

Khnopff Responds to Maeterlinck: His Illustrations for *Pelléas et Mélisande*

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In 1921 a private printing society called the "Société des Bibliophiles" published a limited edition of Maurice Maeterlinck's play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, with illustrations by Fernand Khnopff. The society, also known as "Les Cinquante" because it was comprised of fifty members, had formed several years earlier, but the First World War had delayed the realization of their goal to produce fine editions of Belgian literature illustrated by Belgian artists and printed on Belgian presses. *Pelléas et Mélisande* was the society's first publication.¹

Fifty-five copies of the book were printed—one for each of "Les Cinquante" and one for each collaborator.² Khnopff's ink drawings were reproduced by photogravure. The five main plates (160 mm x 100 mm) were placed at the beginning of each act and had a protective covering of tissue with words from the text imprinted to place the image in context. The artist sparingly colored each plate with colored pencils in soft tones of grey, beige, reddish-brown, pale blue, red, and mossy green. The decorative elements, consisting of a horizontal headpiece (33 mm x 100 mm) and a square tailpiece (30 mm x 30 mm), remained in black and white.

These illustrations for *Pelléas et Mélisande* were Khnopff's last major undertaking. He died in 1921, the year after he completed the commission. The illustrations have been largely ignored by art historians, perhaps because they were produced at a time when Khnopff, a founding member of the influential "Groupe des Vingt" and early exhibitor with the Austrian "Secessionists," was already almost forgotten. The departure from the style for which the artist became well known may also have contributed to the neglect of these images. Yet it is this very departure from his usual style which makes them intriguing, for Khnopff's illustrations reveal the extent to which he understood, and responded to Maeterlinck's Symbolist aesthetic as epitomized in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The members of "Les Cinquante" who sought out Khnopff for this commission anticipated the degree of empathy with which he would address Maeterlinck's play. Khnopff had already manifested a continuing interest in his countryman's dramatic works, providing illustrations for the initial publication of *La Mort de Tintagiles* in the Secessionist journal *Ver Sacrum* in 1898, designing the costumes for the 1907 Brussels premiere of Debussy's opera based on *Pelléas*, making a pastel "portrait" of Mélisande in 1907,³ and designing the program cover for *Monna Vanna* in 1909.⁴ Artist and writer shared many thematic and stylistic affinities, a fact which had often been noted by their contemporaries. In 1900 the Austrian critic Hermann Bahr had written that "Khnopff paints what Maeterlinck writes. He is the painter of interior life. . . ." Both men worked within a Symbolist aesthetic based on subjective experience, ambiguity, multiple associations, and suggestiveness.

Although Khnopff did make drawings associated with other Maeterlinck plays, he was primarily attracted to *Pelléas et Mélisande*. This is not surprising, since *Pelléas* is Maeterlinck's most famous work and the mature embodiment of his Symbolist style.⁶ The simple plot serves as a vehicle for Maeterlinck to develop his characteristic images of water, light, darkness, hands, hair, and Woman. Symbols gradually evolve through repetition, acquiring layers of meaning and multiple associations. Mélisande is an ideal Symbolist character, an enigmatic child/woman who appears in the middle of a forest one day and becomes a passive participant in a fatalistic dreamscape of love and death.

Khnopff began to explore the mysteries of this shadowy character in his pastel drawing of 1907, *Mélisande* (Figure 1). Although the figure's non-frontal pose effectively suggests Mélisande's more elusive quality, the drawing is quite similar to works like *Des Yeux Bruns et une Fleur Bleue* of 1905 (Figure 2) and thus a characteristic example of the artist's style. The hazy quality of the pastel medium, the circular format signifying the isolated, interior world of the individual, the idealized vision of a mysterious woman emphasizing her voluptuous hair, and a pervasive quality of silence—all are typical of much of Khnopff's work.⁷

He became acquainted with Mélisande at this point by examining her connections to his own vision of Woman. By 1920, working on a complete set of illustrations for "Les Cinquante," Khnopff was able to forsake his familiar stylistic vocabulary and to develop the subtle, resonant imagery uniquely suited to Maeterlinck's drama.

The main illustration for the first act (Figure 3) is captioned "*Je commence à avoir froid*" ["I am beginning to be cold"]. This line is spoken by Mélisande to Golaud in the second scene of the act in response to Golaud's question, in mystery.

