Topical Realism in
The Tables Turned

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Morris's only dramatic experiment was his play The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened. Written during the late summer of 1887 as a means of raising funds for Commonweal, the good humour that prevailed both at the rehearsals and performance of the play mark it out as one of the high points in the history of the Socialist League. Although H.A. Barker was the nominal manager of the production, Morris himself assumed responsibility for casting the various characters. He originally approached Shaw to take the part of the hero, John Freeman, but Shaw declined the honour on the grounds “that it would be wiser to let a younger member of his Socialist League . . . do it.” The part was eventually given to Halliday Sparling who was therefore thrown into close proximity with May Morris who played Mary Pinch. According to Walter Crane, Morris asked him to play the part of the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he declined as he didn’t think himself qualified to accept the role of a prelate. Instead, in what turned out to be an inspired piece of casting, Morris took the part himself. Rehearsals commenced in late September after the regular Monday meetings of the Council of the Socialist League, and continued at irregular intervals for the next fortnight.

The play received its first performance on 15 October 1887 in a warehouse behind the Commonweal office at 13 Farringdon Road. Even this location was turned to
humorous advantage by Morris, who had Constable Potlegoff describe its contents as consisting of “printing-stock . . . some very shabby furniture, and the office-boy and three compositors.” On this occasion the premises were packed with an enthusiastic and expectant audience, which a report in the *Pall Mall Gazette* estimated to have numbered “two or three hundred people.” A writer in *Commonweal* noted with satisfaction that amongst the audience were “many people who are not often seen at a Socialist meeting.” Ernest Rhys even recorded that Jane Morris, who rarely had anything to do with her husband’s socialist activities, was seen to join the audience shortly before the curtain rose. Facing this audience was some effective scenery designed by H.A. Barker. For the first act this consisted of the “very realistic” paraphernalia of a drab court-room, while for the second a colourful backdrop had been painted depicting a large tree in the foreground and a communal hall in the distance.

The production which followed was an uproarious success, the climax coming when Morris made his own dramatic entrance. Due to the cramped conditions on the improvised stage most of the cast had to await their cues squashed together in the confined space of the miniature wings. H.A. Barker later recalled how “His Grace of Canterbury was packed in with the rest, in a high state of excitement . . . due, in part probably, to the fact that this was his first appearance as actor and dramatist.” Standing beside him was the actor playing Lord Tennyson, an individual Morris had chosen personally because he apparently combined “the right sort of beard with a melancholy temperament.” Unfortunately, his temperament let him down on this occasion for he fainted just as Morris was preparing to make his entrance. Subconsciously aware that the prompter had abandoned his post to don the unfortunate man’s costume, Morris “got excited again”, forgot his own part, and was obliged to improvise his role in the witness-box as best he could.

He need not have worried. His initial appearance – dressed in shovel-hat, clerical bands and black stockings – was greeted with stupendous cheering, stamping and applause. Shaw recalled that he then proceeded to give a brilliantly pompous portrayal of the purse-proud and wooden-faced prelate “by obliterating his humour and intelligence, and presenting his own person to the audience like a lantern with the light blown out, with a dull absorption in his own dignity which several minutes of the wildest screaming laughter . . . could not disturb.” In fact Shaw was delighted by the whole performance, which he attended as a dramatic critic, declaring that it proved Morris to be in the front rank of European playwrights. This was a view endorsed by an anonymous writer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* – probably William Archer – who under the headline ‘Aristophanes in Farrington Road’ described the play as “. . . the birth, or at any rate regeneration, of a dramatic form destined to supplant the milk-and-water comedies and “leggy” burlesques in which our bloated capitalism delights.”

