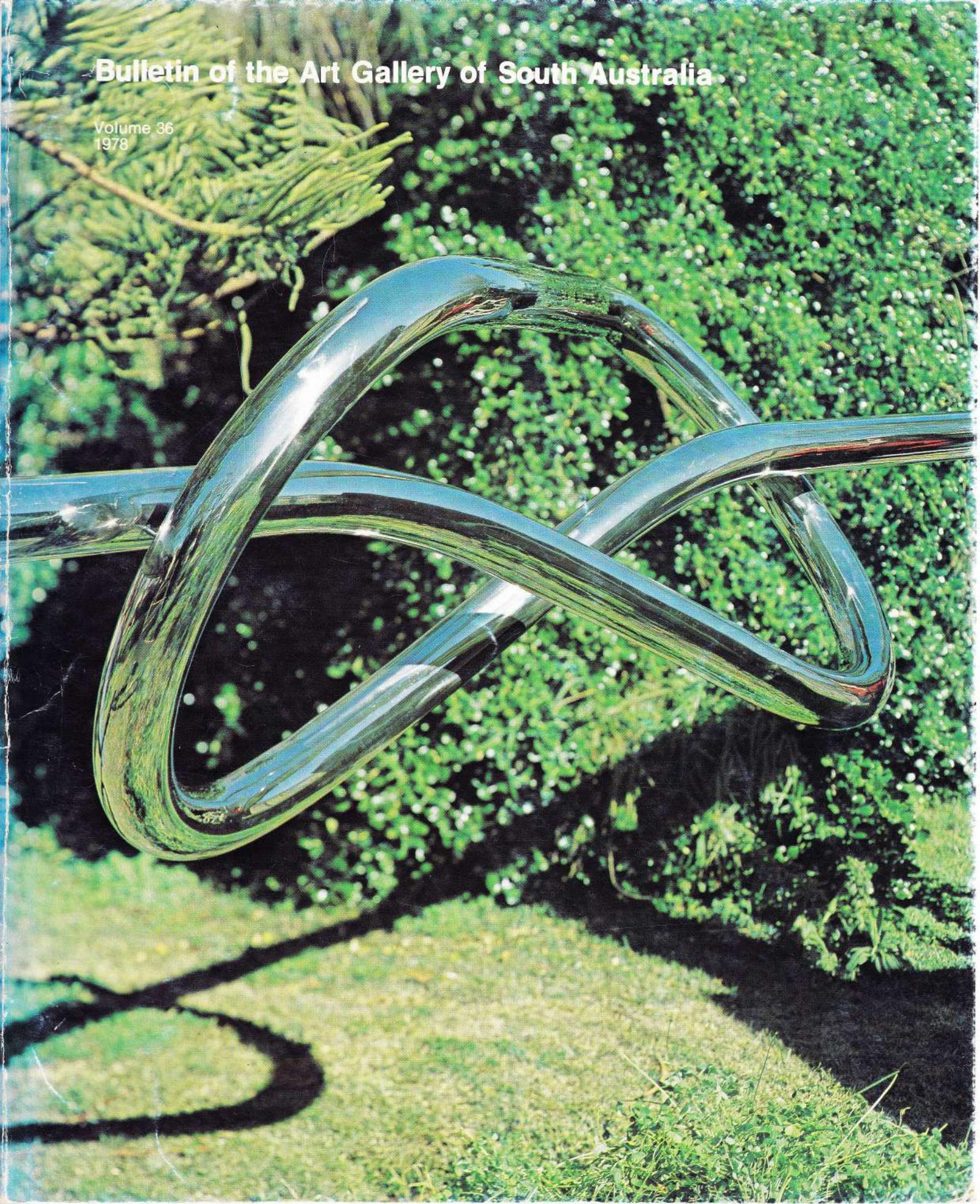


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A study by Sir Edward Burne-Jones for the story of Phyllis and Demophöon

Alison Carroll
Curator of Prints and Drawings

'Tell me what I have done, except to love unwisely'
(letter from Phyllis to Demophöon, Ovid, *Heroides* II, 27).

