The Reviews Are In: Reclaiming the Success of Morris’s “Socialist Interlude”

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Current critical silence on the subject of Morris’s “socialist play,” The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened is less than surprising. A perusal of the Lathams’ latest bibliography of Morris scholarship confirms an opinion established quite early in its critical history, and one formed by no less distinguished a figure than his first biographer, J. W. Mackail. Mackail claimed quite categorically that “as a matter of fact, nothing came of the experiment in which the method of the Townley Mysteries was applied to a modern farce.”¹

There is, however, an impressive amount of evidence to set against Mackail’s judgement, and to suggest that Morris’s experiment is due for a revaluation.

On 17 October 1887, The Pall Mall Gazette reviewed Morris’s “experiment” on nothing less than its front page, noting under bold and striking headlines that there had appeared an “ARISTOPHANES IN FARRINGDON ROAD,” revealed in the form of a “‘Socialist Interlude,’ by the Author of ‘The Earthly Paradise’.” “Mr. William Morris,” known to his wider Victorian audience as the poet of an idle day, had transformed himself into a dramatic satirist. “Not content with writing the songs of Socialism,” the review began, “[he] aspires to write its plays.”

The review was very likely written by the professional dramatic critic, William Archer, who was shortly to hail another “new birth” in Ibsen.² Nearly ten years after its successful opening night in Farringdon Road on 15 October 1887, Archer’s friend, George Bernard Shaw, recalled Morris’s “Artistophanism” in an essay for the Saturday Review entitled “William Morris as Actor and Dramatist” [10 October 1896]. Shaw wrote:

There has been no other such successful first night within living memory, I believe; but I only remember one dramatic critic who took care to be present – Mr. William Archer.³

The Gazette’s reviewer hailed the production not only in terms of its author’s unusual transformation, however, but by the standards of its place in the scheme of dramatic evolution. The anonymous review recognized in the play’s idiosyncratic form the seeds of a drama able to subvert the unhealthy productions of a capitalist theatre:

The development of the rhapsodist into the dramatist is in strict accordance with accepted theories of literary evolution, and the two or three hundred people who crowded the hall of the Socialist League on Saturday night assisted, perhaps, at the birth, or at any rate the regeneration, of a dramatic form destined to supplant the milk-and-water comedies and “leggy” burlesques in which our bloated capitalism delights.⁴
Both the Gazette review and Shaw's laudatory reflections ten years later considered Morris's socialist play an "extravaganza," by popular definition a "spectacular and brilliantly costumed dramatic entertainment." And both recounted the performance's reception as hilarious and enthusiastic. Shaw's essay recalled:

I laughed immoderately myself; and I can still see quite clearly the long top floor of that warehouse in the Farringdon Road as I saw it in glimpses between my paroxysms ... Mrs. Stillman, a tall and beautiful figure, rising like a delicate spire above a skyline of city chimney pots ... and a motley sea of rolling, wallowing, guffawing Socialists between.\(^5\)

The Gazette review pointed out "a sprinkling" of artists among Shaw's sea of guffawing Socialists. Among them was Walter Crane, whose *Artist's Reminiscences* (1907) included a favourable accounting of Morris's "experiment" in dramatic form.

... William Morris, too, came out as a playwright, and actually took a part himself in it - that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, called as a witness in court. The title was *The Tables Turned; or Nupkins [sic] Awakened*, and the play turned on the trial of Socialists for sedition ... It appears there was some difficulty about filling the part of the Archbishop, as so unlikely a person as I was applied to to take it up ... I did not fancy myself as an Archbishop, however, and so lost - well, what I am sure was no loss to the audience! ... It was a very interesting performance ...\(^6\)

Interest within the Socialist ranks appears to have been very keen. The play had been sold out on its opening night. The Commonweal's review judged the immediate success of *The Tables Turned*.

