

# DID QUEEN ELIZABETH USE THE THEATER FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROPAGANDA?

*Gary B. Goldstein*

---



IN the Elizabethan era, when radio, television, movies, magazines, and newspapers were literally nonexistent, nothing equaled the power of the commercial theater to reach and communicate with the public. Its only competition was the Church and, in London, an emerging book trade, but their reach, for reasons we'll examine, was never significant. The newly born commercial theater was the only mass medium during the reign of Elizabeth I capable of addressing the broader spectrum of private and public issues outside religious ritual and rhetoric.

London's population doubled from 100,000 to 200,000 between 1580 and 1600, when the total population of England was a little over four million (Gurr 50), thus placing one in twenty Englishmen in London by 1600. Besides being the most populous city in the country, London was the center of the nation politically, commercially, and culturally, given that the second largest city in England was Norwich, with a population of just 17,000. London was also the largest city in Europe at the time (Cook 288).

The Tudor era was the period of the most extensive growth of the powers of the Crown. The appropriation by Henry VIII of the powers and wealth of the Church of Rome, the establishment of a Protestant hierarchy under his son, and the ongoing and long-term effort through the reigns of all the Tudors, from Henry's father to his daughter Elizabeth, to restrict and diminish the ancient powers of the feudal aristocracy, were the English equivalent of the "nation-building" that was happening during the Renaissance period in every sector of Europe.

Thus Elizabeth, the last of the Tudors, found herself caught between the past and the future; the past as represented by the old aristocracy, still Catholic and continental in culture if no longer in belief, still powerful enough to do harm, and exceedingly angry and frustrated by its losses; the future by the upwardly mobile, energetic new middle class merchants and traders, eager to reform everything from government to religion. These too were angry and frustrated, in their case by the long-standing powers and privileges that they were forced to pay for with their taxes and in which they did not share nearly so much as they desired. It is a credit to Elizabeth and to her choice of ministers that a balance among these antagonistic forces was maintained for forty years, only to fail shortly before her death—a failure that would lead within a few decades to civil war.

### Parliamentary debate

In Elizabeth's time, Parliament was still a long way from the democratic institution that it is today. It met only sporadically, and then only because the Queen called it into session when she needed funds. The legislative powers of Parliament extended only to proposing bills which, in any case, could not become law without her approval. Members of Commons, drawn from a narrow sector in the upper ranges of society, were elected by an oligarchy or appointed by a single patron, while membership in the House of Lords was inherited. Years went by without Parliament being summoned at all; its average duration during the reign of Elizabeth I was all of three weeks a year. Finally, its powers could be completely neutralized by the Queen, who could refuse to sign bills, even shut it down altogether at short notice. For these reasons, a large area of the national interest was effectively outside the purview and control of parliamentary debate (Hurstfield 54-5).

The English printing industry, still in its infancy, was equally unable to provide a forum for public discourse.

### The birth of the English Press

England was one of the first nations to purposely limit the growth of its publishing industry (Febvre 192). As early as 1557, Queen Mary instituted the Company of Stationers—the printers and booksellers guild—creating a restricted membership which had the sole right to publish books (Handover 26) and which was limited to London. The only outside body empowered to print by royal license was Cambridge University, but there printing had been in abeyance since 1521, while Oxford University was given no legal warrant for printing until 1586 (Clair 107-8). In effect, books likely to be in everyday use throughout the country were the monopoly of the hundred men who made up the Stationers' Company at the time of its initial incorporation (Handover 38).

Bennett notes that between 1570 and 1579 there were printed an average of 136 book titles a year. From 1580 to 1589 the figure increased to 202 titles a year, falling to 180 in the final years of Elizabeth's reign (271). Despite the fact that London equalled or surpassed most of the continental cities in population (Cook 288), the handful of printers authorized by the English Crown rarely owned more than one or two presses apiece (Febvre 131). According to Bennett, during the Elizabethan era the number of printers in London fluctuated between 20 and 30. As late as 1583 there were still only 23 printers at work with a total of only 52 presses among them (Bennett 270).

---

*Gary B. Goldstein is editor of the Shakespeare Oxford Society Newsletter and creator and former editor of The Elizabethan Review, a peer-reviewed journal on the English Renaissance (1993-2001). In 1992, he co-produced the three-hour satellite TV program, Uncovering Shakespeare, moderated by William F. Buckley, Jr., that examined the evidence on behalf of the Earl of Oxford as the author of the Shakespeare canon. Goldstein received his MA in Media from NYU.*

The 1559 Injunctions of Queen Elizabeth laid out the broad parameters of government control of the printing press. The Crown granted itself the authority to ensure that no printed materials “should be either heretical, seditious, or unseemly for Christian ears.” Any new books were to be licensed, prior to printing, either by the Queen herself in writing, or by six of her Privy Council, or by one of the following: the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishop of London, or the Chancellors of both universities (Clair 109).