Among a group of fourteen drawings by Sir Edward Burne-Jones purchased in 1955 from the collection of the artist's daughter is a number of subjects relating to paintings by this eminent second generation English Pre-Raphaelite. Some are related to the *Perseus* cycle, one to the *Days of Creation*, another to the *Icarus* work, two others to the unfinished painting of the *Styx*, and yet another to the *Wheel of Fortune*. One (fig. 1), however, stands out for its strength of image and delicacy of drawing, and also because it is a highly developed preparatory study for one of Burne-Jones' most interesting and personal compositions. Previously unpublished, the drawing is the study for the Greek tragic heroine Phyllis who appears in two paintings from a very poignant time of Burne-Jones' life: *Phyllis and Demophöon*, a gouache of 1870, now in the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery (fig. 2), and an extension of this painted in 1881-82, entitled *The Tree of Forgiveness*, an oil painting, now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Cheshire (fig. 3).

The paintings' subject is the final part of the love story of Phyllis, queen of Thrace, and Demophöon, son of Theseus, at the time of the Trojan War. Returning from the war to Athens, Demophöon was shipwrecked off the Thracian coast. He was saved, given shelter and is said to have been entertained by Phyllis in Thrace, and 'to have been beloved by her'.¹ Demophöon, having to travel to Athens, but promising to come back to Thrace, left Phyllis, who eagerly awaited his return. He lingered in Athens and she finally died of heartbreak.

This is how the narrative of the classical authors ends. It was, however, subsequently greatly elaborated. One version is that, on her death, Phyllis was changed into an almond tree. Demophöon, when he did finally return to Thrace and visit her grave, put his arms around the tree. The story again has two versions here: the first is that the tree, destitute of leaves, suddenly put them forth (leaves being in Greek 'phylla'); the second is that, when clasped, the tree split open and Phyllis emerged and returned the embrace of her lover.

While the classical authors do not describe the scene in Burne-Jones' paintings, the power of Phyllis' love is conveyed by them. Ovid tells the story of the faithless lover in his *Heroides* (or *Epistles of the Heroines*) in which Phyllis predicts Demophöon's epitaph: 'This is he whose wiles betrayed the hostess that loved him';² while Virgil in his *Eclogues* uses Phyllis as a measure of the force of love: 'You begin first, Mopsus, if you've something of Phyllis' passion'.³

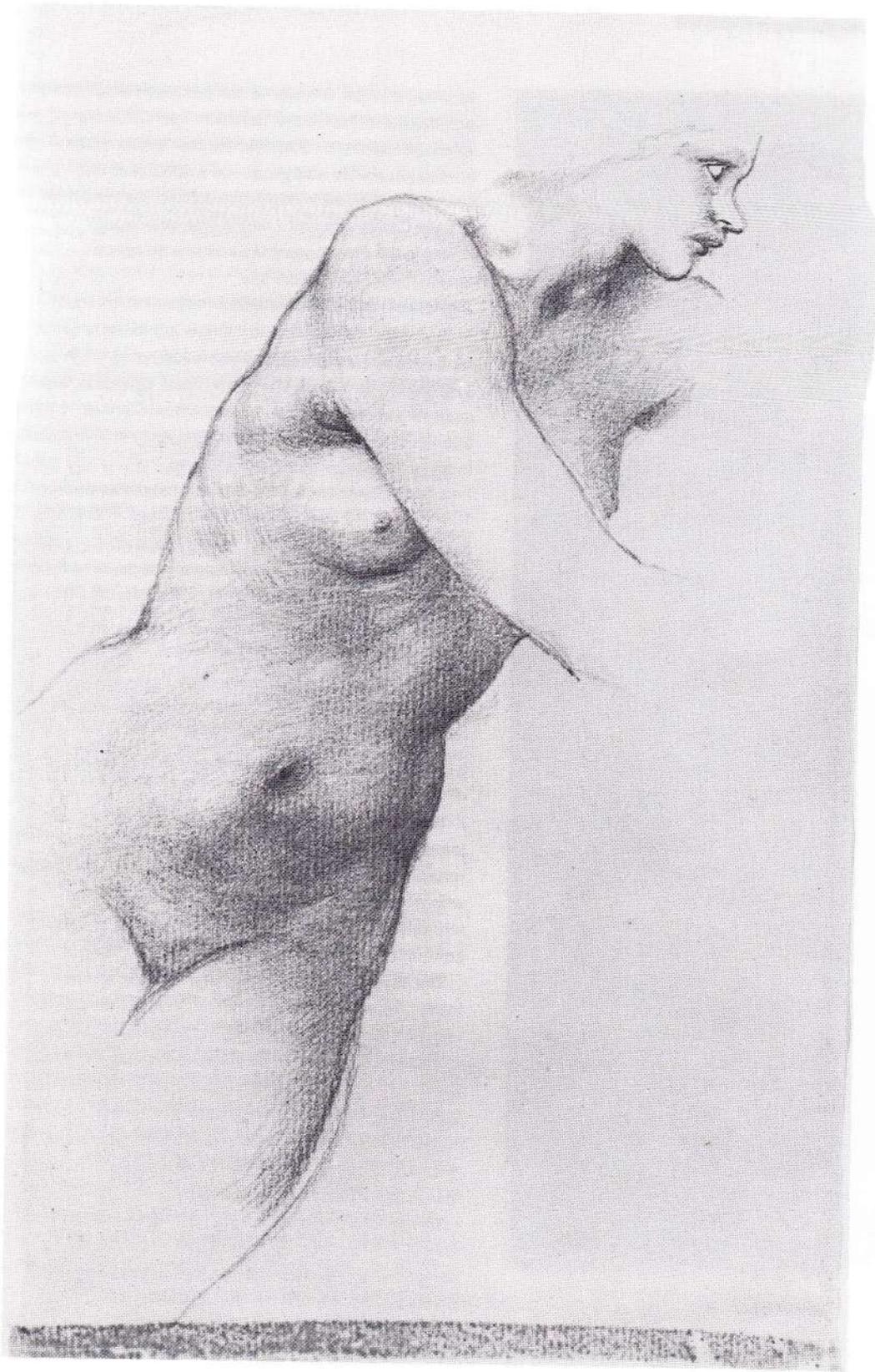
Burne-Jones had been aware of the story of Phyllis for many years before he painted it in the Birmingham gouache, having depicted the story in Chaucer's version of Ovid, his *Legend of Good Women*, a number of times: in tiles, in embroidery, and in William Morris' Kelmscott edition of Chaucer's works. The illustration to the story of Phyllis in the book merely shows the shipwreck sequence. However, Burne-Jones would have noted the moral overtone of Chaucer's words when he contrasts Phyllis, 'fairer on to sene/Than is the flour again the brighte sonne', with Demophöon (whose father's treatment of Ariadne is well known):

