The Unmanageable Playgoer: Morris and the Victorian Theatre

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On the face of it an article on Morris and the Victorian theatre would not seem to have a great deal of potential. It is well-known that Morris had a dislike of theatre-goers and the plays they went to see. In an article he wrote in 1884 for To-day he drew an amusing distinction between those who attended the theatre frequently and those who were only occasional visitors. The former he claimed had simply learned to ‘laugh and cry in the right places ... gravely comparing one nonentity with another, balancing their respective merits and demerits without much consciousness of any standard of dramatic excellence’.1 The occasional visitors, on the other hand, went ‘with some hope of receiving special pleasure from what they think should be a work of art, and if the entertainment falls short of that, they are not ashamed to confess their disappointment, and so perhaps run the risk of being considered ill-natured and exacting’.2

Judging from the reports of his family and friends Morris was firmly entrenched in the second category. As May wrote: ‘As a form of art my father disliked the modern play, as an amusement it bored him almost (sometimes quite) to swearing-point, and modern acting, with its appeal to the emotions, its elaborate realism and character-study, was intolerable’.3 According to May those who accompanied him to the theatre mingled ‘terror as to whether his muttered exclamations could be heard right or left ... with a certain high glee over the picturesqueness of his unmanageable playgoer’s comments’.4 May recalled one occasion when an ‘ill-advised friend ... persuaded us to go to a certain musical comedy, thinking in all good-nature to distract my father who had been somewhat overwhelmed by Socialist anxieties. When the leading lady, a Frenchwoman of dreadful archness, began to get sportive, my father could scarcely contain himself, and muttered in his beard with bent head “Damned little pink TOAD,” the suppressed force of the last word being such that it might well have shot over the footlights and flattened out the lady.’5 Another of the performers he described through clenched teeth as ‘a pink pig squealing into a wool-sack.’6

However, as is so often the case with Morris, such comments tell us only half the story. May also pointed out that in ‘the young days Rossetti was a great play-goer, and my father used often to go with him; they saw many of the old favourites together, and reminiscences of them afforded material for our amusement later’.7 This is confirmed by Penelope Fitzgerald who has noted that the play Medea, or the Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband (1856), which was produced at the Olympic starring the burlesque actor Frederick Robson, was used in the plot of Morris’s abortive novel of the 1870s.8 There are also many records of Morris attending the theatre: in 1857 he saw Charles Kean in Richard II at the Princess Theatre; in 1877 he took Jenny and May to see Macbeth; and in the same year accompanied the Burne-
Joneses to see Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *The Sorcerers* (where he feared he might not gain admittance as his hands were stained deep blue from his dyeing experiments)!

It is quite possible that Morris would have had nothing further to do with the Victorian theatre if it hadn't been for his commitment to the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League. Both these organisations were chronically short of cash and therefore held regular entertainments to boost their funds. Needless to say amateur theatricals were very popular at these events. In November 1884, for example, Morris was present at an 'Art Evening' sponsored by the SDF at the Neumeyer Hall in Bloomsbury at which Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx acted out a play based on their own life. Engels was also present at this event. On another occasion, in January 1885, Morris was in the audience when his daughter May, Aveling, Shaw and Eleanor Marx appeared in the comic-drama *Alone* by Palgrave Simpson and Herman Merivale. May, who described herself as having 'play-fever badly', later tried her own hand as a dramatist. Her play *Lady Griselda's Dream* appeared in *Longmans Magazine* in June 1898 and a second, *White Lies. A Play in One Act*, was privately printed by the Chiswick Press in 1903.

Morris often took part in the entertainments organized by the Socialist League. As May wrote, despite his 'dislike for the play as formalized since Shakespeare's time, one has to remember that my father's dramatic instinct was strong as might be. And his power of mimicry was positively fantastic.' Morris, à la Dickens, gave frequent readings from his poetry and prose, and especially enjoyed reciting John Ball's speech on fellowship from *A Dream of John Ball*. Sometimes he even performed in plays put on by the League. On 12 May 1890, for example, he 'wheeled' the boards - or more accurately 'wheeled' them - when he appeared in a Bath chair as the invalid in Arthur Heathcote's one act play *The Duchess of Bayswater & Co* which was performed in aid of *Commonweal* at a hall in Tottenham Court Road. Shaw was also in the cast. Morris afterwards read the 'Tar Baby' from *Uncle Remus*.