It is possible that the enthusiastic reception afforded *The Tables Turned* led Morris to consider extending his theatrical activities. Mackail quotes an unnamed comrade as saying:

Morris was so interested by his experiment in this sort of composition that he for some time talked of trying his hand at a serious drama, and would no doubt have done it had there been any practical occasion for it, or any means of consummating it by stage representation under proper conditions, without spending more time
on the job than it was worth. It was impossible for such a born teller and devourer of stories as he was to be indifferent to an art which is nothing more than the most vivid and real of all ways of storytelling.14

Elsewhere this same “enthusiastic and most paradoxical of his followers” is quoted as adding: “If he had started a Kelmscott Theatre instead of the Kelmscott Press, I am quite confident that in a few months, without going half a mile afield for his company, he would have produced work that would within ten years have affected every theatre in Europe. . . .”15 The play certainly caught the imagination of many socialists during the autumn and winter of 1887. Following the first night the play was performed again at Farringdon Road the following Saturday, then at the Athenaem Hall on 29th October, the Hammersmith Branch on 5th November,16 and in aid of the “Prisoner’s Defence Fund” on 3rd December.17 Following the publication of a fourpenny edition of the play, productions were arranged by a number of the provincial branches including that at Norwich.18 Pamela Bracken Wiens has claimed that it was performed on at least eleven occasions and was even witnessed by William Butler Yeats.19 Commonweal also reported that the play had come to the attention of Kropotkin and Reclus, who were “talking of putting Nupkins into a French dress and sending him forth to do additional good in that fashion.”20

The play’s success was due to the way in which Morris was able to extract humour from serious contemporary events. Four incidents are of particular relevance to the representation of the main characters in the play. The first of these occurred in January 1887 when two members of the Socialist League — Charles Mowbray and Fred Henderson — were arrested in Norwich and charged with incitement to riot after addressing a meeting of unemployed workmen. Their case was brought before Mr. Justice Grantham, who used the occasion to lecture those present on the wonderful facilities afforded the poor in Norwich. According to a report in the local Eastern Evening News he particularly praised the conditions in the city’s workhouse.21 He concluded his address by sentencing Henderson to four months imprisonment and Mowbray — the father of five children — to nine months. Morris literally bristled with indignation when he heard of Judge Grantham’s remarks and the severity of the sentence. He immediately sent a letter to the Daily News which was published under the title ‘Disturbances at Norwich’ and followed this up by stating, as part of the first entry in his short-lived Socialist Diary, that Grantham’s summing-up showed “a sort of survival of the old sort of bullying of the Castlereagh times mixed with a grotesque attempt at modernisation on philanthropic lines: it put me in a great rage.”22 His main statement on the issue, however, was reserved for his ‘Notes on Passing Events’ column in Commonweal on 29 January 1887. In this he styled Grantham “Mr. Justice Nupkins”, after the bumbling magistrate in Dickens’ Pickwick Papers, and attempted to refute his comments by quoting an extensive press report on conditions in Wandsworth Workhouse.23 There is no doubt that Morris intended his audience to draw the parallel between Judge Grantham and Mr. Justice Nupkins. When Constable Potlegoff accuses John Freeman of using expressions such as “A damned old fool!” and “A blasted old cheat” to describe Nupkins when speaking at an open-air meeting in Hyde Park, the latter candidly acknowledges this by remarking in an aside that Freeman’s comments were undoubtedly provoked by “the Norwich affair.” (p.12)

Morris applied the term ‘Nupkins’ to a number of other representatives of the legal establishment. One of these was Judge Newton. During July 1887, Morris, in his
'Notes on News' column in *Commonweal*, followed a prosecution brought by the police against a Miss Cass for alleged stealing. Although I have been unable to establish the exact circumstances of this case, it appears from Morris's account that Judge Newton convicted Miss Cass on the evidence of police witnesses and was then obliged to reverse his decision when a number of shopkeepers protested her innocence. Newton admitted his "mistake" and forced Charles Warren to issue a directive to the police not to go beyond the law in their prosecution of poor girls in the streets. It is likely that Morris intended his audience to recall the persecution of Miss Cass when he developed the character of Miss Pinch.