That wikked fruit cometh of a wikked tree,
That may ye fine, if that it lyketh you.
But for this ende I speke this as now,
To tell you of false Demophöon.⁴

It is in fact the moral implications of the tale which give Burne-Jones' picture particular interest. He painted the first version, called simply *Phyllis and Demophöon*, in 1869-70, when he was embroiled in an affair with Maria Zambaco, a wealthy and beautiful member of the Greek community in London. She is Phyllis and he, of course, is the false Demophöon.

Burne-Jones had met and first painted Maria Zambaco after she had come to London from Paris in 1866. His affair with her lasted from 1868 to 1871 reaching a height in 1869 when, according to an unconfirmed story, he perhaps left home to live with her

¹ Sir Edward Burne-Jones *Study for the Story of Phyllis and Demophöon*, pencil, 22 x 13 cm., Coll: Art Gallery of South Australia, accession no. 557D9.





2
Sir Edward Burne-Jones *Phyllis and Demophöon*, 1870, gouache, 91.4 x 45.7 cm., Col: Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

for a few months. In 1869 he had produced a number of paintings with her as the 'heroine' — as Circe the enchantress and as Beatrice, another enchantress, among others. He also produced a number of fine drawings of her, including some with her as the Greek heroines Cassandra and Ariadne (the latter again relating to the Phyllis story). In addition he asked Rossetti to record her portrait.

The events of the affair are recorded in the letters of Burne-Jones' friends. (Unsurprisingly Zambaco is never mentioned in the biography of her husband by Georgiana Burne-Jones; nor is the year 1869 dealt with at all.) A famous passage concerns Burne-Jones' attempt to break the affair off, in January, 1869, written in a letter by Rossetti to Madox Brown:

Poor Ned's [Burne-Jones] affairs have come to a smash altogether, and he and Topsy [William Morris], after the most dreadful to-do, started for Rome suddenly, leaving the Greek damsel beating up the quarters of all his friends for him, and howling like Cassandra. Georgie has stayed behind. I hear today that Top and Ned got no further than Dover, Ned being now so dreadfully ill that they will probably have to return to London. Of course the dodge will be not to let a single hint of their movements become known to anybody, or the Greek (whom I believe he is really bent on cutting) will catch him again. She provided herself with laudanum for two at least, and insisted on their winding up matters in Lord Holland's Lane. Ned didn't see it, when she tried to drown herself in the water in front of Browning's house etc. — bobbies collaring Ned who was rolling with her on the stones to prevent it, and God knows what else.⁵

This is the Burne-Jones of the painting: trying to leave, leaving, feeling guilty, tempted to return and, returning, unwillingly falling into the clasp of the one of whom he thought he was free. It is the unceasing struggle for supremacy, with the ultimate seducer and conqueror never defined.

