

Two Women, Two Wars, Two Plays: Queen Elizabeth I and Lady Thatcher in the Theatre

Nilgün Müftüoğlu

Department of Translation & Interpretation
School of Foreign Languages
Karadeniz Technical University
Turkey
denizmuftuoglu6107@hotmail.com

Abstract: Theatre does not only provide people with mere entertainment but also throughout history it has functioned as an effective instrument through which those in power impose their policies or playwrights vigorously criticize these policies. In this sense, Elizabethan drama, which is often associated with Shakespeare, played a significant role of endorsing the ideas and policies of a woman ruler, Queen Elizabeth I, namely maintenance of order and equilibrium in that particular period, whereas Lady Thatcher's policies, one of the longest serving politician in British Political History, came under severe criticism from the prominent contemporary playwrights in the 1980s. In this paper, Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher are compared in terms of their portrait in the theatre by referring to two plays, *Henry V* and *Sink the Belgrano!*. Although *Henry V* is not a play directly about Elizabeth I, it celebrates Elizabeth I and her victory at the defeat of Spanish Armada. And *Sink the Belgrano!* directly criticizes Thatcher's policy in Falklands War.

Throughout history theatre has not only provided people with mere entertainment but also functioned as an effective instrument through which those in power have imposed their policies while simultaneously allowing playwrights to vigorously criticize these policies. This can be seen particularly clearly in the comparison between Elizabethan Drama and the theatre under Thatcher's rule. Elizabethan drama which is often associated with Shakespeare played a significant role in endorsing the ideas and policies of a woman ruler, Queen Elizabeth I, namely maintenance of order and equilibrium in that particular period. On the other hand, Lady Thatcher's policies, one of the longest serving politicians in British Political History, came under severe criticism from the prominent contemporary playwrights in the 1980s. Such an argument might be strengthened by attention to their portraits in the theatre by referring to two plays, Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Steven Berkoff's *Sink the Belgrano!*. Although *Henry V* is not a play directly about Queen Elizabeth I, it alludes to Elizabeth and her victory at the defeat of the Spanish Armada. On the other hand, *Sink the Belgrano!* directly criticizes Thatcher's policy in the Falklands War.

These two ruling women, Queen Elizabeth I from the sixteenth century and Margaret Thatcher from the twentieth century, share many similarities in terms of their character and political events of their era. Both women exhibit characteristics that prevent themselves from behaviors peculiar to the weaker sex. Elizabeth I was so concerned with the welfare of her country that she turned down all marriage proposals for the sake of her country as she thought that marriage would only serve to distract her from her governmental duties. Elizabeth's commitment to her country is strikingly clear in this excerpt from her coronation speech. As she displayed her coronation ring, just like a wedding ring she stated as such "Behold...the Pledge of this my Wedlock and Marriage with my Kingdom. Every one of you, and as many as are English-men, are Children and Kinsmen to me" (Thomas, 1998, p. 95). Like a wife and a mother with responsibilities for her husband and children, Elizabeth had the responsibility to maintain the order and safety in the country as well as to remain faithful. Then, how could people expect her to marry while she had already been married?

As for Margaret Thatcher, she had a hair-style in the appearance of being contrived and always dressed in either black or blue with an intention to have more impact than her male colleagues (Peacock, 1999). Elizabeth I had only one wish which was to get England to be recognized as a world power. By the same token, Margaret Thatcher desired to prove that England was still the world power as it used to be. Neither Elizabeth I nor Lady Thatcher inherited a peaceful and stable country. When Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in 1558, country was suffering from serious economic problems including inflation, the debasement of coinage and their farmers were struggling with another bad harvest (Hibbert, 1992). Likewise, in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher was elected as the Prime Minister, she too witnessed a near national breakdown with an inherent consequence of widespread distress (Reitan, 2003). Moreover, both Elizabeth I and Lady Thatcher had to deal with the power

struggles between two opposites. The former was caught between Protestantism and Catholicism and the latter between the Conservative and the Labor Party. In other words, they both had to prove themselves as powerful and talented leaders in the eyes of their people as well as their enemies. In this respect, the victories at the wars against Spain in 1588 and against Argentina in 1982 provided the prestige and popularity they looked for.

