William Morris's Medievalist Visual Aesthetics and its Persistence in Fantasy

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»The way in which Morris lived his life and created his works is his medievalism.« (Elisabeth C. Küster)

1. William Morris: Works

London-born William Morris (1834–1896) was a politically active man of many artistic talents, a true *uomo universale* of the 19th century. He had such a comprehensive interest in aesthetic and social concepts and expressions that he had no difficulty in juggling such diverse tasks as starting a company to design patterned wallpapers, running a printing press, designing furnishings and books, writing Fantasy novels, and giving lectures on decorative book designs in the incunabula period – combining an almost reactionary fascination with the Middle Ages with a Utopian ideal of socialism. He was one of the founders of, and a long-time central figure in the *Arts and Crafts* movement, which was devoted to the art of the Middle Ages and was an anti-industrial and historicist group. Because of this, he was already highly familiar with the protagonists among Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rosetti and Edward Burne-Jones, with whom he completed numerous book projects. Finally, he was a devotee and enthusiast for the ideas of Karl Marx, with whose daughter Eleanor he founded the *Socialist League* in 1885. Furthermore, he is also considered an early proponent of sustainability and ecological consciousness.[1]

At present, he remains still little known in Germany and in Europe outside of the British Isles, although he was certainly one of the most vibrant personalities of the English Victorian era at the end of the 19th century. There are, of course, many reasons to deal with this figure – to begin this article, then, I must clearly justify why I have chosen to do so. Namely, Morris has been called the inventor of the Fantasy

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1   Bibliographical information from MacCarthy 1994: 1–24.

novel in early Fantasy research (cf. Matthews 1997: 3). I believe this characterization goes too far. After all, in the dominant view the modern genre of the Epic Fantasy (not Fantasy literature itself) arose with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, who established the genre in the mid-20th century. However, Morris did influence Tolkien in many different ways, so that he and his novels and book art can be seen as predecessors for Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, who took inspiration and examples from his works (I will address this in more detail later on). However, apart from these philological influences, I also see Morris as the central personality of Victorian art, which shaped multiple medieval visual and design patterns as well as a typical visual style, influencing not only Tolkien and Lewis, but also the entire pictorial aesthetic of Fantasy as a genre. This is the thesis of this paper.

Like Tolkien, Morris began as a translator before he started to write his own novels: he first translated Virgil's Aeneis (*The Aeneids of Vergil*, 1875–1876) from the Latin, then Homer's Odyssey (*The Odyssey of Homer*, 1887–1888) from Greek, later turning to medieval epics ranging from ancient French novels (*Old French Romances*, 1896) to Beowulf, for which he completed an alliterative translation, impressing his contemporaries (Jones 2010: 364). Due to such projects, he became a kind of multiplier for ancient English culture, advocating for the (re-)discovery of England's own epic and mythical traditions. He explored the Eddic tradition in collaboration with Icelandic academic Eiríkr Magnússon, helping to increase its availability and popularity in England. He worked with Magnússon to translate the Völsunga Saga (*The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, with certain songs from the Elder Edda*, 1870), before putting forward a comprehensive new version in hexameter: *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and und The Fall of the Niblungs* (1876).

Morris became famous for a more comprehensive poetic work, which was published in four volumes under the title *The Earthly Paradise* between 1868 and 1870 and based on the structure of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Classical and Northern Irish mythological stories are arranged in alternating order in the annual cycle. This successful four-volume collection led to two nominations for the prestigious post of 'Professor of Poetry' at Oxford in 1877 on the one hand and the succession to Alfred Tennyson as poet laureate on the other. However, Morris declined both of these appointments (MacCarthy 1994: 374–375).

After writing the *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris completed a series of historical novels: in 1888 *A Tale of The House of Wolfings*, a fictitious tale in prose and verse from the end of the Iron Age which attempts to describe the life of the Germanic-speaking Goths. Then, in rapid sequence, he published *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1890), *The Well at the World's End* (1892), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895) as well as *The Water of the Wondrous Islands* (1897), which features his first female protagonist, Birdalone.

Fig. 1: Opening page of The Story of the Glittering Plain or the Land of the Living. Illustration: W. Crane (Kelmscott Press 1890)

Fig. 2: Opening page of The Wood beyond the World. Illustration E. Burne-Jones (Kelmscott Press, 1894)

Some of these novels are *quest romances*, and follow the Arthurian convention of an adventurous quest. Their protagonists are drawn from the period of Germanic antiquity up to the colonization of England by the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes and the Normans.

William Morris's interest in past times and spaces with a long medieval period at the center runs through almost all of his artistic activities[2]. It began with the painting of the *Hall* at Exeter College in Oxford with scenes from the Arthurian world alongside Burne-Jones and Rosetti, which disappeared again shortly after the project was completed because they were applied improperly to the plaster (Wood 1973: 143). In 1861, together with several other Pre-Raphaelites, he founded a decorative arts company providing interior design for Victorian homes. This was highly successful and had a long-lasting influence on contemporary tastes (later *Morris & Co.*). Among other things, it produced large, hand-knotted carpets using medieval production methods, furnishings, glass windows, and, above all, wall decorations and wallpaper[3].

Fig. 3: W. Morris & E. Burne-Jones: Verdure with Deer and Shields IV (1900)

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2   Elisabeth C. Küster recognized William Morris's medievalism very early in (1928: 6–24).

3   Today, William Morris is known primarily through his work as an interior designer, textile and wall designer. There are, likewise, many published works regarding this work; I will name just a few of these: Pevsner, Nikolaus: Pioneers of modern design: from William Morris to Walter Gropius, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1960; Harvey, Charles: William Morris. Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain. Manchester: MUP 1991; Waggoner, Diane: The Beauty of Life. William Morris & the Art of Design. London: Thames & Hudson 2003; Parry, Linda: William Morris textiles. London: V&A 2013; Mason, Anna (Ed.): William Morris. London: Thames & Hudson 2021.