The story of Phyllis has a further allusion which in these circumstances is of interest. Was Burne-Jones aware of the story of Aristotle and his lover Campaspe? Campaspe in some stories is called Phyllis. Campaspe/Phyllis is shown visually riding on the back of Aristotle who walks on all fours: the female (in fact, whore in this case), sensual part dominates and derides the male intellectual part. Was Burne-Jones in fear of Maria Zambaco in this role as well?

The second large painting of 1881-82 is entitled *The Tree of Forgiveness*. It appears that Phyllis/Maria Zambaco forgives Demophöon/Burne-Jones. He more vigorously turns from her now as she (by virtue of the increased vigour of the forms) more intently clasps him. While the physical resemblance of the face to Maria

Zambaco in this second work is reduced. Burne-Jones must have dwelt on the events of the affair during this time. Even years later, in 1893, he reminisced on the early gouache, writing:

The head of Phyllis in the Demophōon picture... would have done for a portrait... don't hate [her] — some things are beyond scolding — hurricanes and tempests and billows of the sea... it was a glorious head — and belonged to a remote past — only it didn't do in English suburban surroundings...⁶

One final interpretation occurs here which extends the forgiving theme from the particular individual to a general plea for mankind based on the association of the tree with both Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with their subsequent expulsion, and the Cross, with its inherent theme of forgiveness of this original sin. This is clarified by another painting by Burne-Jones, made late in his life, which he associated with *The Tree of Forgiveness*. A description of this is given by Georgiana. She writes that in 1898, one year before his death, Burne-Jones showed Miss Freda Stanhope around his house. Downstairs he said:

Oh, I must shew you this picture — I will light it up for you, it is too dark to see without', and he fetched a candle. It was a large water-colour design of Christ hanging with outstretched arms in the Tree of Forgiveness. When she looked at it, he said: 'He is blessing Adam and Eve, and while His hands are stretched in blessing He is in the attitude of the Cross. There is a corn behind Adam, to shew that he must labour. On the left is Eve with her children, and behind her is the white lily, which means the Annunciation and the promise.'⁷

The question of how the two visualisations of *The Tree of Forgiveness* relate is complex. The symbolic nature of the Tree has been used often in thought and art: as the Tree of Forgiveness, of the Centre, of Fertility, of Ascent, the Inverted Tree, of Sacrifice, of Knowledge, of History, of Inner Necessity and so on.⁸ Women relating to, or indeed metamorphosed as, trees are often depicted in legend, particularly in the Apollo and Daphne saga, one version by Pollaiuolo being well known to Burne-Jones.⁹ Burne-Jones owned a copy of the *Hypnerotomachia* with one of its very influential woodcuts being the gradual metamorphosis from tree to woman of Seven Nymphs before Jove.¹⁰ One very important relationship of the tree with woman is used by Burne-Jones in this later watercolour: the Adam and Eve legend. Christ is the descendant of Adam. He is here forgiving, with outstretched arms, both Adam (himself) and Eve. Eve took the first bite of the apple of the Tree of Knowledge which was offered to her in the form of a (female) serpent. The serpent is depicted very often (as for example in Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling which Burne-Jones closely studied) twisted in the lower part of the tree with only her torso and arms stretching out to offer this fruit to unwary Eve. That Burne-Jones



3
Sir Edward Burne-Jones *The Tree of Forgiveness*, 1882. oil on canvas, 182.8 x 106.7 cm.. Coll: Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Cheshire (Reproduced by permission of the Arts and Culture Committee, Merseyside County Council).

now associates the *Tree of Forgiveness* with Adam and Eve as he once did with Phyllis and Demophoon confirms the stylistic connection of the painting with Michelangelo's strong statement of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from heaven. So Maria Zambaco and Burne-Jones also were subject to future punishment and finally forgiveness.