It may well have been the poor standard of these productions, and his own experiments with dramatic dialogues in *Commonweal*, that determined Morris to write his own play. The result was his two act comic 'interlude' *The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened* which received its first performance at a hall in Farringdon Road on 15 October 1887. The play was a great success, and Shaw claimed there had 'been no other such successful first night within living memory'. Morris's own performance as the Archbishop of Canterbury was greatly admired. Shaw wrote that he played the character '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'. When the curtain fell on this performance Morris is recorded 'capering forward with a joy lit face' as he joined the remainder of the cast in a lusty rendition of his specially composed hymn to socialist victory sung to the tune of the 'Carmagnole'.

It is not my intention to analyse *The Tables Turned* - or its reception - as this has already been done in the *Journal*. Instead I want to show how Morris's experiment in drama brought him in contact with two of the most important playwrights of the late Victorian period. The first of these was the art-critic, translator and dramatist William Archer. It is not clear when Morris first met Archer. However, they were
probably introduced by either Ernest Radford or his wife-to-be Caroline ‘Dollie’ Maitland. Both Radford and Maitland were leading lights in a discussion group called the Men and Women’s Club of which Archer was also a member. Radford subsequently became a member of the Socialist League and later served as secretary of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. His fiancée, meanwhile, had first met Morris on 30 November 1884 when she attended his lecture ‘How We Live, and How We Might Live’ at Kelmscott House. She had been invited to supper after the talk and recorded in her diary that Morris talked excitedly ‘of many things and people. Verse forms - Browning - Swinburne - plays - and Gladstone. Was rather surprised indeed at the way in which he did speak of Gladstone.’17

Archer was certainly present at the first performance of The Tables Turned. This is confirmed by Shaw who stated in an article written for the Saturday Review shortly after Morris’s death: ‘I only remember one dramatic critic who took care to be present - Mr. William Archer.’18 Pamela Bracken Weins has suggested that Archer was responsible for the anonymous review of the play that appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette on 17 October 1887.19 This is almost certainly correct as Archer had written book reviews for the Pall Mall Gazette from the early 1880s, and later contributed a number of dramatic reviews to the paper. Archer was impressed by the performance, writing that ‘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’.20

What is significant about Archer is the part he played in introducing Ibsen and the European realist play to the London stage. In 1880 his translation of The Pillars of Society (advertised as Quicksands) became the first of Ibsen’s plays to be performed in London when a single performance was held at The Gaiety on 15 December 1880. However, his most important achievement in popularising Ibsen was to be his production of A Doll’s House which ran at the Novelty Theatre from 7th-30th of June 1889. I use the term ‘his production’ advisedly, because Archer’s desire for anonymity meant that his role as director was not acknowledged on the programme. As Peter Whitebrook - Archer’s biographer - has pointed out this ‘preference for anonymity on this and six subsequent British premieres of Ibsen, and on other plays, resulted in his importance as a pioneer director being largely unrecognised even during his lifetime and eradicated in the years since’.21

Unfortunately, it is impossible to prove whether Morris attended a performance of A Doll’s House. However, the evidence we have suggests that it is probable that he did. May Morris, writing in The Collected Works, recalled that ‘we made him go to Ibsen performances ... when Ibsen appeared on the horizon.’22 May certainly saw the play. Peter Whitebrook states that she attended the performance held on 11 June accompanied by ‘her husband (sic) Henry Sparling, and Stepniak, the swarthy, sinister-looking Russian revolutionary who, after attempting to assassinate the chief of secret police in St Petersburg in 1884, had fled to Chiswick.’23 Apparently May and her party where met at the theatre by Archer, Shaw and Brackstad (an Anglo-Norwegian bookseller and journalist). It is quite possible that Archer took this opportunity to suggest to May that her father might like to attend one of the performances.

We know that Jane Morris was also familiar with Ibsen. Amongst her correspondence with Wilfrid Scawen Blunt is a letter dated 26 October 1890 in which
she wrote: ‘I am going to see a play of Ibsen’s “The Lady from the sea” - Do you know his plays? They are dreary to read, but I saw the “Nora” acted, and certainly it was unlike any other. I feel curious to see the new one’. Nora is, of course, the central character in A Doll’s House and Jane may well have been referring to Archer’s production of the play in June 1889. The reference to The Lady from the Sea is rather more mysterious. As Peter Faulkner has pointed out, although Fisher Unwin had published Eleanor Marx-Aveling’s translation of this play in 1890, it did not receive its premier at Terry’s Theatre until 10 May 1891. This production was directed by Edward Aveling and considered an artistic failure. Archer described it as ‘a wholly inadequate production’ and ‘out and away the worst Ibsen performance there has ever been’. One can only assume that Jane (and Morris?) were to attend a private performance of the play.