Morris based all of these artisanal products to a large extent on medieval ornamental patterns, primarily drawn from handwritten manuscripts and early printed works. For Morris, these handmade artifacts produced according to medieval templates were »popular art« or »lesser art«, a type of craftsmanship intended to give pleasure to both manufacturers and purchasers through its beauty, both during production and in everyday use. In his 1877 lecture *The lesser arts*, Morris proposed a working aesthetic for everyone involved in designing public and private spaces:

> I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few. (…) That art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town (…) and every man will have his share of the best. (Thompson 1991: 173)

According to Morris, Arts and Crafts should be made by hand using medieval techniques, rather than being fabricated as an industrial mass product – while remaining affordable for all. In line with the medieval awareness of form and material, he strove for a combination of beauty and usefulness. The artisan should take pleasure in the beauty of his products and produce objects of value for all through collaborative work with (rather than as a result of division of labor or calculation of purpose).[4] Morris attempted to meet this ideal of free, sustainable work in his architecture, furniture design, and decorative work. He implemented it in his own *Red House*, which he built and lived in from 1859 to 1865.

At the center of Morris' medieval work aesthetic, however, was book art. In 1891, he set up his own print shop in Hammersmith in order to reinvent the techniques and typography of the incunabula era for the industrial age. By 1898, his own publishing house, Kelmscott Press, had published 54 books, including the famous 15th century edition of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, illustrated by Edward Burne-Jones, as well as 17 of his own works. In this way, Morris realized a close connubium of author, artist and printer, as was the case in the early printed editions, especially with regard to the very close relationship between text and image. The medieval illuminated manuscripts already aimed to combine text and image in their page design, as can be seen in the new order and aesthetics of the book page in the 12th century described by Ivan Illich (Illich 1993: 97–114).

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4   Paul Thompson called this a »romantic« viewpoint (from an ideological-critical perspective, you could also say it is a Marxist viewpoint, if one underscores the insight into the alienation of collaborative processes). Cf. Thompson 1991: 172.

Fig. 4: Opening page of Eusebius: De Evangelica Praeparatione (Venetiae: Nicolas Jenson 1470).

This manuscript book art, which still imitated the incunabula prints, was the model for the book design of the Kelmscott Press: Morris not only coordinated texts and images, but rather aestheticized the entire book as a material object, including its fonts, decorative initials, print space, vignettes, margins and (marginal) decorations. His work was a historical quotation of medieval book art on the one hand, as well as a model for innovative and pioneering book art on the other (cf. Schmitz-Emans 2019: 18–23, here 18).[5] In numerous lectures on medieval and early modern book art, Morris developed a comprehensive and transformative aesthetic – but he warned against imitating the art of the Middle Ages: »But that time had clean passed

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5   Regarding Morris's book art and reception, see also Thompson 1996 as well as the important article by Elizabeth Helsinger (2020: 261–277).

away, and however real the continuity of history, they must recognise the enormous gulf between that period and the present.« Instead, artists should attempt to make things just as well as in the Middle Ages »(...) and by that time they could do this and make things as well as the Middle Ages they would begin to know what the capabilities of art were« (Morris 1982: 22–23). Morris was therefore not interested in imitation, but in productive adaptation and transformation. Above all, he admired the southern German printers (from Ulm and Augsburg) and the Venetian printer Nicolas Jenson, whose page design and decoration he used.

In their work, he recognized the connection between epic and ornamentation in the relationship between text and illustration:

> An illustrated book, where the illustrations are more than mere illustrations of the printed text, should be a harmonious work of art. The type, the spacing of the type, the position of the pages of print on the paper, should be considered from the artistic point of view. The illustrations should not have a mere accidental connection with the other ornament and the type, but an essential and artistic connection. They should be designed as a part of the whole, so that they would seem obviously imperfect without their surroundings. (Morris 1982: 40)[6]

The most important goal for Morris was to »create beautiful books«, the prerequisite for this being the harmonious interaction of all the book's components.[7] Moreover, according to art historian Elizabeth Helsinger, Morris's books gave birth to a fundamental ornamental aesthetic »for all« to be perceived with the senses as well as with the intellect. Jonathan Hay defines ornament as »rhythmic affirmation of motifs across a surface in tension with a limit« (Hay 2019: 2). Helsinger recognizes a close relationship between the textual semantics, its appearance in the book, and its other ornamental and material components, i.e. a connubium of semantics and material, metrics and design (»arranged in complex of multiple metrical an stanzaic shapes and punctuated with striking verbal patterns in color and sound«) which was highly important for the specific ornamental aesthetic of Morris's book design (Helsinger 2021: 263).

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6   Later on, Morris adds: »I lay it down as a general principle in all the arts, where one artist's design is carried out by another in a different material, that doing the work twice over is by all means to be avoided as the source of dead mechanical work« (39).

7   Morris calls Jenson and other printers his role models: »If you will examine carefully the formation of the letters in this book and compare them with what I have called my 'Golden Type,' you will see that it is on Jenson that I have drawn for inspiration.« (...) »But what I want to point out is that the beauty of the form is with such printers as Jenson, Pannartz, Koberger, and others, almost perfectly realised. My own types differ from theirs hardly in essentials« (from the interview of the *Bookseller* (1895) with William Morris, in: Morris 1982: 108–109; cf. also McGann 1993: 49: »Morris's books call out attention to poetry as a materially-orientated act of imagination. «

She bases this view in part on Morris's own statements, which were published in response to the following question in an interview in the *Bookseller* in 1895: »What guides you in the ornamentation of your pages?« he answered: »The subject, of course. In my *Froissart*, for instance, on which I am now very busy, I have made special designs, floriated ones, but having the coats of arms of all the nobles mentioned in the History.« (Morris 1982: 110). In rediscovering the working methods and the awareness for form and material of printers from the incunabula period, Morris develops a modern book aesthetic that recognizes text and image, semantics and decoration as a unified whole. In doing so, he aims not only at the beauty of the book, but also at the imagination and reception of its texts by the book reader.