The image characterizes this initial meeting of Golaud and Mélisande in terms of distance and alienation. Golaud is shown in the right foreground severely cropped by the frame. His warlike attributes are emphasized—heavy beard, massive arms and shoulders, spear, and red-sheathed sword. Mélisande hovers farther back in the picture plane, uncertain whether to follow the "giant" or take her chances alone in the dark forest. She is a somewhat shadowy figure, even at this early stage,⁸ and is formally related to the trees. The spatial relationship between the two figures is left unclear; there is no perspective system to help the viewer organize the image in terms of a logical recession of space. Thus, the formal elements enhance the uncertainty of the scene.

The tailpiece for Act I (Figure 4) is one of the most abstract of the entire series. At first glance the viewer may be unable to read the image because of its restricted point of view and sketchy rendering. Supported by the text one begins to see two hands, lightly touching, separated by a

cluster of dark marks—Mélisande's flowers. Throughout the series Khnopff creates questions in the viewer's mind, questions which may be resolved by careful contemplation of the image and the words associated with it.

The colored illustration for Act II (Figure 5) is associated with the words, "*Elle est perdue*" ["It is lost"], spoken by Mélisande after she has dropped her wedding ring into the Fountain of the Blind. The trees seen in the color plate for Act I form a stylized backdrop for the scene. They restrict the action to the foreground and emphasize the dark, oppressive surroundings so frequently referred to in the text. Contrasted with the forest, the basin of the fountain helps define a charmed circle of light into which Pelléas has led his brother's wife. The dark center of the basin indicates the impossibility of retrieving the lost ring; the water is "as deep, perhaps, as the sea. It is not known whence it comes. Perhaps it comes from the bottom of the earth. . . ."⁹

Mélisande is shown seated on the edge of the marble wall leaning down toward the water. In his emphasis on Mélisande's precarious position, her warm brown hair, and her hand, Khnopff is underlining elements which are gradually developing symbolic significance in Maeterlinck's text.

The headpiece for Act II (Figure 6) would be almost impossible to read without the immediate explanation by the text: "*SCÈNE PREMIÈRE—UNE FONTAINE DANS LE PARC.*" Comparison with the facing color plate indicates that the dark area at upper right denotes the surrounding forest. We also see the curving wall of the marble basin, and the dark, bottomless water. A large tree in the foreground must be the linden referred to in the text. A regularly shaped object just to the right of center seems to be a carved stone from which the spring's water pours into the pool. Perhaps more than any of the images, this headpiece exemplifies the spatial ambiguity which Khnopff evokes by his severe cropping and restricted viewpoint.

The main illustration for Act III (Figure 7) is the only image of the series which shows both Pelléas and Mélisande together. Even here Khnopff does not take the opportunity to produce a typical love scene, rather he attempts to imbue his image with the undercurrent of danger and tension inherent in the text. Mélisande's words make the danger quite clear. Having leaned out of the tower to give Pelléas her hand, she says, "I cannot lean out further. . . . I am on the point of falling. . . . —Oh!, oh! my hair is falling down the tower!"¹⁰ Pelléas takes full advantage of this accident, surrounding himself in the luxurious tresses, filling his hands, his mouth. Mélisande, about to fall, asks to be released, but Pelléas declares that he will keep her prisoner all night long.

Khnopff's image emphasizes the rather disturbing quality of this scene by showing Mélisande being pulled out backward from the tower window. In this particular, the artist departs from a literal interpretation of the text (in which Mélisande inclines toward Pelléas, hand extended) in order to suggest its emotional content. Although he does evoke the scene's underlying eroticism, Khnopff shows that this is not a moment of communion between lovers both in Mélisande's uncomfortable position and in the spatial restriction imposed by the top of the frame.

Maeterlinck refers frequently to Mélisande's hair, so that it becomes one of his major symbols.¹¹ The hair is associated with water and light and compared to birds, which often have erotic associations in Western art.¹² In this scene the hair has tumbled beyond Mélisande's control,

echoing the scene in Act II when the tresses plunged into the Fountain of the Blind. The association of sensuality, represented by the hair, and blindness is expressed explicitly in the words associated with this image—"*Je ne vois plus le ciel à travers tes cheveux*" ["I can no longer see the sky through your hair"].