The third episode to influence the characterisation in *The Tables Turned* was the arrest and trial of James Aliman in February 1887 for open-air preaching close to the meeting place of the Hackney Branch of the Socialist League. Aliman had two previous convictions for open-air speaking – one at Dod Street in 1885 and the other at Stratford in 1886 – and the judge, Mr. Hannay, in what was by any standard a biased summing-up, made use of this fact to impose a fine of forty shillings. This was a considerable sum for a man whom Morris described in his *Socialist Diary* as "single and wretchedly poor", but Aliman declined to allow the League to pay the fine and accepted the alternative of a month in prison. His courage was celebrated later when the League held a special demonstration in Hyde Park on 28 March 1887 to mark his release. What Morris found particularly uplifting about the case was the manner in which Aliman, a working man, stoutly defended himself at his trial. *Commonweal* carried a report of this defence on 26 February 1887:

Allman pointed out the injustice of the police attacking only Socialists and no one else; and that it was only when a few working men bound themselves together to point out to their fellows how they were robbed that the ruling class put this old law into force. There were hundreds of meetings held every evening, not by Socialists, that really did cause obstructions, that were never interfered with, which showed the partiality of the police. Meetings were held three times a-week by a ranter five yards from where he was arrested for speaking, but the police only looked on.

Morris paid tribute to his comrade's dedication to the cause by naming the central protagonist of *The Tables Turned* John Freeman – an obvious echo of the name James Aliman. Like Allman, Freeman refuses to be bullied by the judge and provides an ironic commentary on the proceedings.

Three months after the trial of Aliman there occurred a final event which influenced the subsequent characterisation in *The Tables Turned*. Early in May 1887, following a regular socialist meeting held at the Marble Arch end of Hyde Park, the police decided to close in on the crowd leaving by the only gate in the area – many of whom were undoubtedly completely innocent Sunday strollers – and proceeded to arrest a number of them at random on a charge of 'rioting'. Morris was enraged. In an article entitled 'Coercion in London' he wrote: "These 'rioters' being brought up before Mr. de Rutzen, were persecuted by the Government jackal Mr. Poland, the farcical nature of whose opening speech no one, now Dickens is dead – more's the pity – need attempt to render. The farce was continued by various policeman giving what is facetiously called 'evidence' and more accurately 'swearing the leg off an iron pot'..." Both "the Government jackal", Mr. Poland, Q.C., and the constable who could swear "the
leg off an iron por", are caricatured in the play, the former as Mr. Hungary, Q.C.,
and the latter as Constable Potlegoff. The other policemen's names, it might added,
were also derived from phrases used by Morris to express his contempt for the evidence
they gave: "stick to it" (Sergeant Sticktoit) and "strong in the oath" (Constable
Strongithoath).

The play also reflects many of Morris's contemporary concerns. The first of these
is introduced at the outset with the juxtaposition of the trials of Mr La-di-da and
Mary Pinch. Throughout 1887 Morris had used the columns of Commonweal to
expose the unequal manner in which the law treated the rich and the poor. In January
he had devoted a paragraph to the case of an unemployed father of three who had
been sentenced to imprisonment for begging, while in the same edition as he remarks
on the case of Mowbray and Henderson he criticised a magistrate who passed a two­
month sentence on a labourer found guilty of setting traps to catch wood-piges.

To emphasise the severity of these sentences he pointed out that 'respectable' offenders
were able to pay a fine as an alternative to a spell in prison. One anomaly that came
to his attention as a result of the Mowbray and Henderson case concerned the appeal
procedure. In the nineteenth century an appeal against a sentence could only be
considered if the accused could find someone to guarantee his appeal costs. As these
costs were forfeited if the appeal failed, a large proportion of the population were
effectively denied justice. This was an inequality that Morris often referred to in
Commonweal:

I must once more call attention to the EQUAL LAWS under which we free people
live, which condemn these innocent men to a cruel punishment simply because they
have no friends rich enough to be responsible for paying the expenses of the appeal
if it chances to fail. Nor must we forget even if these poor men are released now,
they will have been in prison for many weeks; the injustice remains in any case.