2. Tolkien and Morris

It is nothing new that Morris was a model for Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, that they knew and appreciated his novels. Lewis, for instance, praised the simple style of his novels, which beautifully contrasted the decorative images and elements of the books (cf. Goodwin 1991: 62). In addition to their professional interest in mythological and folklore tales of the Middle Ages, Tolkien and Lewis were also interested in medieval texts and images offered to them by Victorian culture from a young age (cf. Scoville 2005: 93–104).[8] Scholarly research has already adequately proven that Morris's texts influenced the two founders of modern Fantasy literature due to numerous motifs, landscape and character disposition. Many parallels have been drawn between Morris's novels and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* with respect to characterization, plot motifs, archaic diction, syntax and semantics, as well as to topographic descriptions and resurrection.[9] Therefore, in the following I will concentrate rather on the re-

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8   Also see Biemer 2012: 51–62.

9   A complete exploration is found in Kelvin Lee Massey's dissertation (2007): The Roots of Middle Earth. William Morris's Influence upon J. R. R. Tolkien, specifically on *The Lord of the Rings*. KellyAnn Fitzpatrick identifies how Morris's other novels also had a significant influence on Tolkien; he takes several names from The House of the Wolfings (*Mirkwood* as the name for forests in different texts, *the Mark* as a term for Rohan, *Dale* as the ruined city near Laketown in *The Hobbit* etc. (27–38). Tolkien's elves have a lot in common with the immortals from *The Glittering Plain*, as Fitzpatrick notes: »Tolkien's association of elves with immortality, with a set of magical islands set away from the mainland, and with an ethereal beauty often described through imagery such as evening and stars are arguably directly inspired by Morris« (71). Fitzpatrick also sees similarities in their writing styles: »Even Morris's writing style in his romances – archaic-style prose interspersed with poetry – is recalled in Tolkien's fiction, where elves and hobbits alike are known to break into song. « (70). Finally, many scholars have noted that Tolkien's model of the »secondary world« was likely based on Morris's ability to combine *medieval romance* and *Utopian fiction* in his novels.

ception of Morris's medievalism, his illustrations, and his ornamental aesthetics by Tolkien.

As for Tolkien, he is documented as an early reader of Morris' works. As he states in *On Fairie Stories*, as a child he read about »the nameless North of Sigurd of the Völsungs, and the prince of all dragons,« referring to William Morris's translation of the Völsunga Saga (Scull/Hammond 2006: 601).[10] In 1914, he used part of his prize money for the Skeat prize for English (named after philologist Walter Skeat) to buy three of Morris's books: *The Life and Death of Jason*, Morris's translation of the *Völsunga Saga* and his novel *The House of the Wolfings*. Hammond and Scull show that Tolkien's *The Story of Kullervo*, which he started in 1914, was inspired by his reading of Morris's novels, and that he received a copy of Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* as a gift from H.T. Wade-Gery in 1916.

In 1914, in a letter to his fiancée and later wife Edith, he wrote that he wanted to turn one of the stories from the Kalevala into a short story, »somewhat on the lines of Morris's romances with chunks of poetry in between« (Tolkien 1981: 439f).[11] This letter shows that the characteristic blend of prose and stanzaic poetry Morris used in his novels had made a lasting impression on Tolkien. In a letter to Lewis in 1943, he emphasized that Morris's prose works should be defended more vigorously. He himself had begun to lecture on William Morris's *The Story of Sigurd and the Fall of the Niblungs* at Pembroke College at the time. A personal connection to Morris's family arose when Sigridur Thorarinsson, an Icelandic au-pair, came to stay with the Tolkiens and practiced Old Norse with him between 1926 and 1930. She was introduced to the Tolkiens by May Morris, William Morris's daughter, because she was the cousin of Eirikr Magnusson, with whom Morris had translated the Edda and Icelandic sagas.

Over the last two decades in particular, research has highlighted the numerous links between William Morris's novels and Tolkien's works: from »nordic elements« to structural similarities in the 'hero's journey' and »geographic descriptions« – important components for »secondary creation« – along with topics and motifs (magical objects, the role of trees, elves as immortal, ephemeral beings, »huns« and »orks«) to literal borrowings (Silverfax and Shadowfax, Gandolf and Gandalf), to name just a few.[12] In the words of James McNelis:

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10   Cf. also Evans 1998: 175–191.

11   There is a similar quote in a letter from Tolkien to L.W. Forster from the late 1960s: The plot and development of the *The Lord of the Rings* »owe more to William Morris and his Huns and Romans, as in The House of the Wolfings and The Roots of the Mountains.« (440).

12   Cf. Burns 2005: 367–73: »Morris's influence on Tolkien can be seen in the emphasis both men give to the mythology and social structure of an idealized North, a world which emphasizes independence, directness, and simple artistic form« (367). Cf. also Perry 2007: 439–44; as well as Scoville 2005: 94.

Morris was by far the most influential of the Pre-Raphaelites for Tolkien. C.S. Lewis's own fondness of Tolkien's writing came about in part because it reminded him of Morris's. Tolkien explicitly acknowledged the influence of Wolfings and of the Mountains as sources for the Dead Marshes and the Morannon. (McNelis 2006: 35–36)[13]

Let us now turn to the illustrative and ornamental elements that interested Tolkien in Morris's works. Here it should first be noted that the relevance of the three Victorian artistic movements of Arts & Crafts, *Art nouveau* and the Pre-Raphaelites as influencing factors for Tolkien and Lewis is obvious, as »they pervaded the British culture of Tolkien's youth and have endured ever since« (McNelis 2006: 36). With regard to the influence of William Morris, McNelis summarizes:

Morris's influence in terms of book art, while less documented, may have been equally great. (...) While Tolkien's calligraphy derives largely from medieval influences, from runic inscriptions to uncial Irish early medieval lettering and the clear fluid lines of ninth-century Carolingian minuscule, Morris is a likely inspiration there as well (...) (McNelis 2006: 36).[14]

John Garth puts it even more directly: »Perhaps the most abiding and productive artistic influence on Tolkien was William Morris. Tolkien's absorption of similar ideals is apparent in his frieze patterns and decorative picture-borders, his Númenórean tiles and Elven heraldic devices, and particularly his book-jacket designs« (Garth 2006: 36 et seq.).