The headpiece for Act III (Figure 8) reinforces this association. Mélisande fears that her doves will be lost in the dark and not come back. The fact that the artist has depicted the white doves sketchily against a white tower enhances the notion that they may disappear. The extremely close-up point of view might prevent any recognition of the setting, but Khnopff has provided a visual cue. The black, vertical strip at the extreme right echoes a motif seen in the facing color plate, thus identifying the large white area as the tower wall. As in the headpiece for the two preceding acts, Khnopff uses this one to refer to the setting. Interestingly, it is the only instance in which the headpiece is not related to the lines immediately following—the tower scene is actually the second scene of the act. Apparently the artist was satisfied with this image as an indicator of setting and a harbinger of the themes of sensuality and random wandering.

In his color plate for Act IV (Figure 9), Khnopff again chose a scene rich in the main symbolic imagery, drawing attention to motifs which only gradually become significant because of subtle repetition throughout the course of the play. In this striking image, the boldly contrasting pattern of black and white tiles operates on several levels. Symbolically, it refers to Maeterlinck's constant emphasis on light and darkness—the light associated with the sea, the sun, the Fountain of the Blind, Mélisande and moonlight; the darkness with the oppressive forest, the castle, the underground passages, the night.

Formally, the rigid geometry of those contrasting squares heightens the insubstantiality of the figure. Mélisande's form is suggested by simplified, even incomplete lines. The only color used is the warm brown of her hair. Her robe is white—almost absorbed by the white squares, hovering weightlessly over the black ones.

Khnopff also exploits the perspective system created by the tiles to position the viewer. The viewer looks down on the unhappy figure, so small in the vast expanse of floor, and is encouraged to speculate on her character. This is a perfect example of the Symbolist artist using an image to encourage various subjective responses in his viewer. The viewer's experience parallels that of Arkël and Golaud in this scene, one of whom sees only great innocence in her eyes, while the other sees secrets and cause for jealousy. Each viewer superimposes his own response, encouraged by the refusal of both author and artist to define a mysterious character.

The forlorn figure is associated with the words "*Je ne suis pas heureuse*" ["I am not happy"], spoken after the insanely jealous Golaud has abused his wife. Golaud and his violence are represented by the small red form at the extreme left. The only other instance in which Khnopff uses red is in the sheath for Golaud's sword in the plate for Act I. The red also suggests the blood on Golaud's forehead when he bursts into the scene and the sword for which he is searching—the sword with which he will draw blood later in the Act. Note that Khnopff has used red to suggest all of these violent associations to his viewer, but does not define any of the violent acts which take place.

The color plate for Act V (Figure 10) shows Mélisande on a large bed surrounded by curtains. Arkël and Golaud

keep a bedside vigil, and it is the king, Arkël, who says the words associated with this illustration, "*Il ne faut plus l'inquieter*" ["She must not be disturbed anymore"]. He protects Mélisande from the desperate questioning of Golaud, recognizing that the soul is trying to depart.

The drapery at each side of the image frames the scene and gives some sense of its fragile intimacy. Khnopff uses this drapery to engage the viewer's empathy in much the same way he manipulated the perspective in the plate for Act IV. Here we feel as if we are looking between parted curtains into the death chamber. The heavily outlined rectangle at the upper left represents the large window which has been opened so that Mélisande can see the sun set over the sea.

Nearly seventy-five percent of the image is simply the bare whiteness of the page. Light suffuses the death chamber with its layered associations of the sun, sea, Arkël's wisdom, Mélisande's spirit, and silence. Mélisande's reddish-brown hair is the only hint of color. Indeed, this hair is finally significant as an identifying feature, as Mélisande's ephemerality has been quite literally interpreted by the artist with the faintest of lines. Parts of both Arkël and Mélisande are dissolved and absorbed by light.

This treatment of Mélisande is reiterated in the final image of the series (Figure 11)—an all but empty square in

which the nearly dematerialized head of a reclining figure gives the faintest suggestion of Maeterlinck's Mélisande—". . . a little being, so quiet, so fearful, and so silent. . . . 'Twas a poor little mysterious being, like everybody."¹³ The study of Symbolist book illustration may prove to be particularly enlightening to scholars of the period. The physical connection between text and image inherent in the format provides an appropriate context in which to examine the interdisciplinary interests manifested by the Symbolists.