... The play was well received and much applauded. So many people were unable to obtain admittance that it was decided to repeat the performance this Saturday (Oct. 22) ... Performances are also being arranged for Hammersmith and Bloomsbury; and it was further announced that any Radical Club or branch of the League or S.D.F. possessing a stage and willing to aid the raising of the Commonweal Fund, could arrange with the manager to have the same company, scenery, etc...\(^7\)

In fact, *The Tables Turned* was repeated at least ten times\(^8\): after the two performances in Farringdon, once at the Athenaeum Hall, Tottenham Court Road (29 October 1887),\(^9\) and then throughout the winter and spring months in various performances for London branches of the League.\(^10\) Interest in *The Tables Turned* appears to have been great enough to warrant considerations of taking the piece abroad. A later Commonweal review reported that several "comrades ... are talking of putting Nupkins into a French dress, and sending him forth to do additional good in that fashion."

One of the last performances appears to have been as late as 17 June 1888 - by professional theatrical standards a healthy "run" - when a performance at the International Club for the East-End Propaganda Fund was given by what Commonweal now referred to as "the Nupkins Company".\(^12\)

On Sunday ... the "Nupkins" Company gave a dramatic representation of "*The Tables Turned*" to a large audience, who thoroughly appreciated the various points in the play.\(^13\)
One notable witness of this last performance was William Butler Yeats. Yeats, another of Morris's young admirers who would also demonstrate his interest in dramatic rebirths, had written to Katharine Tynan on 20 June 1888:

I was at the east end of London to see Morris act in his Socialist play. He really acts very well. Miss Morris does not act at all but remains herself most charmingly throughout her part.\textsuperscript{14}

Although his critical commentary on the play is relegated to the performances of Morris and May, Yeats's interest in the play seems to have preceded its performance. Three months earlier he had sent a copy of the play to Katharine:

... I send you a copy of Morris's play; it is a little soiled as it is one of the copies used by the actors - no others being to be had.\textsuperscript{15}

There can only be speculation about the unavailability of printed copies of the text. Commonweal advertised printed copies as early as one week after its first performance. The play appears to have had a healthy reading audience as well.\textsuperscript{16}

Even years later, members of the "Nupkins Company" continued to circulate positive memories about their experiences with The Tables Turned. R. Page Arnott's biography contains the recollection of one of its lesser-known cast members, John Turner:

... Turner, founder of the Shop Assistants' Union (now merged in the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers) and for several years on the Trades Union Congress General Council from its formation in 1921, told me he had played a minor role in the performance. Like many actors of minor parts he remembered more than anything else the strong language used by the producer at the rehearsals and how fiercely Morris stamped and shouted when things went wrong.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite the immediate success of Morris's play, and long lasting memories of its audience and cast, The Tables Turned continues to receive little critical or historical attention. Among theatre and social historians - more recently attentive to left-wing, socialist, and workers' theatre - Morris's "socialist interlude" has been conspicuously overlooked. Although Commonweal billed the play in its early advertisements as "an original dramatic sketch ... produced for the first time;\textsuperscript{18} one of the leading surveys of theatre and socialism in Britain, from 1880 - 1935, fails to mention Morris's play.\textsuperscript{19}

And yet there are many affinities between The Tables Turned and later "socialist skits."\textsuperscript{20} Only one Morris biographer, Jack Lindsay, has gone so far as to claim that Morris's socialist interlude may indeed have broken "new ground in the creation of agit prop."\textsuperscript{21}

Still more mystifying is the relative silence on possible connections between Morris's dramatic experiment and the developing dramatic interest of certain members of its relatively large audience, especially those of his most effusive reviewer, G. B. Shaw. Michael Holroyd's impressive work on the life of Shaw enumerates several aspects of Morris's influence on his young admirer.\textsuperscript{22} But only one Morris biographer has claimed any links between the obvious impression that The Tables Turned made on Shaw (even ten years after he had seen the play) and his own yet-to-ripen dramaturgy. Paul Bloomfield suggested this influence in his 1934 biography of Morris:
Nupkins was performed in Farringdon Road in October for the benefit of The Commonweal, and a queer, magnificent production it is: a kind of collaborative effort by a pageant-master with a bluff sense of humour, and the Evangelist John. It is slapstick dovetailing into high drama; vigorous, reckless propaganda, and an orgy of wish-fulfillment; and Punch-and Judy, and Theocritus, and Bernard Shaw. The Shavian touch is easily explained. A young red-bearded Fabian journalist was present at the first night... and was much impressed. Ten years later he was still convinced that Morris would have written for the stage, and brilliantly, "if there had been any stage that a poet and artist could write for." Of course there could really have been no Shavian touch in Nupkins, but there have been touches of Nupkins in a good deal of Shaw - to name only two: quick transitions from the sublime to the absurd, and the gay singeing of majestic whiskers.23

