depicted *The Slaying of Sir Marhaut*, *Tristram's* battle in Ireland. Prinsep's single contribution *The Departure of Tristram and La Belle Isoude from Ireland* advances the tale to the knight's second journey. In Rossetti's depiction of *Sir Tristram Drinks the Love Potion with La Belle Isoude*, the fateful cup bursts into flames.

Burne-Jones took the tragic lovers through their life in Cornwall, portraying *The Madness of Sir Tristram* and *The Marriage of Sir Tristram and Isoude Les Blanchés Mains*. Brown presented the harsh end in a violent depiction of *The Death of Sir Tristram*, but Burne-Jones tempered the tragedy with his final image *The Tomb of Tristram and Isoude*. As for Morris's contributions, he designed the images of *Sir Tristram Recognised by La Belle Isoude* (the presence of the little dog licking the knight's face has led to a general agreement that the composition indicates that of Morris's first work), *Sir Tristram and La Belle Isoude at Arthur's Court*, and double portraits of the surviving mourners

at Camelot after Tristram's death: *King Arthur and Sir Lancelot* (Plate 7) and *Queen Guenevere and Isoude Les Blanches Mains*. Two panels featuring images of minstrels (unattributed) complete the ensemble.<sup>9</sup>

Given the diverse styles of the participants (and the undistinguished history of earlier ensemble endeavors), the Harden Grange windows express a harmonious and elegant unity. The way Morris achieved this reveals that he could tell a story as well in images as he could in words. The narrative is reinforced by visual elements. Each design features a few large figures, positioned well in the foreground. Graceful, but limited movement, gives both rhythm and restraint to the individual compositions. The rich, forest green chosen for the backgrounds of each panel increased the sense of ensemble. The individual scenes flow naturally from one to another, making the inscriptions that link them a minor device. And what can we presume about Morris's relationship with the Tristram story at this point in his life? Rather than a personal testament, it seems a professional achievement: an early, successful example of Morris's belief in artistic collaboration and applied craft. It seems significant as well that Morris never returned to the subject; perhaps he felt he finally got it right.

As in his writing, Morris abandoned Arthurian subjects in art early in his career. After the Harden Grange window designs no Arthurian image can be assigned to his hand. But, there is a clear difference in the role the legend played in Morris's life as a designer than that in his life as a poet. To the end of his years—through his manufactories and press—he made it possible for other artists to interpret the legend in imagery.

No where is this better seen than in his late collaborations with Edward Burne-Jones. Although Burne-Jones provided the designs—and often the impetus—Morris provided the means and often the inspiration. In 1886, Burne-Jones produced four, highly finished cartoons depicting the Quest for the Holy Grail, to be made into stained glass panels for his home in Rottingdean (Plate 8). Morris and Company (the successor to 'The Firm' in 1875) turned the ideas into a set so beautiful, that Burne-Jones decided not to keep them, but to give them to his neighbor Lady Leighton-Warren. The Grail Quest was also the subject of a set of tapestries woven for Australian mining magnate W.K. D'Arcy (Plates 1; 2; 4; 9). Burne-Jones took the commission in 1891 through the Merton Abbey Tapestry Works, Morris's newly consolidated venture for textile production.

Of all the collaborations between Morris and Burne-Jones, the best known—and most influential—was their work together at the Kelmscott Press. Morris founded the Press in 1890 to restore the art of hand printing to book



Plate 8. Edward Burne-Jones. Cartoon for *The Story of the Quest for the Holy Grail*, design for the Rottingdean Windows. Morris and Company, 1886. Courtesy of William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow.

publication. He took an active role in every part of the process, choosing the titles, inventing new type styles, securing papers and inks of high quality, and designing the books themselves, including their lavish ornaments. There is no debating that Morris's version of the ideal book influenced generations of fine press designers and printers. Further, the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, with ornaments by Morris and illustrations by Burne-Jones, proved to be the crowning achievement of both men's careers. It is a popular assumption that they planned a Malory as lavish as the *Chaucer*, but this may be to some sad extent apocryphal.

Like most writers on this subject, I am convinced that Morris wanted to do an edition of the *Morte Darthur* through the Kelmscott Press. Given the lifelong friendship between Morris and Burne-Jones, and the emblematic role the book played in that friendship, especially in the early years, it is a more than reasonable assumption. But, next to no evidence exists to give any indication of what was planned. A *Morte Darthur* as magnificent as the *Chaucer* seems plausible, but it is our assumption.

Only two contemporary documents cite the plan, and both for very different reasons must be accepted with reservations. The first is a letter written by Aubrey Beardsley to his friend G.F. Scotson-Clark (15 February 1893, Maas, Duncan, and Good 44). It concerns Morris's reaction to the younger artist's designs for John Dent's forthcoming publication of the *Morte Darthur*. 'William Morris has sworn a terrible oath against me for daring to bring out a book in his manner. The truth is that while his work is a mere imitation of the old stuff, mine is fresh and original.' Nothing in the Morris literature confirms that Morris saw this project as a threat to his own plans. While it seems certain that Dent was consciously bringing out a book in the Kelmscott

style, using inferior papers, mechanized production, and unknown artists to be able to market the book at a low price Morris could never match, Morris seemed not to have acknowledged the challenge. And if he felt 'scooped,' no letter or remembered conversation records that reaction. Whether a sales ploy or a young artist's arrogance, the 'terrible oath' is another phantom contribution to the tradition of Morris and the legend.