Penalties for printing contrary to these regulations were laid down by an Order of the Privy Council on June 29, 1566. Penalties were stringent. Offenders were to be debarred for life from printing, imprisoned for three months, and fined ten pounds (109-10). Punishment for illegal printing entailed the loss of presses and type; the former would be broken and the latter defaced. Pirate presses that had been confiscated were never put up for sale (Handover 41).

In 1586, regulation of the printing trade rose to a new level with the Star Chamber decree of that year, “the provisions of which determined the course of the English book trade for the next half century” (Clair 110). With the outbreak of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604), the Queen empowered Archbishop Whitgift and the Privy Council to tighten even further the rules governing printing. The Star Chamber decree issued June 23, 1586, stipulated that “Printing was only to be allowed in London, Oxford and Cambridge; presses were to be examined periodically by the Stationers’ Company; and no one was allowed to print any work until it had first been seen by the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Bishop of London” (Ward 475). From 1587 on, the maximum number of books allowed by the Stationers per edition was between 1,250 to 1,500 copies per title. Publishers of grammars, prayer books and catechisms were allowed a higher maximum, from 2,500 to 3,000 copies per title (Clair 111).

That the Crown was generally successful in its efforts to control the Press can be seen in the fact that, during the Elizabethan era, only four secret presses were ever found that published literature directed against the Crown or the Church of England. Most of the seditious literature disseminated in England was printed on the Continent and shipped over.

### **The limitations of literacy**

Given these restrictions, it’s not surprising that books were never produced in sufficient quantity to become a mass medium in Elizabethan England, yet this was probably due more to the general illiteracy of the public than to government regulation. Colin Clair points out that the literate population of Elizabethan England was so small in most provincial towns that, apart from service books for the churches, there was little need for a printer outside of London (112).

Literacy . . . was markedly higher in London than elsewhere. Only 18 percent of London apprentices and 31 percent of servants in the period were unable to sign their names, whereas in the country the same class appears to have been little more than husbandmen and laborers, of whom 73-100 percent were unable to sign their names. In the country as a whole the gentry and clerics were most literate, tradesmen and yeomen [small landowners] next, laborers and women least. (Gurr 54)

This was not a situation limited to England; cities were the centers of publishing everywhere because the educated who purchased books tended to live in urban areas and university towns.

### Limited distribution

Unlike continental publishers who were able to cross borders easily to sell in other cities and even in other countries, English publishers found it expensive and dangerous to ship books too far afield. In addition, the English publisher was limited to selling from a single stall within the narrow confines of the churchyard of St. Paul's Cathedral in London (Bennett 260). He was limited as well in how he could advertise: an apprentice might call out to passersby, or he could tack loose title pages up on the posts of his stall and posts and walls elsewhere in the city (Bennett 263).

In addition to the bookstalls in Paul's Churchyard and a few shops in other towns, cheaper and more popular books were distributed by itinerant peddlers. These made tours of fairs and markets throughout England, bringing a variety of books and pamphlets to people in the small towns and villages. Such peddlers were not allowed to sell "substantial" books, but only chapbooks, pamphlets, astrological calendars and penny ballads (Bennett 266-7). Ballads were cheap, published for the most part on single sheets, sometimes illustrated with a rough woodcut at their head, and labeled with the title of a popular tune of the day, to which they were to be sung. Ballads celebrated a wide variety of events, generally sensational, reported for their crude, emotional interest (254). More important, they could be sung on street corners and in taverns by those who could read, thereby reaching a much wider illiterate audience.

Like all publications officially controlled by government censorship, a great many ballads were secretly printed without official license (28). Conyers Read found it "difficult to believe that the government made no use of this admirable propaganda medium" (29). The penny ballad was a convenient vehicle for the promotion of any cause or the airing of any grievance, as Shakespeare demonstrates in *Henry IV Part I*:

Falstaff, in his well-known altercation with Prince Hal just before the affair at Gadshill, remarked, "If I have not ballads made on you all and sung to filthy tunes, let a cup of sack be my poison." Shakespeare is indeed full of ballads. King Lear quoted from one of them. Benedict, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, from another; Autolycus, in *A Winter's Tale*, is a ballad-monger par excellence. We get Nightingale, another ballad-monger, in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. The figure was a familiar one in Elizabethan life. (Read 28)

### The Church as Bully Pulpit

The Church had one great advantage over the other methods of disseminating information and opinion—it was illegal not to attend. From the very beginning of her reign, Elizabeth used the State to establish fines and imprisonment for not attending church service, punishments that

increased in severity over time. The primary purpose for enforced attendance was to indoctrinate the public, still not entirely enthusiastic about the Protestant Reformation, to the extent that they would gradually become accustomed to the new ceremony, and forget their allegiance to the old. A more political purpose was to reveal who among them were genuine Catholic recusants, those whose primary allegiance was still to the Pope.

. . . failure to attend the Anglican Church on Sunday and Holy Days was punished with 1 shilling fine per week in 1559, raised in 1581 to 20 pounds a month. In some cases failure to pay the fine could lead to the seizure of two-thirds of a recusant's lands for the whole period of his recusancy, and to imprisonment. (Hurstfield 332)

One would think that such enforced attendance gave the Crown unlimited power to disseminate policy from the pulpit, but interestingly, Elizabeth and her ministers chose not to go this route (Read 26-7).