In his illustrations for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Khnopff developed a stylistic vocabulary well suited to enhance Maeterlinck's Symbolist aesthetic. This stylistic vocabulary included the development of symbolic motifs through repetition, ambiguity due to severely restricted point of view, devices to encourage subjective responses in the viewer, and the evocation of multiple associations. The artist consistently chose to associate his images with those moments richest in ambiguity and emotional complexity, resisting the temptation to interpret the play on a more superficial, romantic level.¹⁴ Khnopff's degree of empathy is perhaps best seen in his suggestive sequence of images of the elusive Mélisande, images of a figure which becomes less and less a part of the material world.

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1 H. Liebrecht, *L'Histoire du livre et de l'imprimerie en Belgique des origines à nos jours* (Brussels, 1934), p. 88.

2 Maurice Maeterlinck, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Brussels: Société des Bibliophiles, 1921), title page. Observations about this book and its illustrations are based on examination of copy 14/50 in the Réserve Précieuse of the Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1^{er}, Brussels.

3 R.-L. Delevoy, Catherine De Croës, and Gisele Ollinger-Zinque, *Fernand Khnopff: Catalogue de l'Oeuvre* (Brussels: Lebeer-Hossmann, 1979), nos. 315, 436, 442.

4 Herbert Juin, "Fernand Khnopff et la littérature," *Fernand Khnopff*, catalogue to an exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris, 1979), p. 30.

5 Hermann Bahr, *Secession* (1900) as quoted by Juin, p. 28, author's translation.

6 The medievalized drama is set in the mythical kingdom of Allemonde. Golaud, grandson of King Arkël, marries a mysterious woman named Mélisande whom he finds weeping in the middle of a forest. A gradual awareness of unspoken love between Mélisande and her husband's half-brother, Pelléas, culminates in a declaration which is interrupted by the insanely jealous Golaud. Pelléas is slain, and Mélisande dies soon after, unable to resolve any of the questions which torment Golaud.

The action is important only insofar as it can be loaded with associations and half-hidden meanings by Maeterlinck's use of repetitive imagery, ambiguous dialogue, and evocative settings.

7 For further discussion of Khnopff's interest in silence, see Susan Canning, "Fernand Khnopff and the Iconography of Silence," *Arts Magazine*, Dec. 1979, pp. 170-176.

8 We will see the figure of Mélisande gradually dematerialize as the series progresses.

9 Maurice Maeterlinck, *Pelléas and Mélisande*, trans. Richard Hovey (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1915), p. 36.

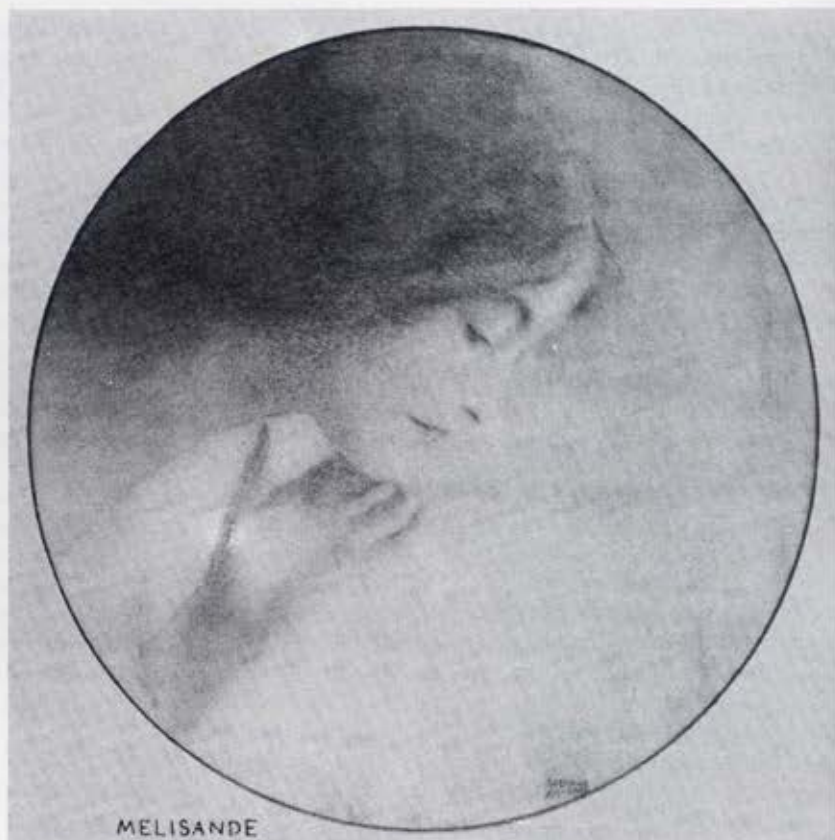
10 Hovey translation, p. 62.

