

Theater and Politics in Elizabethan England

Throughout history, in every culture, the ease of spreading ideas and thoughts control the direction a country grows and can greatly affect the future of any country. To this end, individuals have found outlets for expressing thoughts both mundane and fantastic in an effort to share what they believe to be the most important cultural thoughts or paradigms of their time: the arts. Music, sculpture, paintings, books, theater; all of these exist not purely as a form of entertainment, but also as a means to convey thoughts evocative of the period they came from. Theater especially presents a powerful conduit, especially into the minds of a populace; it allows an audience to view the world around them through the eyes of another. The theater offers not only stories to entertain and captivate us, but a chance to learn and grow as a society.

However, such an open form of ideological communication comes with no small amount of risk; theatre across cultures and eras has inspired many to action, based upon ideals that have been presented by the company onstage. One such example of this can be found during the late 16th and early 17th centuries in England; called the Golden Age of English Drama. In this paper, I will examine growth of the English theater under Queen Elizabeth I, as well the theater's interplay in advancing her political agenda through propaganda and censorship.

The professional theatre of London during the Elizabethan period grew largely out of the conventional entertainments of the period; “juggling and clowning, cockfighting and bear-baiting” (Montrose 19). Alongside this, the religious drama of the previous medieval period contributed to the form of drama that Shakespeare would eventually be writing for the Elizabethan stage. In fact, as Montrose states, “... it [professional drama] was still in the process of separating itself when Shakespeare began his theatrical career late in the century” (Montrose 19). The Neoclassical style that rose from the theatre on the continent contributed inasmuch as

the Elizabethans recognized its existence. The five act form popularized by Italian Neoclassicism was adopted by the English, while none of the other characteristics remained. The architecture of English theatre evolved in much the same way; in the early stages of Elizabethan drama, actors would use bear and bull-baiting rings as theater space (Lark), as there were no spaces designed specifically for theater until around 1567 and no professional company laying claim to a theater space all its own until the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599 (Montrose 19). The English modeled their indoor theaters in much the same way that the theaters on the continent were modeled, separating seating in the pit/box/gallery format. Alongside these private theaters were public theater spaces, which were open-air and featured no seating on what would be the pit area; these spaces were open standing room. The importance of the English theater is visible in this architecture, as these playhouses were built to house upwards of three thousand audience members (Lark). And, as Lark points out, when a single playhouse can attract 1.5% of a population on any given performance night, a government as threatened as Elizabeth I's by the spread of ideas has great cause for concern. While the purpose of the theatre was to entertain, it could also be used as a means of propaganda; three thousand people exposed to the same thoughts and ideas at one time is both an amazing and amazingly frightening prospect. As early as 1577, John Northbrooke wrote that people regularly attending theatrical performances were stating "that playes are as good as sermons, and that they learne as much or more at a playe than they do at God's worde preached" (Montrose 59).

Theater in the Elizabethan period saw the rise of some of the most brilliant authors to write in the English language; Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe and Thomas Kyd, and perhaps the most important, and certainly most iconic, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare knew well the importance of wit and the spread of idea, described by White as

understanding “the implications of psychological warfare,” as well as having been the first English writer to be truly aware of this and was only preceded in Europe by Machiavelli. White further enforces his point by quoting Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*, as Benedick says “Shall quips and sentences and these paper bullets of the brain awe a man from the career of his humor?” And while contemporaries such as Robert Greene were using paper bullets in the form of pamphlets, Shakespeare was using the Globe and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men as his slings and arrows. As mentioned, the theatre was a dangerous place; a wooden building that could be either a venue of entertainment or a powder keg waiting to explode, such as with the Earl of Essex’s failed rebellion in 1601; several of the Earl’s supporters arranged for – and attended – a performance of what was likely Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, with a controversial scene – usually cut from the performance – of a weak monarch being deposed, a monarch known to consort with “corrupt favorites” (Lark). On the morning following the performance, the Earl and his accomplices attempted to incite riot in the streets of London, believing “that drama has the capacity to imitate action and, by example, to impel its audience to action...” (Montrose 71). That belief certainly serves to reinforce the assertion that theater spreads ideas in a dangerous way. Records further indicate that the players themselves were “quickly exonerated... because they played the whole affair by the book...” (Montrose 70). As Montrose goes on to state:

To the Elizabethan government, the spectacular failure of Essex in his attempt to arouse the Queen’s subjects in the streets of London may not have signified that the theatre was politically ineffectual but rather that the players’ performance of their playwright’s play was innocent of seditious intent. Indeed, the Privy Council may have judged the players’ intention by means of the audience’s response. Such

an assumption would have implied, by negation, a fundamental conviction that the theatre was powerful indeed. (Montrose 70)

Given this understandable belief in the power that theatre held – or could hold – over the people, it stands to reason that the governing bodies would place tight controls on the theatre. Elizabeth and her court did not explicitly help or guide the formation of the theatre in London; what did arise, however, was the beginning of censorship under the Master of Revels, a position evolving out of the Pageant Master of medieval times (Goldstein 161). Started in 1574, and reaffirmed in 1581, the shift in production power of the theatre moved into the hands of the government, where it would then stay well into the 18th Century. Sir Edmund Tilney, Master of Revels for Elizabeth's court, gained the political power to “call upon plays and playmakers to appear before him and recite their pieces, with a view to their consideration for performance at Court” (Goldstein 161). His office was also granted the power to reform or rewrite the content of any play brought before it – either before the Master of Revels or to a deputy of his – and the power to shut down any production in London using a script or show he had not approved; even Shakespeare was not exempt, as a character in *Henry IV* had his name changed from “Sir John Oldcastle” to “Sir John Falstaff” (Goldstein 161); the real Sir John Oldcastle had been executed after rebelling against Henry V, and was considered a martyr by the Protestants (Love).