The cases of Mr La-di-da and Mary Pinch reveal the class-bias inherent in English
law. Nupkins' judgement is not based on an impartial assessment of the evidence but
on his own bourgeois prejudices. Mr La-di-da is a swindler who has ruined the lives
of some of the weakest members of society but he is also a 'gentleman'. Despite his
obvious guilt his respectability and social standing have to be protected at all costs.
As Nupkins puts it when passing a sentence of one month in prison: "I shall take care
that you shall not be degraded by contamination with thieves and rioters, and other
coarse persons, or share the diet and treatment which is no punishment to persons
used to hard living: that would be to inflict a punishment on you not intended by the
law, and would cast a stain on your character not easily wiped away." (pp.1–2)

Opposite considerations prevail in Nupkins' judgement in the case of Mary Pinch.
Despite her rigorous denial of the charge of stealing three loaves – and the
contradictory evidence heard in court – Nupkins has no hesitation in influencing the
jury to convict and then to pass a sentence of eighteen months' hard labour. He justifies
the severity of the sentence by suggesting – as had the judge in the case of the Marble
Arch 'rioters' – that the case was not one of personal indiscretion but part of a general
revolutionary conspiracy by the poor: "This is not a common theft gentlemen ... it
is a revolutionary theft, based on the claim on the part of those who happen
unfortunately to be starving, to help themselves at the expense of their more fortunate,
and probably – I may say certainly – more meritorious countrymen." (p.7)
Mary Pinch's trial is used to raise another issue of importance to Morris, that of police perjury. This facet of courtroom life had first come to his attention during the trial of Mowbray, Kitz, Mahon and Lewis Lyons at the Thames Police Court on 21 September 1885. During Lyons’ case one of the officers had lied so consistently and obviously (a fact later proved at the men’s appeal) that it had contributed to Morris’s outburst at the end of the trial which resulted in his being dragged up before the magistrate, Mr Saunders. Writing to Jane the following day he made his views clear: “The behaviour of the police, their bullying and hectoring, was quite beyond belief, and I have no doubt they mostly ‘swore through a kitchen table’.” Thereafter there was hardly an incident in the free speech campaign which did not bring forth from Morris an angry condemnation of what he termed contemptuously the “bodyguard of professional witnesses”. In *The Tables Turned* the obvious collusion of Sergeant Sticktoit and Constables Potlegoff and Strongithoath not only serves to illustrate this belief, but stands out as one of the most hilarious moments in the play. It is clear from the start that their collective evidence has been rehearsed in advance to obtain a conviction. Unfortunately, Sergeant Sticktoit becomes confused when questioned by Mr Hungary, Q.C. as to whether the three loaves were stolen from the same shop or three different shops. This in turn causes Constable Potlegoff to lose the thread of the argument with the result that he finds himself uncertain whether he witnessed Mary Pinch caught with the loaves in the shop or in the street. In the end it falls to Constable Strongithoath – in what is one of the funniest speeches in the play – to attempt to reconcile their accounts as best he can:

*Strong. (very slowly and stolidly, and as if repeating a lesson). I saw her steal them all – all – all from one shop – from three shops – I followed her – I took her. When she took it up – she let it drop – in the shop – and wiped the street mud off it. Then she dropped them all three in the shop – and came out – and I took her – with the help of the two constables – and she cried.* (p.5)

Much of the humour in the play derives from the way in which Morris was able to manipulate contemporary attitudes regarding the spread of socialist ideas. He successfully exploits the gap between the exaggerated bourgeois fear of impending revolution and the drab – and often disillusioning – difficulties facing the socialist propaganda: problems all too familiar to most of his audience. The trial of John Freeman for alleged “sedition and incitement to riot and murder” (p.9) is a comic masterpiece for precisely this reason.