There is documentary evidence from the Kelmscott Press that an edition of the *Morte Darthur* was planned. In 1898, two years after Morris's death, his long time associate Sydney Cockerell oversaw the final publication at Kelmscott. This was Morris's own essay *A Note by William Morris On His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press*. Appended to the work was Cockerell's own history of the press and a list of works published and planned. At the end of this list Cockerell mentions Malory's *Morte Darthur* 'among works Mr. Morris had some thought of printing' (as quoted in Sparling 174). That's it. No plans for length, scope, or even illustrator are documented. Cockerell does not explain how he compiled his list, so the citation may be the result of serious planning or the memory of an idle conversation.

It is a safe assumption that Burne-Jones would have done the images if a *Morte Darthur* had been undertaken. Arthurian subjects fascinated him throughout his career and were of rising interest at this late date. When the Kelmscott Press produced three slim volumes based on the 1844 Thornton editions of fifteenth-century romances brought out by the Camden Society, Burne-Jones provided each with a design for a wood engraved frontispiece. *Syr Percyvella of Gales* appeared in 1896. *Syr Ysambrace* appeared in 1897, after Morris's death. *Syr Degrevaunt* has a colophon date of 14 March 1896, but it was not printed until October 1897, again a posthumous publication. The design for the last strikes a poignant note, echoing the images planned over thirty-five years earlier for the Red House. Whenever the subject was chivalric or, as in these cases, Arthurian, Morris chose Burne-Jones as the illustrator. It is likely he would have done so for an edition of the *Morte Darthur*. But he never had the chance.

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This close scrutiny of William Morris's role in the revival of Arthurian imagery produces two results. The first leads to dispel the myths that enlarge the role of this slender set of works in Morris's highly productive career. Morris's contribution was decidedly slim and inconsistent. The surviving works—finished and unfinished—reveal few connecting patterns. As Morris did with new craft techniques, he experimented with these subjects, and then, when

he was satisfied with what he learned, he moved on. This was his life long working pattern. But our desire to impose pattern of identification on these works is not fully misplaced. Morris's own contemporaries—his wife, his daughter, his friends—sought to do the same.

With the myths stripped away, the works stand on their own. And we reach the second result when we attempt to assess them out of their mythic context. The early paintings—however many or few—show Morris's struggle to define himself, not as a lover but as an artist. The Harden Grange windows mark a turning point in that development, placing Morris not as the individual artist, but as the organizing force in the creation of collective endeavor. And that is the role that endures to the end of his career, a man who takes full stock and appreciation of the powers of his colleagues and then finds the means to encourage and apply them. And in this we can see the pattern emerge. It is a circle of shared goals and collaboration with like-minded friends, with Rossetti at Oxford, with Burne-Jones and his family at the Red House, with the participants in 'The Firm,' and finally—and to greatest satisfaction—again with Burne-Jones in their last years of life. It seems no accident that Arthurian subjects figure in each of these important stages of Morris's production. For Morris, it was the Arthurian circle—not the fatal triangle—that gave form and meaning to his endeavors and ideals.

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#### NOTES

1. This mode of analysis reflects an approach that has been successfully used to decode Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting and poetry. But, while Rossetti openly associated himself with figures from legend and literature—most notably Dante and Lancelot—there is no evidence that Morris did the same. For examples of this approach to Rossetti's work, see Debra N. Mancoff, 'A Vision of Beatrice: D.G.