The actual paintings themselves were the centre of attention — on both personal and artistic grounds — during Burne-Jones' life. When the gouache was shown in April, 1870, at the Old Water-colour Society, it caused Burne-Jones to leave the society, ostensibly for the depiction of the male nude. General knowledge that this male was Burne-Jones and the woman Maria Zambaco must have heightened the scandal a good deal. The gouache received some interesting reviews which do not, of course, refer directly to the personifications but do go further than the story-line. The reviewer of *The Athenaeum*, of April 30, 1870, for example, notes how Phyllis clasps Demophoon 'in her love-worn arms, and presses to his her eager face with the woe of a denial in her eyes and dread of coming dissolution',¹¹ while the critic for *The Times* wrote that the 'idea of a love-chase, with the woman for "follower" is not pleasant.'¹²

The personal nature of the image is reinforced by the originality of the notion to portray the story, one notable for its lack of previous visualisation, and the repeated depiction of this very original image demonstrates Burne-Jones' seriousness about it. As well as noting the personal intimations of the subject contemporary critics and viewers also recognised the power of the work itself.¹³ The wide-spread knowledge of the image is attested by a cartoon in *Punch* of 1882 which satirises the oil painting as the *Tree of Friendship* with the caption: "'Take me, take my Trunk'" by E. Burne-Jones, or "Ty-Burn Jones", for the deadly-liveliness of the figures.'¹⁴

The drama of the Phyllis and Demophoon painting and the reality of Burne-Jones' life is pertinent not only to the Christian tradition of Western man (as particularly apparent in *The Tree of Forgiveness*) but to his Greek tradition as well. The obvious relationship of Greek myth to the modern Greek damsel is heightened by the presence of the Greek notion of pre-destination in the work. Fate has it that these two are ever entwined, or so Burne-Jones may have thought in 1870.

Where does the Gallery drawing fit in this saga? Stylistically, it is closer to the second painting. The strong Michelangelesque forms, the facial features and

of course the detailed study of the lower body all relate to the second work. In 1881 Burne-Jones no longer met Maria Zambaco, so it is probable that this is either a study from another model, or, perhaps, a re-evocation in Burne-Jones' mind of his image of his Greek lover.

Notes

- 1 Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 59.
- 2 Ovid, *Heroides (or Epistles of the Heroines)* II, 74.
- 3 Virgil, *Eclogues* 5, 10.
- 4 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, republished by William Morris, the 'Kelmescott Chaucer', 1896.
- 5 Letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 January, 1869 (see *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 1965, p. 685, Vol. II, no. 809). Rossetti also composed the Nonsense Verse on Burne-Jones:
There is a young artist named Jones,
Whose conduct no genius atones:
His behaviour in life
Is a pang to the wife
And a plague to the neighbours of Jones.
- 6 Penelope Fitzgerald *Edward Burne-Jones, A Biography*, 1975, p. 127.
- 7 GB-J (Georgiana Burne-Jones), *The Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904), 1971, II, p. 349.
- 8 See, for example, Roger Cook, *Tree of Life, Symbol of the Centre*, London, 1974.
- 9 See Martin Harrison & Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* 1973, p.99.
- 10 Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* Venice, 1499, n.p.
- 11 Review in *The Athenaeum*, 30 April, 1870, p. 586.
- 12 Review in *The Times*, 27 April, 1870, p.4
Even Ruskin referred obliquely to the association in a lecture on Michelangelo and Tintoretto when he criticised the Florentine's 'dark canality, poor draughtsmanship, fading colours and perverted imagination'. Says Penelope Fitzgerald (op.cit., p.131): 'Ned could hardly doubt' Ruskin related the artist's situation to the Michelangelesque drawing of Demophoon.
- 13 Georgiana tells the story of Mr. T.M. Rooke talking of Rossetti to her husband, saying: 'the first time I saw him was in the winter of 1869 to 1870, when he came into your studio one afternoon after you had gone out, and he was in such a passion of admiration over your head of "Phyllis" that in my then unenlightened condition, I supposed he couldn't be an artist, (*Memorials* op.cit., II p. 76); while Malcolm Bell recalls that *The Tree of Forgiveness* was included among Burne-Jones' most powerful works by the French critic Chesneau (in *Edward Burne-Jones, a Record and Review*, 1893, p.63).
- 14 *Punch*, 1882, LXXXII, no. 144.