As the Catholics represented the old religion, the one that Protestant Reform sought to replace with something closer to the original intention of the early Church, the Puritans were demanding that the Reformation be taken to a level that the government was not prepared to go. Elizabeth owed her power to the tradition of monarchy, to her supremacy in the Church and to the semi-divine qualities with which anointing endowed her. The Puritans were prepared to recognize the sovereign as head of the Church and State, but they acknowledged an authority greater than the Monarch: the voice of God as made known through the Bible. They argued that, if the bishops were usurpers, then the monarch who stood in place of the Pontiff was, by implication, a usurper as well. They acquired seats in the House of Commons, where they gave speeches critical of the Establishment and proposed radical reform measures. They satirized the bishops in the underground press, placing the Crown as well as the Church and its officials in danger (Hurstfield 82).

Thus Elizabeth felt she had little choice but to deny both the Puritans and the Catholics the freedom to publicly express their beliefs, whether in church, Parliament, or through the printing press. A brief chronology will show the extent to which religious politics claimed Elizabeth's attention: In 1569, two Catholic noblemen led an uprising of English Catholics against the Queen; in 1570, the Pope excommunicated her; in 1571, Mary Queen of Scots used English nobles and the Spanish government to plot her overthrow; in 1585, England formally went to war against Catholic Spain, a war that lasted until 1604 on the high seas and the European continent; in 1586, a second plot to overthrow her that involved the Queen of Scots was uncovered; and in 1588 a Catholic invasion of England in the shape of the Spanish Armada was attempted and thwarted.

These activities go some way to explain the various mechanisms that were put in place by the Queen's government to control the English Catholics. The 1559 Oath of Supremacy, required by everyone in every public service, barred Catholics from access to office. The same oath was meant to keep them out of the universities, so that they could send their children only to schools that would instruct them in the Protestant faith. All Catholic services were prohibited, while, from 1559 on, failure to attend the Anglican Church on Sunday and Holy Days was punished by fines. After 1581, more severe punishments were levied for non-attendance: failure to pay fines could lead to

seizure of two-thirds of the recusant's land for the entire period of his recusancy—even to imprisonment. After 1585, any Catholic priest found in England was ipso facto subject to the penalties for high treason, while harboring a priest also carried the death penalty (Hurstfield 332). Laws passed in 1593 went so far as to limit recusants' ability to travel to within five miles of their homes (Bevington 232).

It is clear that, when England was facing military threats from abroad and religious and political threats to its national security at home, the Queen, as head of both Church and State, sought to consolidate control over the three major forms of media: the Theater, the Church, and the Press. Yet despite the advantage of controlling audience attendance along with the rhetoric of the church service, it appears that Elizabeth's government did not use the Church to disseminate propaganda.

It is rather surprising that the Crown made no considerable use of the pulpit in its battle with the Roman Catholics. The official Book of Homilies, for example, though it passed through several editions in Elizabeth's reign, remained virtually unchanged. After the [1569 Catholic] Rising in the North, a special homily was issued in 1570, dealing with Disobedience and Willful Rebellion, and this homily was added to editions of the Book of Homilies published thereafter. But there were no other separate homilies issued to meet specific situations . . . (Read 26-7)

Rather than use the Church as a communications channel to effect public persuasion, a path that might possibly have brought about open rebellion, Elizabeth turned to the Stage. Although this was by no means an open policy, that she did so has been attested to repeatedly by diplomats, intelligence agents, and educated contemporary observers.

### The Stage

There is no indication that the Queen or the Privy Council ever contributed to the creation of the London commercial theater. Nevertheless, that it grew from nothing to the primary forum for public discourse in the course of Elizabeth's reign is an established fact. The first public theater in England was constructed in London in 1567. Prior to that date, plays were staged in taverns, churchyards, village commons, gaming houses, guild halls, noble households, and the halls of royal palaces (Chambers 1:335-6). During the early years of Elizabeth's reign, plays were performed, as they had been for centuries, intermittently by itinerant acting companies whose players sometimes never received their pay. Gurr describes the player's precarious existence before commercial playhouses were constructed in London:

Players who performed in market places had to take a hat around for their income, and were likely to be paid haphazardly rather than systematically in advance. Players who secured an innyard venue were dependent on the innkeeper's willingness. Players who performed in halls, whether at the behest of the local mayor or the Lord of the Manor, were paid by their host . . . [Moreover,] in the 1560s, use of an open marketplace or banqueting hall meant that . . . audiences at halls and even markets usually

gathered for reasons more mighty than seeing a play. Plays in banqueting halls were a garnish to the feast by a generous host. [The] commercial playhouses thus created the first regular means for every playgoer to buy his or her own entertainment. (Gurr 116)

The speed with which the acting profession gained respect probably derived from the commercial theater's rapid and widespread popularity, which brought about a certain level of economic stability for its practitioners that they had not known until then. Chambers traces how the government perspective on actors changed over the course of a single generation, from the time the first commercial playhouses were built in London:

And so, . . . the actor's occupation began to take its place as a regular profession. . . . As early as 1574 the patent to Leicester's Men refers to playing as an "arte and facultye." In 1581 the Privy Council call it a "trade"; in 1582 a "profession"; in 1593 a "quality." The order of 1600 explicitly recognizes that it "may with a good order and moderation be suffered in a well governed state." (1:309)

Following the building of the Red Lion Inn in 1567, two playhouses were built in London in 1575, another in 1576, two more in 1577, another in 1579, and yet another in 1580. Throughout the 1580s and '90s eight theaters served an eager public, four of them public theaters, though their seating capacity varied widely. A private theater like Blackfriars, which operated from 1576 to 1584, could serve only 750 theatergoers, while Paul's, operating from 1575 to 1590 and again from 1600 to 1606, held a mere 200 (Gurr 22).

It was the great public playhouses, multi-galleried amphitheaters with an average seating capacity of 2,800 (Gurr 20), that provided the greatest access to theater. This was true of opportunity as well as seating capacity. While the smaller indoor private theaters scheduled plays only once a week, the public playhouses were "committed to putting on a different play every day of the week" (Gurr 118). By the last decade of the sixteenth century, the theater had evolved to the point where they were in almost continual public performance. "In the 1590s, playing normally ran in an unbroken sequence of forty-two weeks, save for a Lenten break, with an occasional summer tour of some eight weeks in the provinces" (Gair 8).

After a slow start, the number of plays performed during Elizabeth's reign increased exponentially. Taking publication of plays in book form as one guide, of the 168 plays published during Elizabeth's reign, 103 were published in the last decade (Bennett 255). Given that as many as 290 new plays were written for the Stage during this final decade, it becomes apparent that only a third of the new plays being offered on the boards in the 1590s were published. But the number of plays that were actually performed on stage during the 1590s, the heyday of Elizabethan drama, was much greater than the number of new plays would indicate. The Lord Admiral's Men, primary company at Henslowe's Rose Theater, was performing as many as thirty-five different plays each year, many of these obviously revivals of old plays. Gurr estimates that Henslowe processed more than 300 plays "to feed London's appetite" between 1592 and 1600 (115), thus it is likely that more than 500 new plays were played upon the stages of London during the final decade of the sixteenth century.

During this period, at least six permanent adult companies were playing in London and the

provinces at any one time (1.8-260). During Elizabeth's forty-five-year reign, nine boy companies and twenty adult companies played in London and the provinces, nearly all for a period of at least ten years and most for fifteen to twenty years (2.8-260). The competition among the companies was fierce: for plays, for viewers, for critical acclaim, and for the best actors.

The competition was considerable, for in the provinces the London companies found rivals in the shape of other companies which rarely or never came to London at all, but were none the less substantial and permanent organizations. (1.340-1) Not only was there a continuous bill of fare offered to the London public by the mid-nineties, the theaters were ubiquitous enough for all Londoners to be within walking distance (Cook 297). Gurr notes that, by 1604, "There was a playhouse of some kind within two miles of nearly every Londoner" (34).

Equally important was the affordability of the public theaters. Built for volume, their tickets were priced accordingly: for a penny you stood in front of the stage; for two pence you had an uncovered seat in a gallery; three pence gave you a covered seat; while for sixpence you had the luxury of a box on the stage (Gurr 26). In 1589

six pence could be used to go by boat from the Temple steps to the Court at Westminster and back; to pay for a pair of shoes to be repaired; to have two shirts laundered; to buy silk to make button holes; or a book; or four ounces of dates; or a quart of claret or white wine or a tobacco pipe . . . (Gair 73)

The penny admission at the public theaters was the cheapest form of entertainment to be had. The other major pastimes available—gambling, whoring, and drinking—were all by that standard lordly sports. Tobacco was three pence for a small pipeful, and even the nuts that spectators chewed during performances cost up to six pence. Only bear-baiting was as cheap as the yard of the public playhouses (Gurr Stage 198). Given that skilled workers made about seven shillings a week, the general admission of the easily-accessed public playhouses enabled the workers of London to see plays as often as they pleased.

So successful was the theater in drawing playgoers that church attendance was affected. "Plays were not even wholly forbidden on Sundays and Holy Days, and the crowd flocked to the inn-yard gates, already open in spite of the regulation [of 1574], while the bells were still ringing for divine service in the empty churches" (Chambers 1:285). More to the point are the weekly attendance figures for the mid-nineties, the height of the great flowering of Elizabethan drama. "Extrapolating from [Henslowe's] Diary figures, it seems that, in 1594-5, with two amphitheatres offering plays, about 15,000 people attended each week (Gurr 253n). Given that approximately 200,000 people were living in London by 1600, it would be fair to estimate that a large percentage of Londoners were attending the theater on a regular basis. Gurr is emphatic on the theater's importance:

. . . it was the only major medium for social intercommunication, the only existing form of journalism, and the only occasion that existed for the gathering of large numbers of people other than for sermons and executions. . . . The fictions of the stage were certainly not so marginal to the affairs of state, because imaginative thought had few other outlets, and none with the coerciveness of the minds of men in company. (113-4)



### Control of the Stage

The London Stage was the glory of the Elizabethan era, but its power was as feared as it was admired. The Queen and the Privy Council were concerned with possible displays of heresy and sedition. More concerned were the City authorities, the Corporation and its magistrates, whose mandate was the maintenance of public order. Most concerned of all was the Church, as is seen in the many documents pressuring the government to close or curtail the theaters, ostensibly because two o'clock performances conflicted with religious ceremonies, also scheduled for two o'clock (Gurr 33), but also because they feared the effects on their flock of staged displays of sinful behavior and of opportunities for illicit assignations offered by a mixed crowd of men and women.

The history of play-licensing in London really turns upon the attempt of the [City] Corporation, goaded by the preachers, to convert their power of regulating plays into a power of suppressing plays, as the ultimate result of which even the power of regulation was lost to them, and the central government, acting through the Privy Council and the system of patents, with the Master of Revels as a licenser, took the supervision of the stage into its own hands. (Chambers 277)

This transfer of power began in 1574 when the Earl of Leicester's Company was issued a patent under the Great Seal, giving them permission to play "during the royal pleasure" either within London or in any other town throughout the country. The license was subject only to two provisions: one, that there would be no performance during common prayer or times of plague; the other, that all plays would be seen and allowed by the Master of the Revels, Sir Edmund Tilney. As Tilney was an officer of the royal household, subordinate to the Lord Chamberlain, this amounted to a transfer of control from the City to the Crown.

These powers were reaffirmed and increased in 1581 when a commission was issued under a patent to the Master of the Revels investing him with authority to "press workmen and wares" for service to the Revels and to "call upon players and playmakers to appear before him and recite their pieces, with a view to their consideration for performance at Court." The Master was also appointed "of all such shows, plays, players, and playmakers together with their playing places to order and reform, authorize, and put down as shall be thought meet or unmeet unto himself or his said deputy in that behalf" (Chambers 2.288). Thus it would seem that from 1581 forward the power to control the content of plays was entirely in the hands of the government.

An example of the Crown's exercise of censorship can be seen during the Martin Mar-prelate controversy of 1588-9 when the Lord Admiral's Men were temporarily suppressed by the Lord Mayor because Tilney, the Master of the Revels, "misliked their plays" (2.136). At one point, censorship forced the name of one of Shakespeare's characters to be changed from "Sir John Oldcastle" (in the original version of *Henry IV*) to "Sir John Falstaff" (2.196). In 1597 Tilney closed down all the London theaters after a single performance of a seditious play, *The Isle of Dogs*, and then arrested and interrogated all but one of the playwrights and the leading actors (2.196). Yet, despite these skirmishes, the efforts of the Church and the City to get the Crown to totally shut down or seriously

curtail the theaters on a permanent basis were met for the most part with bland equivocation or penalties followed by a quick return to business as usual. It is clear the Crown was not about to do any serious harm to the London Stage.

By 1592 the City authorities were forced to acknowledge their lack of power to redress the “inconvenience” of the Stage by debating the advisability of approaching the Master of the Revels with a bribe (1:320). Henslowe’s Diary discloses that between 1592 and 1597, in licensing both theaters and plays, Tilney regularly took fees amounting to seven shillings for each new play produced, and five, six, and ultimately ten shillings for each week during which a theater was open. He also licensed the provincial traveling companies, in spite of the fact that they held no direct royal authority (1:321).

### **The Crown’s use of the Stage for agitprop**

Modern historians acknowledge that the theater had functioned as an instrument of state propaganda from the very start of Elizabeth’s reign in 1558.

Queen Elizabeth handled the political drama of her early reign with a finesse that baffled both critics and admirers. Her method was of a piece with her foreign and domestic policy, avoiding inflexible positions, countenancing secret propaganda even while she publicly cajoled and temporized. (Bevington 127)

Whether the Queen actually employed William Cecil, her Principal Secretary, to carry out such a policy, or she simply tolerated it, is not conclusive, though the Spanish Ambassador indicates that the Queen was aware that Cecil took an active lead in the matter, as we see from a letter sent to his master, Philip II of Spain, in April 1559:

She was very emphatic in saying that she wished to punish severely certain persons who had represented some comedies in which Your Majesty was taken off. I passed it by and said that these were matters of less importance than the others, although both in jest and earnest, more respect ought to be paid to so great a prince as Your Majesty, and I knew that a member of her Council had given the arguments to construct these comedies, which is true, for Cecil gave them, as indeed she partly admitted to me. (Graves 547)

Another modern historian has noted of this volatile period that, during the first few months of Elizabeth’s reign,

a period of extreme uncertainty with respect to the outcome of the Reformation, seems to have been especially productive in controversial entertainments presented to arouse the anti-Catholic feeling. So boisterous, indeed, were histrionic activities as to call forth two royal proclamations in as many months. (Graves 545)