A further aspect concerns Tolkien's appreciation for medieval calligraphic ornamentation, as is evident in the artistic design of Elvish scripts. For Tolkien, the shape of the script was just as important as phonemic considerations in Elvish languages

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13   With reference to Podles 2002: 41–47. Cf. also Fitzpatrick 2019: 69: »In addition to the distinct linguistic elements that Tolkien borrows from Morris's historical fiction (Mirkwood for the name of a forest in numerous texts; the mark as a term for Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings*; (both from *The House of the Wolfings*); Dale as a ruined city near Laketown in *The Hobbit*), Tolkien also follows Morris in that he appropriates the culture and language of a historical group of people in his fiction«; Biemer (2012) even sees specific motifs: the ring of Barahir in the *Silmarillion*, she assumes, was influenced by the snake-shaped magic ring that Birdalone receives from Habundia in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*; the dwarf in *The Wood Beyond the World* shares some features with Gollum (rough voice, exorbitant, animalistic physical behavior); finally, the dry tree in *The Well at the World's End*, recalls the withered white tree of Gondor (53–57).

14   Cf. also the latest investigation in Tankard 2019: 35, which establishes Morris's influence on Tolkien's visual aesthetic, in particular his calligraphy.

(Holmes 2006, 29). His publisher Unwin explained Tolkien's inclination and talent for design with his professional interest in medieval manuscripts.[15]

Fig. 5: J.R.R. Tolkien: Númenórean Tile from Elenna preserved in Gondor (1960) (McIlwaine 2018: 17)

Fig. 6: J.R.R. Tolkien: Floral Designs and Borders; Númenórean Ceramic Grass Patterns; Border Designs (1960) (McIlwaine 2018: 191)
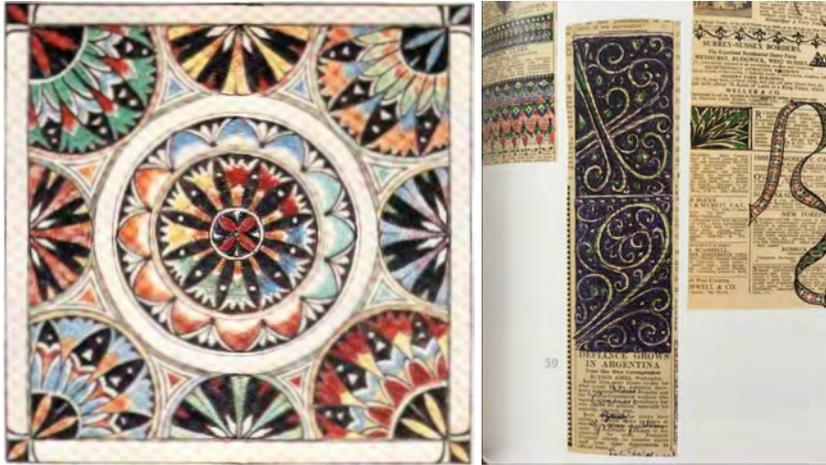
Addressing his interest in artisanal production, in the spirit of William Morris, Hammond and Scull underscored, in their book *Tolkien. Artist and Illustrator*:

> It seems clear, too, that he (Tolkien) agreed with the underlying philosophy of Morris and his followers, which looked back to a much earlier time: that the 'lesser' arts of handicraft embodied truth and beauty no less than the 'fine' arts of painting and sculpture. One looks for the latter almost in vain in his writings (...), but finds a wealth of references to crafts. The carved pillars, floor of many hues, and 'woven cloth' of Théoden's Hall in The Lord of the Rings spring to mind. (Hammond/Scull 1995: 9–10)

We can see that Morris's influence on Tolkien's visual design of illustrations, ornamentation and manuscripts, both in his texts and in his artistic work – whether published or not – was at least as great as that on his storytelling and narrative style.

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15   Cf. Holmes 2006: 32: »Stylized curlicues of arboreal tendrils such as we see in Tolkien's *Amalion* designs, abound in medieval manuscripts. In fact, the preferred border design for medieval illuminators appeared to be, in most cases, the very sort of branches and leaves and nesting birds we find in Tolkien's *Tree of Amalion*.«

Knowledge of and love for medieval languages, literature and book art as well as their modern adaptation unites both as authors and artists. It should be emphasized that medievalism was neither politically nor aesthetically backward-looking in Morris's nor Tolkien's case, but highly modern (Chance/Sievers 2005: 3). This is the prerequisite for its enduring impact in text and image to this day.

3. Morris and Fantasy

Fig. 7: Opening page of Felix Shay: Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora (1926)
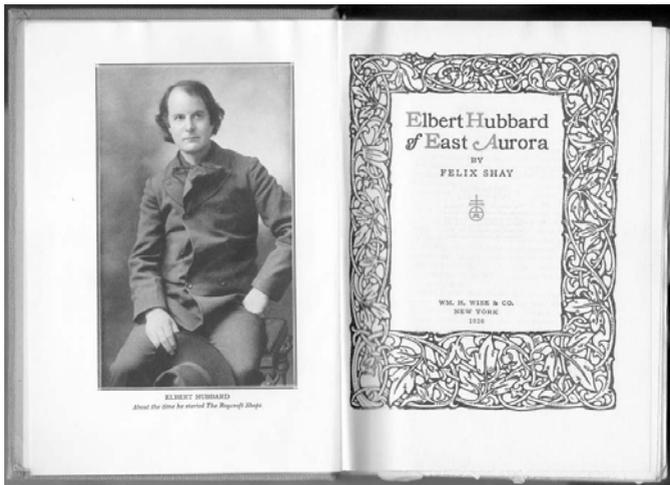
In the following, I intend to outline the impact William Morris's visual style had on Fantasy literature beyond Tolkien and Lewis. I see certain pictorial patterns that are imprinted on Fantasy as a genre through the adoption of Victorian medieval visual aesthetics. These patterns are by no means the only determining factor for cover design, illustrations and book decoration in Fantasy; there is far more than just one iconographic direction here. But the Victorian visual aesthetics of William Morris, as I will call it, is certainly an important strand of Fantasy illustration and art. I would like to begin by showing that Morris had an impact well into the first decades of the 20th century – albeit not on fantastic literature, but more on historical novels, fiction and books for young people. Elbert Hubbard, an American writer and publisher, whose publishing house 'Roycroft Press' was directly oriented towards Morris's Kelmscott Press and its book productions, should be mentioned here first. He also continued the ornamental aesthetics of the Arts & Crafts movement and propagated the movement's goals (Fitzpatrick 2019: 68).

