

Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print. Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 378. ISBN 978-0-8047-8408-5

Those educated in systems structured by conventional scholarly practice and taught to value book-learning above all else might wonder about the status that Morris attaches to literature and reading in *News from Nowhere*. Elizabeth Miller confronts the issue head-on. In his later life Morris indeed lavished attention on book-production, having already spent a good part of it writing and publishing in the socialist press, but his ideal society does without both.

Nowhere's inhabitants, she observes, are literate and the children do learn to read, but they are not academic. According to Dick, she notes, "'They don't do much reading, except for a few story-books, till they are about fifteen years old; we don't encourage early bookishness'". Instead of becoming expert readers, Nowhere's young become expert story-tellers and 'users of spoken language' (70). Maybe Morris was just torn between a love for past oral traditions and early Victorian literature? Perhaps, as Thorstein Veblen argued, Morris's venture with the Kelmscott Press revealed the tension between his politics and his aesthetics or, as E.P. Thompson believed, that the Press was fundamentally an apolitical project (53-4).

Miller's beautifully written, richly detailed and impressively learned book provides a different, more persuasive explanation for Morris's position. His efforts to produce books on craft lines, like his commitment to fund spaces for capitalist critique, were both manifestations of a consistent drive to challenge the logic of commercial exploitation. Morris published, of course, but he did so as one who longed to escape the mediations of capitalist culture and who preferred the immediacy and camaraderie of direct exchange. Thus *A Dream of John Ball* advanced the idea that Morris again captured in *News from Nowhere* by depicting 'oral exchange ... as a highly effective political medium, much more so than print'

(71-2). Morris, Miller argues, understood the public power and anti-authoritarian challenge of oral discourse and the fellowship that it fostered.

Miller's book is not about Morris but about an array of radical movements and debates that coalesce around him. Describing Morris as 'perhaps the most influential radical writer of the era' (25) she builds on a perceptive and sympathetic account of his work to analyse literary culture between 1880 and 1910. *Slow Print*, the book's title, is also a short-hand term that describes the diverse, complex and interrelated experiments in publishing, literature, aesthetics, poetry and theatre that Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement stimulated. Miller's discussion is organised in a themed chronology which progresses through a critique of realism, the dramatic revival of the 1890s, an analysis of poetry in the radical press and turn-of-the-century esoteric discourses, inspired by theosophy, to finish with a consideration of free love and the emergence of sexual radicalism. The study examines a large group including Shaw, Edward Carpenter, Annie Besant and Alfred Orage, but Miller's approach is not canonical. She lovingly picks through a radical press archive, in part with the intention of recovering lost treasures and, in the other part, with a desire to challenge prevailing conceptions of literary modernism by showing how the obscure and not-so obscure Victorian literatures she uncovers infused and shaped it.

A critique of Habermas and an appreciation of both Raymond Williams and Michael Foucault lend Miller's historical and literary criticism theoretical shape, also highlighting the contemporary resonances of the challenges with which radical Victorians wrestled. Looking at Morris and Shaw, she challenges Habermas' claims about the possibility of creating spaces within the public sphere for the exercise of communicative reason (70; 127). Turning to radical poetry, she acknowledges the potential for countercultural movements to decline from alternative to marginal, but shows how this was avoided by the largely conservative and un-experimental form of Victorian writing (168). Towards the end of the book, she uses the idea

of biopolitics to reflect on late-century campaigns for free love and sexual liberation. Miller's view is that the debates about censorship and free print were re-ignited by these campaigns. Whereas political and economic radicals had failed to threaten the ideological dominance of the capitalist press and produced literature that could happily co-exist within the commercial mainstream, free love campaigners posed an altogether more significant challenge than this, thus signalling a shift from class to sex-based radicalism (261).