Although Archer’s production of A Doll’s House was a popular success it received some very unfavourable reviews. Most of the criticism centred on the lack of action and the ‘immoral’ message of the play. The People called it ‘unnatural, immoral and, in its concluding scene, undramatic’, while the Standard claimed it ‘would be a misfortune were such a morbid and unwholesome play to gain the favour of the public’. One of the most stinging criticisms came from Robert Buchanan in the Pall Mall Gazette on 11 June 1889 where, amongst other things, he derided Ibsen as ‘a Zola with a wooden leg stumping the north in the interests of quasi-scientific realism’.

Buchanan’s attack on the play is interesting as it provoked Morris to come to Ibsen’s defence in Commonweal. Morris, in common with many of his colleagues in the Socialist League, recognised that the play was a useful piece of socialist propaganda which should be defended for challenging the assumptions of what Archer had satirised in an article in the Dramatic Review as the contemporary ‘fashion-play’. Morris therefore dismissed Buchanan and the other bourgeois critics of Ibsen as ‘parasites’ who refused to acknowledge that the play was ‘a piece of the truth about modern society clearly and forcibly put’. There is further evidence that Morris was familiar with more than one of Ibsen’s plays for he went on to add: ‘I note that the critics say that Ibsen’s plays are pessimistic; so they are - to pessimists; and all intelligent people who are not Socialists are pessimists. But the representation of the corruption of society carries with it in Ibsen’s works aspiration for a better state of affairs.’

It is quite possible that Morris was also introduced to the playwright Henry Arthur Jones as a result of the success of The Tables Turned. Jones was the son of nonconformist tenant farmers in Buckinghamshire to whom ‘dancing, card-playing and theatre-going were vices’. He left school at twelve and worked first in a drapery shop in Ramsgate and then as a commercial traveller in London. In 1879 - after having a number of one-act plays performed in the provinces and a comedy called A Clerical Error in London - he decided to become a full-time playwright. He established his reputation with The Silver King (1882) a melodrama which caught the popular imagination and enjoyed an extended run at the Princess Theatre in Oxford Street. Partly as a result of the success of this play Jones’s income rose to £3,398 in 1883 at a time when Ibsen’s was only £819.

Although Jones was not a socialist, his modest nonconformist background led him to experiment with the realistic portrayal of working class characters. He was also
willing to introduce themes of topical interest into his plays. Both Archer and Shaw championed Jones as a playwright capable of reforming the fashionable theatre and using drama as a force for social and cultural change. Shaw wrote that Jones was ‘the only one of our popular dramatists whose sense of his earnestness of real life has been deep enough to bring him into serious conflict with the limitations and levities of our theatre’. Shaw, himself, had been working on a socialist play intermittently during 1887 and had shown the first two acts to Archer in the autumn. Archer had been unenthusiastic about the play due to its structural inadequacies. Shaw, who at the time respected Archer’s opinion, had then suggested that he should give it to Jones ‘who might borrow a notion from it for a drama touching socialism’.

Whether this suggestion was ever carried out is uncertain. What we do know is that Jones decided to write a play on the theme of socialism the following year. Probably as a result of seeing a performance of The Tables Turned, he invited Morris, May, Shaw and Archer in October 1888 to his north London home to hear him read his latest drama which he had tentatively entitled A Socialist Play. What Morris thought of this play is not recorded. However, when it opened at the Haymarket on 27 April 1889 under the far less controversial title of Wealth, he and May were invited to attend. The Athenaeum recorded on 4 May 1889 that among ‘those present was Mr. William Morris, an unusual guest on such occasions, but lured, possibly, by the knowledge that one of the characters was a representative of a mild form of Socialism. With him was his daughter, bearing a striking resemblance to her mother, and recalling numerous pictures of Rossetti’. The play revolved around the relationship between a rich ironmaster, Matthew Ruddock (played by Beerbohm Tree) and his daughter, Edith. Edith refused to marry Ruddock’s mercenary nephew, John, as she loved the socialist Paul Davoren. Unfortunately, Davoren’s ‘socialism’ amounts to little more than support for a mild form of profit-sharing which is hardly likely to have impressed Morris. However, Ruddock’s subsequent decline into madness does bear more than a passing resemblance to that of Judge Nupkins melodramatic ‘lesson’ in Act II of The Tables Turned. Understandably, the play was not popular with the fashionable public and soon closed.