A second successor to Victorian medievalism in book art is Howard Pyle, one of America's most well-known and talented illustrators and writers. He made a name for himself with his illustrated novels on the lives of the American colonists and on King Arthur's Round Table: *The Story of King Arthur and his Knights* (1902), *The Story of the Champions of the Round Table* (1905), *The Story of Sir Launcelot and His Companions* (1907), to name just a few.

Fig. 8: H. Pyle: Sir Pellias encounters the sorrowful Lady in Arroy (1903)
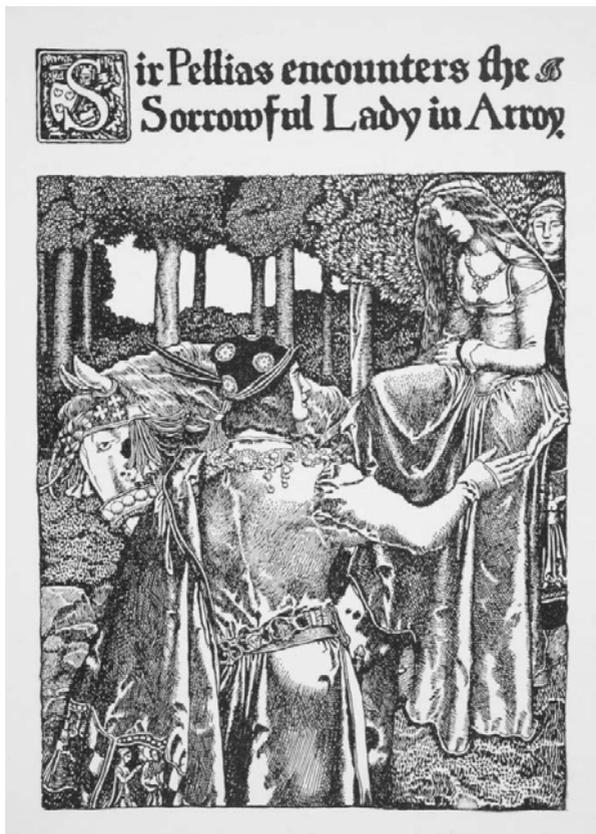
Pyle's illustrations stand out for their historical precision and attention to detail, as well as for their strong narrative quality. He was popular for his ability to create illustrations of authentic living and historic figures, whose movements and actions he was able to bring to life in a fascinating way, making him a forerunner of 20th century pictorial history. His illustrated art cycle helped to shape the popular un-

derstanding of the Middle Ages in the United States, even though his tales greatly modified the model provided by Thomas Malory.

The corporeality of the characters in illustrations from William Morris's books reflects the aesthetics of the Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts & Crafts movement, which in turn were oriented towards late medieval Gothic and early Renaissance painting: slender, beautiful, often tall, delicate female and male bodies with historicist, ephemeral clothing and often melancholic facial expressions were depicted in front of mostly medieval, ancient, or renaissance backdrops. In a departure from academy painting, the depiction of figures was more spiritual and mystical-contemplative, in the sense of being lifted up in God and nature, according to the guidelines of the art critic John Ruskin. Romantic and symbolist currents are combined in a fin de siè-cle aesthetic of medieval influence with numerous poetic and literary references, as can be seen in the pen and ink drawing of Isolde and the tapestry with motifs of the Holy Grail made with Burne-Jones. Burne-Jones's illustrations for the Kelmscott Press likewise exemplify the importance of late-medieval models from book illustration.

Fig. 9: W. Morris: Iseult Boarding the Ship
(1857–60, Pencil and Ink, William Morris Gallery,
London

Fig. 10: W. Morris & E. Burne-Jones: The Failure of Sir Gawaine: Sir Gawaine and Sir Uwaine at the Ruined Chapel (1895–96)

I would like to show the *longue durée* of these pictorial patterns by highlighting the Tolkien illustrator Alan Lee, who, congenial to Tolkien's Morris reception, brought his illustrations for *The Lord of the Rings* closer to Morris's figurative models. Visual archetypes from the Victorian aesthetics described above appear both in the design of the medieval background design and in drawings of characters. Lee paints highly aestheticized landscapes in which the viewer marvels at the size of castles, cathedrals, cliffs, seas and trees.

People are usually very small, compared to the forces of nature and architecture. Nevertheless, Morris's formulaic visual language can also be recognized in larger depictions of figures, as can be seen in the two illustrations for *The Lord of the Rings* (Eowyn's farewell to Aragorn and the mirror of Galadriel).[16]

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16   Cf. Tolkien 1991 and many subsequent editions of the Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit.