The prosecution case against Freeman is ludicrous because it is based on fundamental misconceptions about the organisation of the socialists and their success in encouraging discontent amongst the workers. According to Hungary, Freeman is a member of at least one, but probably more, of the three principal socialist societies. These he lists as the Federationist League (corresponding to the Socialist League), the International Federation (corresponding to the Social Democratic Federation) and the Fabian Democratic Parliamentary League. Morris cannot resist a dig at the Fabians by having Hungary describe them as by far the most dangerous group as they exact a “special deed of ferocity before admission, the most guilty of their champions veiling their crimes under the specious pretexts of vegetarianism, the scientific investigation of supernatural phenomena, vulgarly called ghost catching, political economy, and other occult and dull studies.” (p.10) This reference to vegetarianism was topical, as
during the autumn of 1886 the correspondence columns of Commonweal carried a number of letters from aggrieved vegetarians who accused the socialists of ridiculing their beliefs. Morris found such diversions from the aims of revolutionary socialism absurd and irrelevant. In his ‘Notes on News’ column published on 25 September 1886 he wrote:

It seems to me that there is no need either to attack a vegetarian or to confer a vote of thanks on him, so long as he is one because he chooses to be so on any grounds that pleases himself, whether he makes it a matter of health, or economy, or sentiment. But a man can hardly be a sound Socialist who puts forward vegetarianism as a solution of the difficulties between labour and capital, as some people do, and as one may think that very severe capitalists would like to do, if the regimen were not applied to themselves; and again, there are people who are vegetarians on ascetic grounds, and who would be as tyrannical as other ascetics if they had the chance of being so.4

Another bourgeois misconception Morris attacked was the belief that within the various socialist organisations individual socialist cadres exercised enormous power. In the case of Freeman, Constable Potlegoff swears that he has not only heard him plotting with some two hundred others to have the Queen take in washing, but also witnessed him inciting to violence a crowd of 1,000 workers in Beadon Road. Furthermore, he claims Freeman is the architect of an elaborate plot in which he plans to lead some 2,000,000 sympathisers in an armed uprising using weapons stored at the Federationist League headquarters at 13 Farrington Road. As further evidence of this plot Sergeant Sticktoit points out that on his arrest Freeman was found to be in possession of copies of Commonweal. Hungary draws the jury’s attention to the fact that these papers carry an article by a certain Mr Bax entitled the ‘Curse of Civilisation’ in which it is clear that the author is “familiar with the use of dynamite to a fearful extent”. (p.15)

The humour at the expense of the League’s propaganda continues when Freeman calls as witnesses for the defence three of the most distinguished figures of late-Victorian society: the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Tennyson and Professor John Tyndall. Their introduction reaffirms Morris’s earlier points concerning the perjury of the police and the prejudice of judges in dismissing all evidence – however respectable the witness – if it contradicts that given by official representatives of the law. It also enables him to present a rational and dispassionate assessment of the realities of the socialist propaganda campaign. His observations on this are both astute and humorous. The Archbishop of Canterbury, we learn, had been present at the open-air meeting Freeman had addressed in Beadon Road. Far from being an enthusiastic revolutionary mob of 1,000, this meeting consisted of only three people other than the speaker. The Archbishop recalls Freeman remarking “I say, Bill, damned hard lines to have to speak to a lamp-post, a kid, and an old buffer.” (p.16) Tennyson, meanwhile, had attended the Federationist League’s meeting at its headquarters in Farrington Road. This meeting of some seventeen people he describes wearily as “dull”, the only thing of significance he can recall is the fact that “now and then an old bald-headed fool and a stumpy little fool in blue made jokes, at which they laughed a great deal; but I couldn’t understand the jokes”. (p.17) Finally Tyndall – who was renowned for his scientific precision and brevity – when asked to remember the state
in which Constable Potlegoff appeared at the time he had unearthed Freeman’s alleged uprising replies with amused contempt “Drunk!” Morris is careful, however, not to allow these humorous observations to undermine the League’s propaganda campaign completely. It made clear throughout *The Tables Turned* that the existence of a socialist movement – whatever its actual achievements – had succeeded in frightening the bourgeoisie. Morris suggests that the bourgeoisie’s over-reaction to the socialists was leading to such blatant injustice and hypocrisy that it was actually benefiting their propaganda. As he wrote in *Commonweal*, “no Socialist can help reflecting that those fools, Matthews, Poland, Warren, and Co., are doing good propagandist work for us. People generally have some idea of fair play, and the spectacle of such blatant injustice as has been recently exhibited, has to my certain knowledge moved to indignation people not particularly favourable to Socialism.” This was a confirmation of his pre-‘Bloody Sunday’ belief that the revolution was imminent. This idea is introduced into the play through the singing of the *Marseillaise*, which interrupts the proceedings from time to time, gradually getting louder, until a Socialist Ensign bursts into the court to announce the success of the Revolution.