11 For further discussion of the iconographic significance of Mélisande's hair, see Michael Wood, "Les Cheveux de Mélisande," *Les Annales de la Fondation Maurice Maeterlinck*, 1958, pp. 5-14.

12 According to James Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1974), birds are often an attribute of the sense of Touch. They may also represent Air in depictions of the four elements, and, beginning in Ancient Egypt, birds frequently represent the human soul (p. 48). Doves, paradoxically, are seen as attributes of both Lust and Chastity (p. 109). These various associations make the connection between Mélisande and her doves particularly resonant.

13 Hovey translation, p. 120.

14 Carlos Schwabe succumbed to this temptation in 1924 in his lavishly decorative, thoroughly inappropriate illustrations to *Pelléas*.



MELISANDE

Figure 1, Fernand Khnopff, *Mélisande*, 1907, Private Collection, Brussels; R.-L. Delevoy, C. De Croës, and G. Ollinger-Zinque, *Fernand Khnopff: Catalogue de l'Oeuvre*, Brussels: Lebeer-Hossmann, 1979, no. 442.

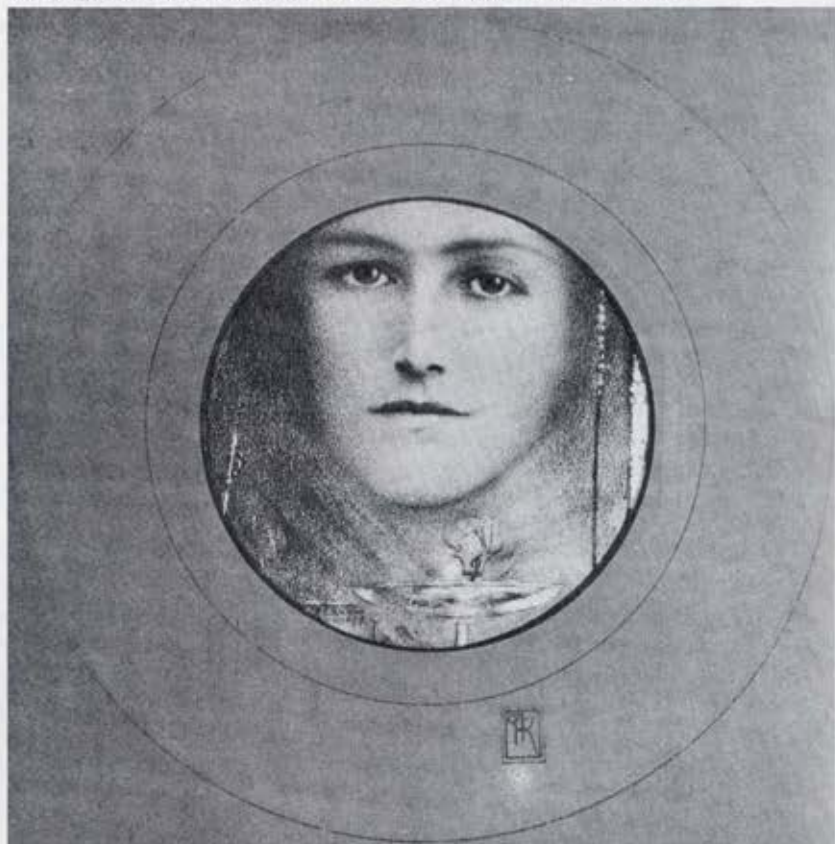


Figure 2, Fernand Khnopff, *Des yeux bruns et une fleur bleue*, 1905, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent; R.-L. Delevoy, C. De Croës, G. Ollinger-Zinque, *Fernand Khnopff: Catalogue de l'Oeuvre*, Brussels: Lebeer-Hossmann, 1979, no. 415.