Fig. 11: Detail from Alan Lee: Minas Tirith, in: J.R.R. Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings (1991)
Fig. 12: Detail from Alan Lee: Eowyn bids Farewell to Aragorn, in: J.R.R. Tolkien: The Lord of the Rings (1991)

Both watercolours show the spiritualized drawing of the figures according to Pre-Raphaelite patterns against a medievalizing background (chivalrous-looking warriors and the mirror reminiscent of a medieval or antique altar); the statuesque, enraptured appearance of the figures in their form of expression and their relationship to one another is also reminiscent of Morris's figurative illustrations. By illustrating the complete edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (1991) and illustrating *The Hobbit* and other works by Tolkien well into the 21st century, but above all by using these illustrations as the basis for the design for Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film adaptation, Lee has left a lasting mark on the collective imagination of the characters, places and scenes from Tolkien's trilogy.

How can we explain the persistence of such medieval-fantastic figurations and pictorial programs? This might be a good opportunity to make use of Aby Warburg's pathos formula to explain the adaptation of medieval visual archetypes. After all, Morris was already interested in Pre-Raphaelite painting and sculpture, in robes and hair in motion, the tension between spiritual contemplation and physical movement, the static nature of living, expressive images. His figures are often mournful

or melancholy, thoughtful and reflective, turned inwards. This is not entirely in line with Warburg's pathos formula, which is geared towards moving passions, towards »energetic symbols of action and struggle, expressions for lively movements of physical and spiritual forces« (Ritter 1989: 201–203). Nevertheless, what is meant here are formulaic image patterns, image formulas, whether in motion or still, which are expressive insofar as they are directly related to semantic text content. These semantics, which are often based on emotions such as »suffering« or »devotion« (Sütterlin 2008: 161), are formalized in a fixed visual language. The basic framework of this visual language is the historicist-medieval background, which has an effect both thematically and spatially.

In this respect, one could speak of medieval pathos formulas or, if one wishes to focus on Ruskin's art theory of art as incorporated by Morris, of *medieval ethos formulas*. This could also include the comprehensive ideality of the figures and settings. Instead of the stored and circulating affectivity of pictorial formulas, Fantasy would then place more emphasis on the stored and circulating *ethos* of pictorial formulas, according to my thesis, which I would like to put up for discussion in this article. Singular events can be formalized, stored and reversed through such ethos formulas, in order to then be received and transformed once again, as Fantasy has done through the decades.

A further link between Warburg's pathos formulas and Morris's medieval ethos formulas lies in the attention that both pay to ornamental movement. In Warburg's work, this is the drapery or hair in the wind (dynamograms), whereas in Morris's work it is more the tension between figurative-textile movement and static pictorial delimitation through ornamental framing. These cause the figure to stand still in relation to the formula. At the same time, as already mentioned, the Fantasy figures can often be motionless and absorbed in themselves.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I will now refer to a few examples from English and German-language Fantasy literature since the 1970s, namely cover illustrations, book illustrations and book decorations with a medieval design. I have divided these heuristically into three aesthetic categories based on the work of William Morris:

1. Ornamentation (type area, frames around illustrations and covers, marginalia in the text, vignettes, bar framing, map decoration)
2. Typography (typesetting, layout, fonts, initials)
3. Images (front and back cover, spine, illustrations)

It seems correct to describe all three categories in the framework of medieval book decoration according to Morris's conceptualization, and especially the images (figurative illustrations) can be seen as (neo)medieval *ethos formulas*.[17] I will begin with some examples of authentic and fictitious neomedieval adaptations from the direct reception period of Morris's book decoration and illustration design: 1920 saw the publication of the fantastic novel *Domnei – A Comedy of Women Worship* by James Branch Cabell, author of the successful novel *Jurgen – A Comedy of Justice* (1919), a satirical novel in which the protagonist wanders through medieval-looking dream kingdoms (Jürgen was included in 1981 in German translation in the Fantasy Classics series published by Heyne-Verlag). *Domnei*, in contrast, was not published until 1986 and appeared alongside other texts under the title *Die schönste aller Frauen* in the Fantasy series published by Bastei-Lübbe. However, both so-called Fantasy novels were published with specific aesthetic markers that refer to Victorian book art: large initials for chapter beginnings and figure drawings clearly reminiscent of Victorian medievalism.

Fig. 13: *Title page of James Branch Cabell: Domnei, in: Die schönste aller Frauen (1986)*


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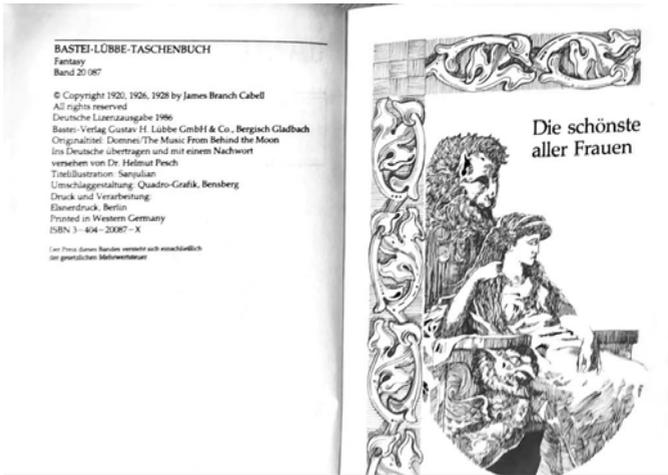
17   I am using 'neomedieval' here instead of 'medieval' (as for Morris and in the 19th century) because this is a consciously ahistorical and selective enactment of the historic Middle Ages. In doing so, I refer to Marshall, who defines *neomedieval* as follows: »a self-conscious, ahistorical, non-nostalgic imagining or reuse of the historical Middle Ages that selectively appropriates iconic images, often from other medievalisms, to construct a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the medieval.« (Marshall 2011: 21–34, 22). Cf. also my recent article on the distinction of terms (Velten 2024: 23–42).

The two figures are static, turned inwards and not towards each other, with a melancholy gaze – they are as if immobilized in the formula »beauty and the beast«, with medieval characteristics limited to the strong border around the edges. Goldman had even made the fictitious claim in the title that his novel was an abridged new version of a first edition by S. Morgenstern from 1928 with the subtitle *A Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure* in order to make the historical-rinascimental plot more credible.