Contemporary reports by the Ambassadors of Venice and Spain provide us with detailed descriptions of these plays. On May 4, 1559, shortly after the above letter to Philip II, Paulo

Tiepolo, Venetian Ambassador to Philip's Court in Spain, wrote to the Venetian Doge and Senate:

The demonstrations and performance of plays by the London populace in the hostels and taverns were so vituperative and abominable that it was marvelous they should so long have been tolerated, for they brought upon the stage all personages whom they wished to revile, however exalted their station, and among the rest, in one play, they represented King Philip, the late Queen of England [Philip's wife, Mary Tudor], and Cardinal Pole, reasoning together about such things as they imagined might have been said by them in the matter of religion; so that they did not spare any living person, saying whatever they fancied about them. (Graves 546).

However apologetic the Queen may have been to the ambassadors, and however willing to pass along blame to Cecil, she never did anything effective to prevent the Stage from producing satires—that is, so long as they were directed against her enemies.

A disenchanted Bishop Quadra [Spanish Ambassador in England from 1559 to 1563] sent home in 1562 certain portions of John Bale's satire on Philip of Spain, "As I was tired of complaining to the Queen of the constant writing of books, farces, and songs prejudicial to other princes, and seeing that notwithstanding her promises, no attempt was made to put a stop to it." (Bevington 128)

E.K. Chambers concurs with Read and Bevington about the use of the Stage during the early part of Elizabeth's reign for state propaganda, adding that such practices were carried out throughout her reign on a systematic basis against both internal and external enemies. He also identifies Cecil as the agent orchestrating this staged propaganda.

. . . at the beginning of the reign Cecil made use of interludes, after the manner of his master [Thomas] Cromwell, as a political weapon against Philip of Spain and Catholics; and many years after, both Philip and James of Scotland had their grievances against the freedom with which their names were bandied by the London comedians. Similarly, when it was desired that Puritanism should be unpopular, the players were not debarred from satirizing Puritans. (1:323)

It may be that foreign diplomats simply tired of lodging complaints with the Queen and her government, or the Queen, may have ordered a cessation of dramatic hostilities, since—until England's entry in 1585 into the continental war with Spain—this dispatch is the last contemporary piece of evidence of state-sponsored anti-Spanish propaganda that we have. Yet while explicit anti-Spanish propaganda may have abated in the theaters, anti-foreign sentiment "increased in tempo" in the plays of the late 1560s and 1570s, something that David Bevington attributes to the Queen's direct influence (134). Naturally the playwrights and actors were wont to tread much more cautiously when the subject was the monarchy:

An unmistakable phenomenon in the 1560s and 1570s is the vogue of "mirror" plays exploring the nature of tyranny and the proper attitudes of subjects under its cruel sway:

*Cambises, Appius and Virginia, Virtuous and Godly Susanna, Jocasta, Promos and Cassandra, and Damon and Pythias* . . . obviously dare[d] not hint at dictatorial abuses in Elizabeth herself. Instead, they implicitly or explicitly flatter Elizabeth by the contrast between her and the conventional tyrant. (156)

Until the middle of Elizabeth's reign, the threat to the government was more internal than external, stemming from the activities of Catholics and Puritans. Yet despite these disturbances, England enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity that lasted for twenty-seven years. Finally however, the pressure of events forced the Queen to agree in early 1585 to send an army of 4,000 to assist the Dutch in their revolt against the occupying armies of Catholic Spain.

The cost of the war against Spain soon became a great burden on the English people. From 1558 to 1588 taxation had remained at a fairly constant level, but by 1589 it had doubled; by 1597 it had trebled; and by 1601 it reached a level of four times what it had been in 1588. Between 1593 and 1596 the price of wheat nearly trebled—the scarcity of foodstuffs bringing the nation to the brink of famine. During the twenty years that the war lasted, the annual direct expenditure on the Army and Navy alone exceeded 80 percent of the total revenue of the country on seven occasions. At the time of the Armada crisis in 1587 and 1588, the figures are 95 percent and 101 percent. In one year only, 1595, did military expenditures drop below 50 percent of revenue (Ward 457).

Another historian of the period, Ann Cook, concurs with the bleak economic picture outlined by Ward. "By 1594, after five straight years of bad harvests, prices were so high, food was so scarce, and unemployment so general, that famine and starvation threatened" (291). She describes the entire decade of the 1590s as one of economic recession (295).

David Bevington is more explicit regarding the effect of the war on the English:

The unrest to which Marlowe, Wilson, Peele, Greene, and other playwrights appealed was an unceasing problem throughout the 1590s. For all classes, the long-continuing war meant heavy taxes, forced loans, ship money, and impressment for war service. Dissident returning veterans were a potential source of agitation. The harassments of tax-collectors and of purveyors for the army and the court provoked cries of bribery and corruption. Economic hardship was exacerbated by an unusually rapid inflation, by major outbreaks of the plague, by several succeeding years of bad harvest, and by a new wave of enclosures of arable land. (231-2)

Life for the civil population during the last nineteen years of Elizabeth's reign was neither peaceful nor prosperous. It was a period of chronic economic hardship, religious and political turmoil, and, hanging over everything, the constant threat of military invasion. We must accordingly reframe the traditional view of the historical setting in which Elizabethan playwrights wrote, concluding that they were not simply enjoying themselves in "Merrie Olde Englande" but were struggling to survive under the stress of war and economic hardship. It was during this period that the Stage came into its own as the pre-eminent forum for the discussion of national and foreign affairs.