However, Morris’s association with Jones did not end with the staging of Wealth. In the autumn of 1891 Morris & Co. were responsible for the stage-decoration of Jones’s play The Crusaders which opened on 2 November and enjoyed a run of three months at the Avenue Theatre in London. According to Jones’s daughter, Doris, her father gave ‘Morris carte blanche to design and make the furniture’ for the sets of the play. Amongst this furniture was a sideboard designed by George Jack in which Jones later kept his plays and copies of Kelmscott Press books. Morris & Co. also provided the wallpaper and accessories for ‘Mrs Greenslade’s Drawing Room in Mayfair’ in Act I and ‘The Rose Cottage & Rose Farm at Wimbledon’ in Act II. The Illustrated London News for 6 November 1891 praised Jones for mounting his play ‘luxuriously and in excellent taste’.

Morris & Co. were also responsible for the stage decoration for another of Jones’s plays. This was The Case of the Rebellious Susan which opened at the Criterion Theatre, London, on 3 October 1894. This play was of interest as it was ostensibly about a ‘New Woman’, Lady Susan Harabin, who hearing of her husband’s infidelity sails to Cairo to have an affair of her own. However, by this time Jones’s radical
tendencies had been replaced by a desire for popularity. By introducing the character of Sir Richard Kato QC - Susan's uncle - who believed in the desirability of women deferring to men, all the conventional assumptions about men and women and marriage were merely reinforced. As Archer was to write: 'I am the very last to sympathize with the "fireside-and-nursery" ideal of womanhood which the play appears to enforce. "Nature's darling," says Sir Richard Kato, "is a stay-at-home woman, a woman who wants to be a good wife and a good mother, and cares very little of anything else." In that case, Nature and I differ, as we do, indeed, on a good many other points.'

It is more than likely that Morris was invited to this play. He certainly was to The Masqueraders another of Jones's plays that opened at the St James's Theatre on 28 April 1894. On that occasion Morris declined the invitation, but added: 'I wish you all manner of success for your new play'. However, as Norman Kelvin has pointed out, Jones remained a great admirer of Morris and his work. Kelvin notes that Doris Jones, when she was given her father's copy of Morris's Architecture, Industry and Wealth, found that her father had written in it 'This was the greatest man I have ever met in my life'.

The last record we have of Morris going to the theatre is in the spring of 1895 when Burne-Jones succeeded in persuading him to attend a performance of Charley's Aunt. According to Penelope Fitzgerald, in her biography of Burne-Jones, on this occasion Morris gave the lie to his alleged unmanageable playgoer's temperament and 'enjoyed' the performance. Maybe, as George Bernard Shaw suggested in his wonderfully astute reminiscences 'Morris as I Knew Him', Morris deliberately cultivated an image as 'a petulant veteran wilfully and invincibly ignorant of the latest developments' in the arts. If so, I hope that this article proves that this ignorance did not extend to contemporary developments in Victorian drama.

NOTES
2 ibid., I, p. 225.
4 ibid., XXII, p. xxviii.
5 ibid., XXII, p. xxviii.
6 ibid., XXII, p. xxviii.
7 ibid., XXII, p. xxx.
9 Nicholas Salmon (with Derek Baker), The William Morris Chronology, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1996), pp. 19, 83 and 89.
LJ Saturday Review, 10 October 1896.

G. B. Shaw, Our Theatres in the Nineties, (London: Constable 1932), II, p. 211.


William Morris: A Life for Our Time, op. cit., p. 492.

Saturday Review, 10 October 1896.

‘The Reviews are In: Reclaiming the Success of Morris’s “Socialist Interlude”’, op. cit., p. 20n.

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


William Archer, op. cit., p. 89.


ibid., p. 48n.


ibid., p. 88.

tbid., p. 88.

ibid., p. 85.


ibid., p. 601.


ibid., I, p. 377.

Athenaeum, 4 May 1889, p. 577.


ibid., IV, p. 153n.