There is little point dwelling on the remainder of the play. After the incisive humour of the courtroom scene, Justice Nupkins’ subsequent ‘lesson’ is a great disappointment. Morris fails to define in any detail the post-revolutionary society. All we learn about this happy and prosperous utopia is that decisions are made by a nebulous Council of the Commune and that there are no laws, courts or prisons. The central weakness, however, lies in the portrayal of Nupkins. He becomes such a snivelling, whining and pathetic character that the remaining action becomes almost irrelevant and one is rather relieved when the final curtain falls. In the end Morris was unable to reconcile topical realism with abstract speculation.

NOTES

Pamela Bracken Wiens’ new edition of the play is reviewed later in this issue.

1 *Commonweal*, 5 November 1887, p.359. Henry Barker had a taste for theatricals. On 21 January 1888 *Commonweal* carried a report detailing a performance of his own dramatic extravaganza, *The Lamp*, in which no less a personage than Joseph Lane appeared!


3 *The Books of William Morris Described: With Some Account of His Doings in Literature and in the Allied Crafts*, H. Buxton Forman, (London, 1897), p.128. Morris himself wrote in September 1887 that he had given the part of Mary Pinch to a Miss Canthorne, but it is clear from the published version of the play which contains a cast list that May Morris actually played the role. See *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, op. cit., p.275.


5 *The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened*, (13 Farringdon Road, 1887), p.13. Subsequent references are given in brackets after quotations.

6 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17 October 1887, p.1.

7 *Commonweal*, 5 November 1887, p.359.

Commonweal, 5 November 1887, p.359.


Saturday Review, 10 October 1896.

ibid., 10 October 1896.

Pall Mall Gazette, 17 October 1887, p.1. Shaw later wrote that William Archer was the only drama critic present on the first night, c.f. ‘William Morris as Actor and Dramatist’, Our Theatres in the Nineties, (London, Constable, 1932), II, p.211.


ibid., II, p.188.

Commonweal, 5 November 1887, p.359.

ibid., 19 November 1887, p.376.

ibid., 19 November 1887, p.376.


Commonweal, 5 November 1887, p.359.


Commonweal, 29 January 1887, p.33.


William Morris’s Socialist Diary, op. cit., p.34.

This had been a characteristic of Allman’s earlier convictions as well. See the Daily News, 4 March 1886, and the East London Observer, 4 March 1886.

Commonweal, 26 February 1887, p.71.

ibid., 14 May 1887, p.153.

ibid., 15 January 1887, p.17.

ibid., 19 February 1887, p.57.

ibid., 23 July 1887, p.236.

The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends, op. cit., p.239.

Commonweal, 27 August 1887, p.273.

Commonweal, 25 September 1886, p.201.

Commonweal, 14 May 1887, p.154.