Shortly after England entered into war with Spain, we again find diplomats calling attention to attacks on Philip II appearing on the London Stage. On July 20 1586, the following dispatch was

written to the Doge and Senate of Venice by the Venetian Ambassador to Spain:

His Majesty hears with great displeasure the account of the damage which the Queen of England is doing in Flanders and in the Indies, besides the understanding which she maintains with Portugal through the medium of Don Antonio, and her negotiations at Constantinople. But what has enraged him more than all else, and has caused him to show a resentment such as he has never before displayed in all his life, is the account of the masquerades and comedies which the Queen of England orders to be acted at his expense. His Majesty has received a summary of one of these which was recently represented, in which all sorts of evil is spoken of the Pope, the Catholic religion, and the King, who is accused of spending all his time in the Escorial with the monks of St. Jerome, attending only to his buildings, and a hundred other insolences which I refrain from sending to your Serenity. (SP 182)

During the late eighties the Stage became involved in the Martin Mar-prelate controversy. This took place throughout 1588 and 1589 with a series of secretly printed pamphlets attacking the principles of episcopacy written by one "Martin Mar-prelate," the pseudonym of a witty and educated author whose identity has never been conclusively established. The pamphlets included scurrilous ad hominem attacks on the bishops. "The stage is brought into the church; and vices make play of church matters," said one episcopalian writer (Chambers 1.294). Bacon censured the "immodest and deformed manner of writing lately entertained, whereby matters of religion are handled in the style of the stage." Soon the Stage would become even more closely involved.

. . . before long the vigor of the attack drove the bishops to seek on their side for an equally effective literary retort. They hired writers, including John Lyly and Thomas Nashe; and these not only answered Martin in his own vein, but also made use of the theaters for what must have been the congenial task of producing scurrilous plays against him. . . . Martin was brought dressed like a monstrous ape on the stage, and wormed and lanced to let the blood and evil humors out of him. Divinity appeared with a scratched face, complaining of the assaults received in the hideous creature's attacks upon her honor. (1.294-5)

Attacks against the Scottish King James probably derived from English anxieties during the late 1590s over the question of the royal succession. On April 15, 1598, George Nicolson, an English agent in Edinburgh, wrote the following in a letter to William Cecil, Lord Treasurer and Privy Councilor, about the effects a play produced in London was having in Scotland:

It is regretted that the comedians of London should scorn the King and the people of this land in their play; and it is wished that the matter should be speedily amended and stayed lest the King and the country be stirred to anger. . . . I have thought meet to commend to your Lordships considerations [to] put stay of these courses. (Lee 8)

Despite such letters, it seems that the Queen's government made no effort to stop the satires. "Even in Ireland, in 1603, it was common knowledge 'that the very stage-players in England jeered

at [James] for being the poorest prince in Christendom” (Bevington 12).

Propaganda directed against state enemies was not the only use to which the government employed the Stage: it also dramatized the successes of English forces against Catholic France and Spain. One example of this comes to us in a letter from Robert White to Sir Robert Sidney written October 26, 1599, describing a play that glorified English feats of arms:

Two days ago, the overthrow of Turnholt was acted upon a stage, and all your names used that were at it, especially Sir Francis Vere’s, and he that played that part got a beard resembling his, and a satin doublet, with hose trimmed with silver lace. You was also introduced, killing, slaying, and overthrowing the Spaniards, and honorable mention made of your service, in seconding Sir Francis Vere . . . . (Chambers 1.322n)

After decades of experience in dealing with state oversight of the Church, the Press, and the Stage, the community of writers, actors, and their noble patrons would be able to discern with great sensitivity which topics and personalities would be safe from the antipathy of either the Master of the Revels or the Queen and her ministers. This might have clarified for the late Sir Edmund Chambers what was “inexplicable” about the role of the theater in the career of the Earl of Essex:

A rather inexplicable part was taken by players in the wild scenes that closed the career of Robert, Earl of Essex, in 1601. Essex was a popular hero and, as the prologue to Shakespeare’s *Henry V* shows, a name to conjure with in the theater. Bacon records how in August 1599, after his return from Ireland, “did fly about in London streets and theaters seditious libels.” That he should become an object of ridicule than of honor on the boards was one of the bitterest stings of his disgrace. “Shortly,” he wailed to Elizabeth on 12 May 1600, “they will play me in what forms they list upon the stage.” And when the mad step of rebellion was taken in February 1601, it was a play, none other than Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, to which the plotters looked to stir the temper of London in their favor. (1:324-5)

Bevington succinctly describes the general themes and aims of Elizabethan playwrights during the Shakespearean era:

. . . discussions of royal succession, obedience to authority, the efficacy of public justice, and the dangers of religious civil war were central to most plays one could see, public or private. War plays whetted popular appetites for a hysterical hatred of foreigners and stay-at-home politicians, as in post-Armada jingoistic drama. (290)

Another modern historian, Lily Campbell, is emphatic about the systematic political uses to which the history plays of Shakespeare, in particular, were designed:

Each of the Shakespeare histories serves a special purpose in elucidating a political problem of Elizabeth’s day and in bringing to bear upon this problem the accepted political philosophy of the Tudors. (125)

**In conclusion**

Reviewing the evidence of contemporary comment, as discussed above by numerous historians of the period, it appears that whenever a national crisis challenged the legitimacy or security of the government, the Crown used the Stage as its primary instrument of propaganda. In contrast, the book trade was unable to surmount the obstacles of public illiteracy, poor distribution, Church-controlled censorship, and a monopoly on printing, barriers which prevented it from becoming the mass medium it became on the continent. Although the Church was theoretically a free venue for Crown propaganda, its use for anything but cautiously presented religious ritual would have been far too risky in the face of Catholic and Puritan sensitivities. The recently-created commercial theater, free of the concerns of the pulpit, could deliver a message liberally sauced with humor and drama directly to a public not yet able to obtain information from the printed page. Theater was the medium that worked.

This was the world into which the seventeenth Earl of Oxford was born, a world in which the Theater was used to influence both Crown policy and public opinion by methods his guardian, William Cecil, is known to have used during the period that Oxford lived and studied under his roof. Thus the Stage was the natural arena for a gifted and educated writer who was not in a position to wield influence through any other means. \_\_\_\_\_



## Works Cited

## BOOKS

- Bennett, H.S. *English Books and Readers 1558-1603*. London: Cambridge UP, 1965.
- Bevington, David. *Tudor Drama and Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968.
- Brown, Horatio, ed. *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian*. Vol 8. London: Eyre, 1894.
- Campbell, Lily B. *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1978.
- Chambers, E.K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1923.
- Clair, Colin. *A History of Printing in Britain*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966.
- Cressy, David. *Literacy and the Social Condition*. London: Cambridge UP, 1980.
- Ellul, Jacques, *Propaganda*. New York: Random House, 1973.
- Febvre, Lucien and Henri-Jean Marin. *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing: 1450-1800*. (1958) Trans. David Gerard. London: Humanities, 1976.
- Gair, Reavley. *The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theater Company, 1553-1608*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge UP, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Handover, P.M. *Printing in London: From 1476 to Modern Times*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Hurstfield, Joel. *Freedom, Corruption, and Government in Elizabethan England*. London: Cape, 1973.
- Plomer, Henry. *A Short History of English Printing*. 2nd ed. London: Keegan Paul, 1915.
- Read, Conyers. *Mr. Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth*. New York: Knopf, 1955.
- Shepherd, Simon. *Marlowe and The Politics of Elizabethan Theatre*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

## ARTICLES

- Cook, Ann Jennalie. "The Audience of Shakespeare: A Reconsideration." *Shakespeare Studies*. 7 (1974): 283-305.
- Graves, T.S. "Some Allusions to Religious and Political Plays." *Modern Philology*. 10 (1912): 1-10.
- Johnson, F.R. "Notes on English Retail Book Prices 1550-1640." *The Library*. 5th ser. 5 (1950): 83-112.
- Klotz, Edith. "A Subject Analysis of English Imprints for Every Tenth Year from 1480 to 1640." *Huntington Library Quarterly*. 1 (1938): 417-9.
- Lee, Sidney. "The Topical Side of the Elizabethan Drama." *Transactions of the New Shakespeare Society*. 1st. ser. 11 (1887): 1-36.
- Read, Conyers. "William Cecil and Elizabethan Public Relations." *Elizabethan Government and Society*. Ed. S.T. Bindoff, Joel Hurstfield and C.H. Williams. London: Athlone, 1961. 21-55.



- Rickert, Edith. "Political Propaganda and Satire in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*." *Modern Philology*. 21 (1923): 53-87, 133-154.
- Simpson, Richard. "Political Uses of the Stage." *Transactions of the New Shakespeare Society*. 1st ser. 1 (1874): 371-442.
- Ward, Captain Bernard M. "Shakespeare and the Anglo-Spanish War, 1585-1604." *Revue Anglo-Americaine*. December 1929. Rpt. in *Oxfordian Vistas*. Ed. Ruth Miller. New York: Kennikat, 1975. 454-468.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Shakespeare and Elizabethan War Propaganda." *The Royal Engineers Journal*. December 1928. Rpt. in *Oxfordian Vistas*. Ed. Ruth Miller. New York: Kennikat, 1975. 469-482.

#### INTERVIEWS

- Blayney, Dr. Peter W.M. Telephone interview. December 19, 1990. Dr. Blayney is author of *The Texts of King Lear and Their Origins* (London: Cambridge UP, 1982).