The book decorations for the Fantasy novel *The Princess Bride* by William Goldman (1973) likewise show characteristics from the three categories above: margins with floral patterns, medieval-like print space and typography, as well as an illustration with Victorian style character drawings.

Fig. 14: Title page of William Goldman: The Princess Bride (1973)
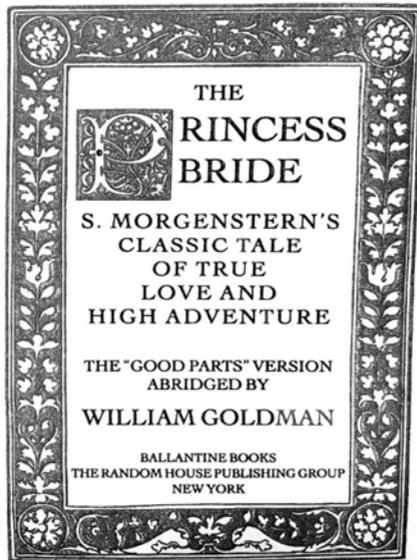
However, Fantasy novels that do not directly refer to the medieval enthusiasm of the 19th and early 20th centuries also make use of the ornamental, typographical and pictorial patterns of Victorianism. These also include works of fiction with a certain literary appeal, such as T.H. White's *Der König auf Camelot* from 1982, originally published in English in 1958 (*The Once and Future King*). The cover of the Klett-Cotta edition presents not a medieval, but rather an art déco font from the 1920s;

however, the early-humanistic style of illustration, combined with oversized leaves in the marginalia and multiple floral and animal motifs on the cover, do recall late medieval book arts as we have seen from Morris's Kelmscott Press.

Fig. 15: Cover of T.H. White: Der König auf Camelot (1982)
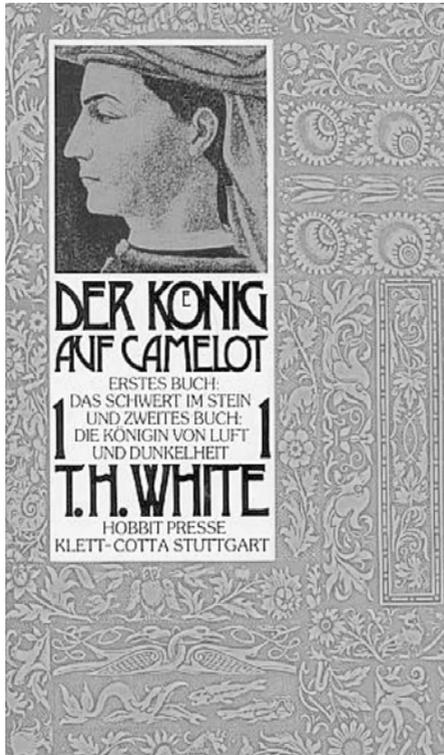
A large ornamental, neo-mediaeval framework with magical creatures such as dragons and unicorns also comprise the cover illustration of the 2001 published *Die Priesterin von Avalon* which appeared in the Avalon series by Marion Z. Bradley. The illustration shows a woman in a red costume (of unspecified vintage) in a thick forest, holding aloft a richly decorated, medieval sword.

The illustration and parts of it can be found in reduced size in the frame, the allegorical marginalia also on the spine. Instead, typographical features are missing, replaced by the handwritten title, which in turn points to the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages. The title page of George R.R. Martin's fifth volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire, A Dance with Dragons* from 2011, appears less distinctive.

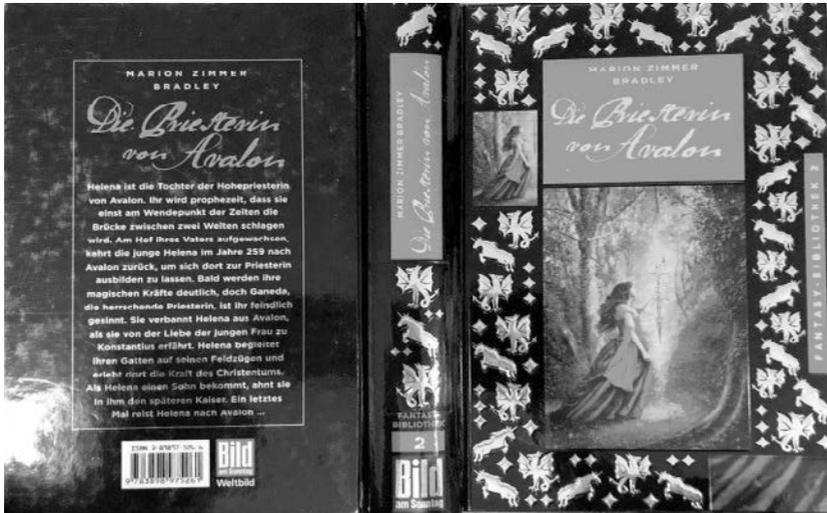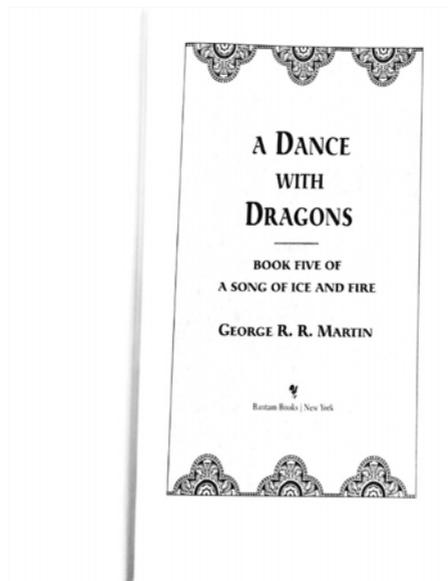*Fig. 16: Front and Back Cover of Marion Z. Bradley: Die Priesterin von Avalon (2001)*

Fig. 17: Title page of G.R.R. Martin: A Dance with Dragons (2011)

However, medieval framing decorations in the style of the Kelmscott Press can also be seen here, as in the rest of the type area of the book. Smaller vignettes in this style can be found at the beginning and end of chapters in the book, so that the motifs run through the entire book design.[18]

Two other more recent examples are the cover of David Edding's novel *Das leuchtende Volk* (2004) and the cover of the first volume of Bernhard Hennen's Elfen series *Die Elfen* (2005). On the cover of Edding's novel, a warrior in early medieval armor rides through the snow with a stern look in his eyes; a Gothic castle can be seen in the background and the whole thing is delimited on the left by an amulet-like border. The colors used in the marginalia reflect those used for the knight and the title font.