The Master of Revels gave the Elizabethan court an edge on the influence of the populace, especially considering the tension between Protestant and Catholic factions in England; Elizabeth was smart enough to keep things civil and, with an officer of the court in control of the content of everything going to the London stages, had very little trouble doing so. Despite this, however, and pressure from the Church or the City itself to shut down the theatre in

London, the Crown was willing to apply slaps on the wrist where it could and allow theatre to continue as normal (Goldstein 161 - 162).

Given the ability of theatre to incite riot, and the strength that could be found in its practice and performance, it would be beneficial to not only censor certain portions of the theater, but also to see works commissioned that attack those who the Elizabethan government saw as enemy; this frequently referred specifically to the Catholic church or the Catholic-backed Spanish monarch King Phillip II, both of whom hated Queen Elizabeth and her Protestant court. Because she had such powerful enemies, Queen Elizabeth had to play the political game carefully – she also made sure her subjects knew that she had their best interests at heart, or believed that she did. And if that were accomplished by undermining her enemies, all the better; “Queen Elizabeth handled the political drama of her early reign with a finesse that baffled both critics and admirers” (Goldstein). She worked, politically, to avoid positions she could not easily move from, and appeared to control and suppress propaganda without actually doing very much at all to stop it when found; she may have actually employed her Principle Secretary William Cecil to carry out a policy of commissioning secret propaganda against her enemies. Whether she had these works ordered or not, she appeared to be aware of their existence; a letter from the Spanish ambassador to England written to the king of Spain in 1559 reveals that she wished to “punish severely certain persons” for having written things about King Phillip II, but that “these were matters of less importance” than others (Goldstein). Another letter, written by the Venetian ambassador to Spain in the same year as the previously mentioned letter, says “... they brought upon the stage all personages whom they wished to revile, however exalted their station,” a group which included Phillip II, his late wife and former Queen of England Mary Tudor, and several other officials of court and church (Goldstein 163). And, despite all her apologies, the

satires and propaganda plays continued unopposed, so long as her enemies remained the primary subjects of ridicule (Goldstein 163).

One group involved in such propaganda using the English stage was a company of players known as “The Queen’s Men,” led by Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth’s Secretary of State for seventeen years and her Controller of Intelligence (Love). The Queen’s Men was “a flag-waving, propagandists’ company of players” who worked to forward the message that the ruling Queen was just, and any state that opposed her rule would be crushed handily; “It may have been done with a smile, but the message was clear” (Love). The group acted not only as bearers of the Queen’s message, but also as eyes and ears into the homes of those in the court suspected of following Catholicism; “By performing their entertainments in the grand manor houses of the rich and influential... the group also provided eyes in the homes of known and suspected Catholic sympathizers” (Love). Walsingham, who died in 1590, was an effective pusher of Queen Elizabeth’s agenda in her early reign, and a powerful enemy to those who would oppose the State.

The combination of political turmoil and a company of players devoted specifically to the furthering of this agenda contributed to the hardships of several of the playwrights of the time - including Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Johnson, all of whom would suffer at one point or another and to varying degrees; Shakespeare over the aforementioned use of Sir John Oldcastle’s name in *Henry IV* (Love) and Johnson over a work entitled *The Isle of Dogs*. There are no remaining copies of Johnson’s play, as they were all burned and Johnson arrested while his co-writer Thomas Nashe escaped to the country (Lark), leaving Johnson to be “questioned and then secretly imprisoned with two informers who encouraged him to betray himself to them” (Lark). Marlowe, during a bar brawl, was either the accidental casualty of drunken shenanigans,

or murdered by an agent of the State to silence him for misunderstanding of his works; Shakespeare commented on his death in *As You Like It* (Love), where Touchstone says “When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a man's good wit seconded with the forward child understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room,” or “A misunderstood man is a dead man.” Even with the subtly twisted wording meant to pass under the nose of the various propaganda-driven initiatives in the Elizabethan State, the message on both sides makes for a mixed truth: The Queen is good and just, but God help you if you cross her Majesty.

The Elizabethan period was a Golden Age for English drama; it saw the works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Nashe, and Johnson come to the stage: Shakespeare alone wrote 38 plays that are far and away some of the best works written in the English language. And while the English style of drama discovered during this period and throughout the Jacobean and Caroline periods would eventually die out with the Commonwealth's closing of the London theaters, the scripts and writings of the Elizabethan dramatists continue to inspire and affect modern writers and playwrights. These men, however, wrote and grew professionally under the heel of a very strict political regime; one where a man could be arrested and tortured for a misinterpretation of his work, or have every copy of his script burned and erased from public record. Elizabeth I was absolutely interested in keeping her throne, and in undermining her enemies both political and religious. The theater, being the only form of large-scale entertainment apart from executions and the blood-sports of the era (Love), was an effective tool in this war; the use of theatrical performance to ensure that three thousand of your loyal subjects, or members of a visiting court, know that you are a good and just ruler and that those that oppose you will meet their death soon enough was an effective form of propaganda that would have been foolish to pass up. Through

censorship and commissioned – or ignored – propaganda, Queen Elizabeth I of England ushered in an era of drama that allowed her subjects to practice professional theater and leave behind a legacy that resonates even in the year 2013. And, through examining the record left behind in the words of Shakespeare and Marlowe, we find proof of the importance in both expressing and voicing idea and opinion, and controlling and misdirecting those thoughts and ideals.

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