- Rossetti and the *Beata Beatrix*, *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 6 (November 1985): 76-87 and Eriko Yamaguchi, 'Osculatory Obsession: Rossetti's Treatment of Arthurian and Dantesque Subjects in 1855,' *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature* 6 (1991): 37-58.
2. For a description of how Rossetti coerced his friends into trying their hands at painting, see Marsh 571.
  3. Among the many accounts of the Oxford Murals project, the following works offer particular insight: William Holman Hunt, *The Story of the Painting on the Walls and the Decorations on the Ceiling of the Old Debating Hall (now the Library) in the Years 1857-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), a highly biased and inaccurate account, but written by an associate of many of the participants; John D. Renton, *The Oxford Murals* (Oxford: Oxford Union, n.d.), a small pamphlet available in the Debating Hall presenting a concise guide to the history and the mural subjects; and John Christian, *The Oxford Union Murals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), an insightful text that balances anecdote with analysis including good microfiche reproductions of the murals. See Socki for the most comprehensive discussion of the murals, complete with an appendix that reviews literature on the project (70-84).
  4. The deterioration of the murals was extraordinarily rapid and well documented in contemporary and subject accounts. For examples, see Malcolm Bell, *Edward Burne-Jones: A Record and Review* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892) 28-29 and Hunt (1906). Several restorations have been undertaken since 1875 when Morris repainted the ceiling. See Socki 29 n. 20 and Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990) 307, n. 62 for information. The most recent restoration, completed by 1989, affords the best opportunity for viewing the works as originally intended.
  5. Morris's original design for the ceiling is unknown. The present repeating foliage pattern is an example of his mature design work of his mid-career. Many legends exist about how quickly he painted the ceiling and of all the whimsical images employed, but these are only known from descriptions that are regarded as highly speculative. See K.L. Goodwin, 'William Morris's "New and Lighter Design,"' *Journal of the William Morris Society* 2 (Winter 1968): 24-31.
  6. Poulson came to this conclusion well before 1989. Both Banham (115) and Marsh (572) cite her ideas on this issue.
  7. According to Marsh (577), when the Tate received the painting it bore a label in Jane Morris's hand that identified the work as *La Belle Iseult*. But, the Gallery retitled it 'for some unknown reason,' in 1965. The Tate curatorial files use both titles, but the recent Morris retrospective at the Victoria and Albert Museum (9 May-1 September, 1996) uses only *La Belle Iseult* as the title.
  8. Costume is another feature that has been used to connect Morris's early drawings and designs with Arthurian subjects. Marsh (573) points out that a drawing of three figures associated with the Red House decorations (see Parry, 95 for illustration) wears the same 'scoop-necked medieval-style dress with narrow sleeves, reversible cuffs and a full skirt, with a decorated girdle round the hips' as depicted

in the Tate painting. A similar costume is seen in an unfinished embroidered hanging (design by William Morris, needlework by Jane Morris) now at Kelmscott Manor. It is titled *Queen Guenevere*. An example of this type of dress (a reproduction) is in the costume collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, installed with a label that associates the dress style with Jane Morris's personal wardrobe.

9. Sewter (2.27) notes that a cartoon, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Scotland, may represent a lost panel. The composition matches those of *King Arthur and Sir Lancelot* and *Queen Guenevere and Isoude Les Blanches Mains* and looks to be from the same hand (Morris?). Sewter suggests that it may represent Arthur and Guenevere or King Howell of Brittany and his daughter Isoude Les Blanches Mains, but admits it could also be connected to the series of Chaucer's Good Women. In any case, Sewter notes that if a glass had been made from the cartoon, it has not been traced. See Sewter vol. 1, plate 83 for an illustration.

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Plate 9. Edward Burne-Jones. *The Attainment*, from *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Merton Abbey Tapestry Works, 1891-94. Courtesy of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

## Reviews

N. J. HIGHAM, *The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994. Pp. viii, 200. 5 figures. ISBN: 0-7190-4079-5. \$75.

Nick Higham has been, over the last ten years, one of the most prolific historians of early medieval Britain. In addition to numerous articles (many of them dealing with Gildas), Higham has produced two regional histories (*The Northern Counties to AD 1000* and *The Origins of Cheshire*), a synthesis of the archaeology and history of fifth-century Britain (*Rome, Britain, and the Anglo-Saxons*), and a scholarly 'coffee table' book on northern Britain (*The Kingdom of Northumbria: AD 350-1100*). His latest book, however, is sure to cause the most sensation, for not only is it the most thorough examination of *the* crucial text for the 'Age of Arthur' (or 'Sub-Roman Britain,' to use the preferred scholarly term), it also is a study which puts forth radical—and likely to be controversial—views on Gildas's geography, chronology, and purpose in writing his enigmatic *De Excidio Britanniae* [DEB], 'On the Ruin of Britain.'

Higham organizes his arguments logically and delivers them forcefully with an occasional rhetorical flourish reminiscent of E.A. Thompson, perhaps the last true historian to tackle such an ambitious study of the sources for a period all but abandoned to archaeological speculation. The book begins with a lengthy (chs. 1-3) examination of Gildas's prose style and purpose in writing. Here Higham arrives at the same conclusion which several literary scholars have made in the last twenty years: Gildas adopts an obvious Biblical style to construct a providential history of Britain and a jeremiad against contemporary rulers and clerics. As a Latin writer Gildas is neither clumsy nor provincial, but rather erudite and, as Higham adeptly shows, continuing in a tradition of Christian historical writers of Late Antiquity that included Eusebius, Orosius, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Salvian of Marseilles.

Higham then tackles two more controversial areas: Gildas's geographic location (ch. 5) and his dates (ch. 6). On the first matter, Higham again follows recent trends in preferring a southern Gildas. Wiltshire or Dorset are good candidates because they were Romanized areas with towns and near both the Saxon settlers in the East and the few geographic features (Verulamium, the rivers Thames and Severn) named by Gildas. In dating Gildas and the events he describes, however, Higham makes some radical assertions: the Siege of Mount Badon took place c.430 (instead of the