Figure 3, Fernand Khnopff, "Je commence à avoir froid," handcolored illustration for Act I of Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels: Société des Bibliophiles, 1920. (All photographs reproduced in Figures 3-11, courtesy of the Réserve Précieuse, Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1^{er}, Brussels.)



Figure 4, Fernand Khnopff, tailpiece for Act I of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.



Figure 5, Fernand Khnopff, "*Elle est perdue*," handcolored illustration for Act II of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.

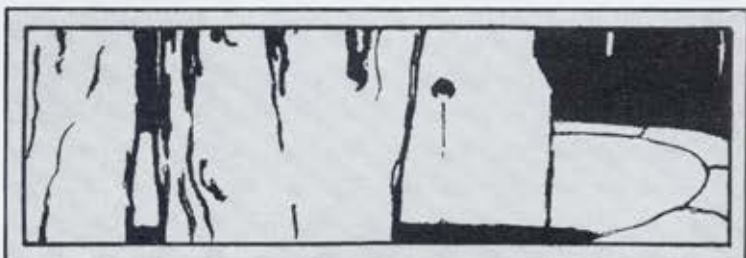


Figure 6, Fernand Khnopff, headpiece for Act II of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.

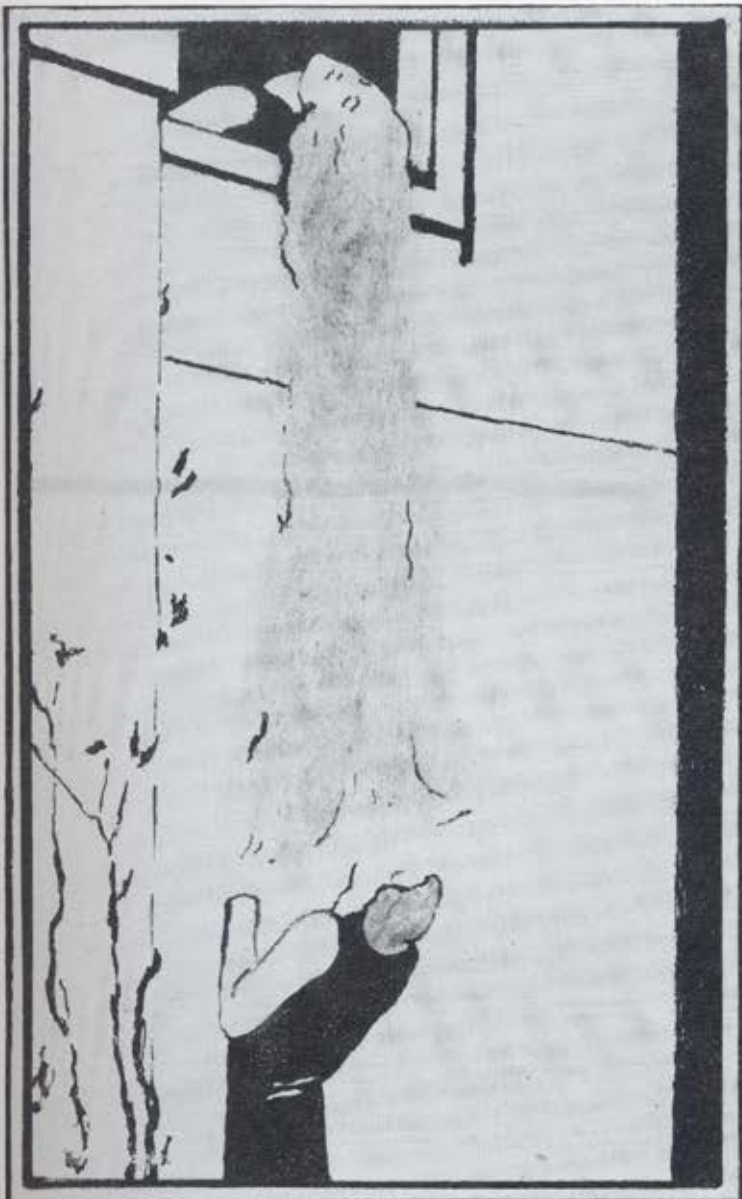


Figure 7, Fernand Khnopff, "*Je ne vois plus le ciel à travers tes cheveux.*" handcolored illustration for Act III of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.