Fig. 18: Front Cover of David Eddings: Das leuch-tende Volk (2004)

While the colorful cover refers to Fantasy traditions from the 1980s, these features in turn recall illustration conventions from Victorian-medieval book and visual aesthetics. This can be seen even better in the second example of *Die Elfen*, where the

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18   Cf. the article by Theresa Specht in this volume.

type area for the start of the chapter headed *Das Volk der Freien* uses a neomedieval font and is bordered by an almost half-page illustration on the right.

Fig. 19: *Illustration Chapter 40: Das Volk der Freien of Bernhard Hennen: Die Elfen (2005)*

This in turn shows a crowned lady elf with long hair leaning against a gnarled, magical-looking tree, whose branches are, as it were, embracing the type area. Alongside multiple other heraldic signs and decorative vignettes, the book art here is consistently neomedieval, which gives the text a whole range of atmospheric reference points.

The genre of the Fantasy novel, especially the subgenre of *Epic Fantasy*, thus demonstrates the persistence of visual medieval and neomedieval aesthetic patterns. The covers mentioned and shown, the illustrations as well as the typeface and book design exhibit content-related and formal characteristics of the three aesthetic categories developed by Morris above: ornament, typography and image.

Hundreds of German and English-language book editions could easily be listed here, which have the same characteristics but cannot be shown for reasons of space.

The publisher's decision to use medieval-looking visual conventions and fonts as well as book art conventions for the book design not only refers to the content of the Fantasy, which in many cases follows a neomedieval grammar (cf. Velten 2024a: 124–151), but also (and above all) to the recognizability of (neo)medieval ethos formulas of book design, which have been tangible since Victorian art and William Morris as its most important representative, and which are still handed down and being transformed by the genre of Fantasy all through to the present.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1: Opening page of The Story of the Glittering Plain or the Land of the Living Men (W. Morris). Illustration: W. Crane. Kelmscott Press 1890, available online: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelmscott_Press.

Fig. 2: Opening page of The Wood beyond the World (W. Morris). Illustration E. Burne-Jones (Kelmscott Press, 1894) featuring a feminine figure (the visionary Maid), the same as female protagonist Birdalone in The Water of the Wondrous Islands.

Fig. 3: W. Morris & E. Burne-Jones: Verdure with Deer and Shields IV (Quest for the Holy Grail Tapisseries; Morris & Co. 1900.

Fig. 4: Opening page of Eusebius: De Evangelica Praeparatione (Venetiae: Nicolas Jenson 1470, roman antiqua).

Fig. 5: J.R.R. Tolkien: Númenórean Tile from Elenna preserved in Gondor (1960) Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Tolkien Drawings 91, fol. 14.

Fig. 6: J.R.R. Tolkien: Floral Designs and Borders; Númenórean Ceramic Grass Patterns; Border Designs (1960) Bodleian Library, MS Tolkien Drawings 94, fol. 65, 11, 66.

Fig. 7: Opening page of Felix Shay: Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora (New York: William H. Wise & Co. 1926) in the style of E. Hubbards book openings.

Fig. 8: H. Pyle: Sir Pellias encounters the sorrowful Lady in Arroy. Illustration for the book The Story of King Arthur and His Knights, New York: Ch. Scribner's & Sons, 1903. Pen and black ink over graphite and paper. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Fig. 9: W. Morris: Iseult Boarding the Ship (1857–60); Pencil and Ink, William Morris Gallery, London.

Fig. 10: W. Morris & E. Burne-Jones: The Failure of Sir Gawaine: Sir Gawaine and Sir Uwaine at the Ruined Chapel, Number 4 of the Holy Grail tapestries woven by Morris & Co. 1891–94 for Stanmore Hall. This version woven by Morris & Co. for Lawrence Hodson of Compton Hall 1895–96. Wool and silk on cotton warp. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Fig. 11: Detail from Alan Lee: Minas Tirith. Illustration for Book V, Chapter I, Minas Tirith, The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. London/New York 1991, available online: https://arthur.io/art/alan-lee/minas-tirith Copyright Alan Lee.

Fig. 12: Detail from Alan Lee: Eowyn bids Farewell to Aragorn. Illustration for Book V, Chapter II, The Passing of the Grey Company, The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. London/New York 1991, available online: https://arthur.io/art/alan-lee/lady-eowyn-bids-farewell-to-aragorn, Copyright Alan Lee.

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Fig. 14: Title page of William Goldman: The Princess Bride. New York: Ballantine Books 1973.

Fig. 15: Cover of T.H. White: Der König auf Camelot (German transl. of The Once and Future King (1958). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1982.

Fig. 16: Front and Back Cover of Marion Z. Bradley: Die Priesterin von Avalon (German transl. of Priestess of Avalon (2000), Licenced edition Weltbild Verlag 2001).

Fig. 17: Title page of G.R.R. Martin: A Dance with Dragons. Book V of A Song of Ice and Fire. Bantam Books: New York 2011.

Fig. 18: Front Cover of David Eddings: Das leuchtende Volk (German transl. of The Shining Ones (1995). Licenced edition Weltbild Verlag 2004.

Fig. 19: Illustration Chapter 40: Das Volk der Freien of Bernhard Hennen: Die Elfen (2005). Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, München.