Even among Morrisians, keen on redeeming every multi-faceted aspect of this eminent Victorian, Morris's "socialist interlude" has been either neglected,24 or considered as a kind of museum piece - at best regarded as an interesting biographical footnote,25 a tangential testimony to Morris's effusive energies and experimental temperament. There have been at least two "revivals" of The Tables Turned over the last two decades; these were performed, no doubt, rather in the spirit of memorial than for reasons of artistic merit.

Current Morris literary scholarship has overlooked - or ignored - what the Gazette reviewer first referred to as an "Aristophanism." In so doing, it has bypassed the play's value as evidence of Morris's skill in handling humour in a satiric vein and in producing lively prose for dramatic purposes. The Tables Turned does in fact provide important evidence to dispel one of the most on-going criticisms of Morris's work; namely, that it failed to express, as Yeats later wrote, "that humorous, many-sided nature of his."26

Something, then, did come of "the experiment in which the method of the Townley Mysteries was applied to a modern farce," both in terms of its immediate success and possibly even in terms of its more far-reaching influence. Morris's play was seen by hundreds, if not thousands of English workingmen, socialists, and artists, as well as by a number of young men and women who would later show their own dramatic inclinations. Judged by even the most humble criteria, Morris's "Aristophanism" was a dramatic success, and once the reviews are in, The Tables Turned should be reclaimed as legitimate ground for further critical acclamation.
NOTES


2 Although the DNB does not list The Pall Mall Gazette as one of the publications to which Archer submitted dramatic criticism, Holroyd’s biography of Shaw mentions that Archer “planted [Shaw] among the reviewing staff of The Pall Mall Gazette” [Michael Holroyd, Bernard Shaw, Vol. I (1856-1898): The Search for Love (New York: Random House, 1988), p.138]. In this case, it is possible to suggest that the review was anonymously written by either Archer or Shaw himself.


4 The Pall Mall Gazette, 17 October 1887, p.1.

5 Shaw, p.213.


7 Commonweal, 22 October 1887, p.343

8 Mackail noted that the performance “was so successful that it was repeated three times”, [J. W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, 1899), p.187]. But at least eleven performances of the play are indicated through various sources.

9 Commonweal, 29 October 1887, p.352.


11 Commonweal, 5 November 1887, p.350.

12 Commonweal, 16 June 1888, p.192. This performance was on a Sunday.


15 ibid. p.74.
In a letter to Charles Rowley [17 March 1888], Morris included a printed copy of *The Tables Turned*, obviously at Rowley’s request (Kelvin, Vol. II, p.756).


Commonweal, 1 October 1887, p.320.


See, for example, the summary of *Brotherhood*, a little play widely staged in the Socialist Sunday Schools after the turn of the century (Raphael, MacColl, and Cosgrove, pp. 14-15).


Holroyd, pp.142-52, 189-90, 223, 402.


It is unfortunate that Morris’s two seminal biographers, Mackail and Thompson, show only slight interest in “Morris’s experiment.” Mackail denies the verifiability of all of Shaw’s glittering claims for Morris as a dramatist, while Thompson only cites *The Tables Turned* as “a bitter satire on the procedure of the courts” in the “fight for free speech” [E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p.683]. Jan Marsh does, however, discuss the play briefly from the standpoint of its “success” for May [Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris* (London: Pandora, 1986), pp.208-210].

Yeats expressed this, one of the most striking criticisms of Morris’s work, in his essay, “Literature and the Living Voice” [*Plays and Controversies* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), pp.187-88].