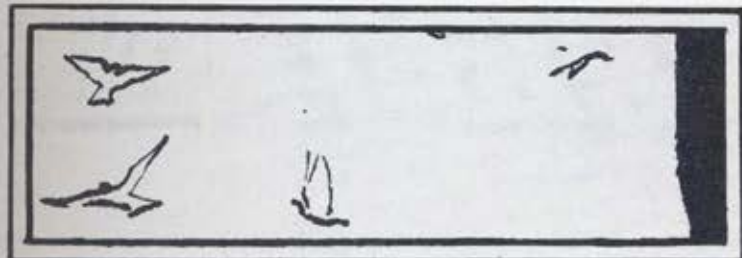


Figure 8, Fernand Khnopff, headpiece for Act III of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.



Figure 9, Fernand Khnopff, "*Je ne suis pas heureuse*," handcolored illustration for Act IV of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.

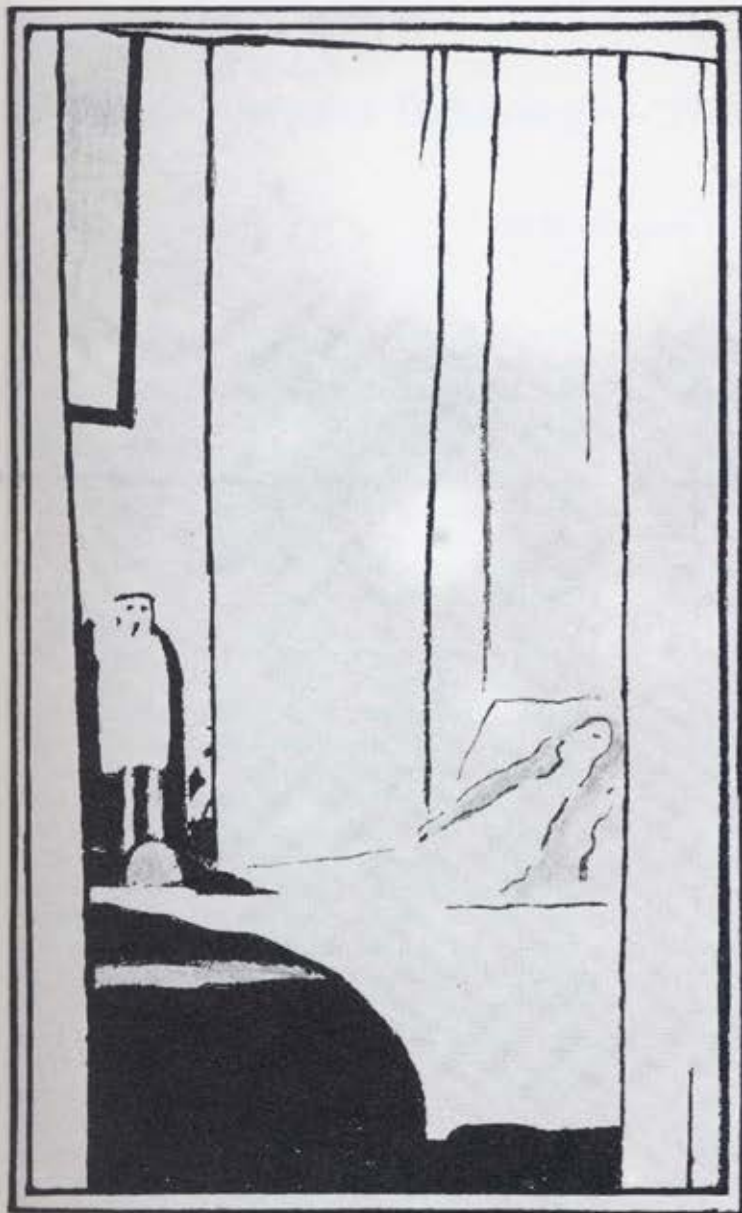


Figure 10, Fernand Khnopff, "Il ne faut plus l'inquieter," handcolored illustration for Act V of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.



Figure 11, Fernand Khnopff, tailpiece for Act V of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Brussels, 1920.