Miller's anticapitalist lens, which might have dimmed the analysis, instead produces some fine points. She considers the critique often levelled against Morris about the one-dimensionality of his characters. On her reading 'flatness and unreality ... constitute their revolutionary quality'. Morris wanted to show by his writing that 'roundness and volume are not for us' but for 'the postrevolutionary future' (79). Miller develops the theme in a discussion of Shaw and then Wilde, examining their responses to realism by using a concept of heartlessness and illuminating, in the process, some significant shifts in the terms of debate. Morris's 'socialist revolt against the illusory forms of capitalism' gives way in Wilde to an 'aesthetic revolt against realism' (111). Miller also shows how anticapitalist slow print sensibilities stimulated experimentation with new literary forms. Shaw's turn from the novel to the theatre was driven, she argues, by a rejection of the commercialisation of the former (132). Having decided to move in this direction, Shaw discovered that his efforts to reinvigorate a debased literature too easily drew the ire of the censor. As Ibsen had already discovered, the new medium of print-drama enabled Shaw to expound radical ideas while avoiding the restrictions of the stage. Slow-print values thus led him to develop a new platform for free expression (165).

One of the major themes unifying these meticulous observations is a persistent concern with democracy and elitism. Even where Miller offers judgments about the implications of the positions she examines, her careful reconstruction of context reveals the

tensions in slow print that help explain why particular activists and writers fell one side or the other of this basic divide. The contrast between Morris and Shaw, whose motivations were in many respects similar, is striking in this respect. Both believed that capitalism was responsible for the production of a 'monolithic, impoverished literary and print culture'. Both observed the parallel rise of a mass reading public, but whereas Morris held fast to the possibility of democratic art and of reaching an audience outside the market – using precapitalist cultural models for inspiration – Shaw associated mass readership with the devaluation of literary culture. It was still possible to argue for anticapitalist print, but only as an acquired taste (108). Shaw toiled over the design of *Fabian Essays* because he was desperate to mount 'a formal challenge to the logic of print capitalism'. Yet whereas Morris used radical print to disseminate revolutionary ideas to mass audiences, Shaw used Morris's style to appeal to a privileged circle of intellectuals. Miller admits that there was probably a reputational issue behind Shaw's strategy. She notes: 'printing cheap editions might ... diminish the Fabians' social capital, for the Society was known for attracting the cultural elite'. Nevertheless she puts Shaw's refusal to print cheap editions down to a primary concern not to 'reinforce the ideology of capitalist production' - a principle he took from Morris (117). Miller tracks the theme through to turn-of-century avant-garde figures like Alfred Orage, who stood on the cusp of modernism. The influence of Morris's democratic anticapitalism is again made clear here, and although Miller does not follow his legacy, it was felt strongly in the work of Herbert Read, who also absorbed Orage's fondness for Nietzsche.

To my mind, Miller's exploration of elitism and democracy is more successful than her claim about the shift from class to sex radicalism, which she discusses at the end of the book. The argument is based on the coupling of two claims, the first about the failure of the early slow-print campaigners to destabilise commercial print and the second about the inability of the mainstream to accommodate or co-opt sex radicalism for commercial

purposes. Miller's suggestion that the revival of censorship wars indicated a political refocusing risks overplaying the relationship between the anticapitalist strategies stimulated by slow print and the ambitions or character of radical movements that experimented with it. And there appears to be a significant difference between her observation that sex radicalism provided a new site of free print activism (295) and the suggestion that 'radical discourse was losing its rhetorical coherence around the issue of class' (302). Miller's invocation of biopolitics seems to do a lot of work in establishing this idea and the complexities of the currents that she probes up to this point are dissolved in a dichotomy that looks too sharp.

Miller's re-assessment of the role that slow-print radicalism played in establishing the ground for modernism does not rely on an argument about the priority of free love and sex psychology in late-Victorian literary cultures. And her idea that modernist antirealism and aesthetics were prefigured by Victorians never appears as something imposed on or read back into the earlier period. Miller not only brilliantly illuminates the revolutionary principles that infused Victorian slow print but also shows how this reading helps to qualify anti-modernist critique. When mapped to the rejection of capitalist commercial practices, the establishment of modernist niche markets appears less like an instrumental policy than an authentic radical rejection of mass production. Similarly, the elitism of modernists looks different when refracted through the slow-print lens. The sobering lesson is that elitist elements within radical movements serve as a 'reminder of how easily resistance to capitalism can transmute – or be transmuted - into antipopulism and how part of capitalism's strength is to render the anticommercial as the antidemocratic' (301).

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