In 1588, Philip II of Spain attacked England for a number of reasons: the piratical raids of English sailors on Spanish ships and ports, the intolerable interference of Elizabeth I in the Netherlands and the Pope's desire to overthrow Elizabeth I, whom he announced as heretic (Carter & Mears, 1960). The battle drew to a conclusion with the defeat of the Spanish Armada. This victory not only secured the throne of Elizabeth I but also made England the most powerful naval force in the world. Thus, it paved the way for England to colonize North America. In addition, this meant a victory gained against Catholicism. On November 24th 1588, Elizabeth I gave thanks for the nation's victory in St Paul's Cathedral. Hibbert (1990) states that she arrived at the cathedral in a chariot drawn by two white horses and she was like the Goddess of Victory. From then on, people admired her so much that whenever the queen passed through the streets, they were eager to show their adherence.

In the same manner, the Falklands War began when Argentina invaded the Falklands Islands and South Georgia in April, 1982, propounding the historic claim that the islands belonged to them. The Falklands issue was regarded as a chance by the governments because neither political nor economic situation was good in either country. For this reason, this war had important political consequences for both sides. The defeat of Argentina hastened the downfall of its government. In England's case it reminded individuals all around the globe that England still had the power and ability that was so notable in its past. In particular, this victory meant a great deal to Margaret Thatcher since "Thatcherite triumphalism was born in the Falklands war" (Clarke, 1996: 375 cited in Cross, 2004: 174). It secured a second term as Prime Minister for Thatcher, who hitherto has been among the most unpopular leaders of Britain. With the advent of victory, people began to regard her as a powerful leader standing against a foreign power and voted for the Conservatives in the 1983 election (Evans, 2004). Thatcher recognized herself as the savior and unifying force of Britain (Cross, 2004), which reaches its fullest expression in her remarks on April 25th of 1982. Addressing to the public in front of the cameras outside 10 Downing Street, she wanted them just to rejoice. As Peacock (1999) states, "such self-aggrandizement exhibited monarchical tendencies." (p. 19). The fact the Thatcher sunk a battleship and eventually defeated Argentina- a Spanish speaking nation, identified her in the minds of the people as a second Queen Elizabeth I (Cross, 2004). However, unlike Elizabeth I, Thatcher was annoyed by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the service of thanksgiving for the victory which was held at St. Paul's Cathedral. In his sermon, Robert Runcie said "War is a sign of human failure, and everything we say and do in this service must be in that context" (Blewett, 2008, p. 4).

Contrary to their parallels in personal character and political history, Queen Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher differ almost entirely when it comes to their portrayal in theater. Elizabeth I manipulated theater to maintain her power and authority. She herself patronized and protected the theatre. Stephen Greenblatt puts forward that it is because of the fact that Elizabeth had neither a powerful army nor an extensive police force (Hall, 1997). However, she had a more powerful thing, which was the pen of Shakespeare. Writing his histories with a pedagogical and political intention, Shakespeare became her preeminent comrade. By means of these plays, particularly *Henry V*, he aimed to "reinforce and consolidate belief in social order based on the power of the monarch" (Hall, 1997, p. 17). On the other hand, after Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, the contemporary playwrights such as John McGrath, David Hare and Caryl Churchill, who criticized capitalism in their works until that time, saw Thatcherism as a great threat and turned their harsh criticism towards Lady Thatcher and her policies (Cross, 2004). One play in particular was Berkoff's *Sink the Belgrano!*. It is highly critical of Thatcher and particularly her policies during the Falklands War.

In fact, when Shakespeare wrote his play, *Henry V* in 1599, it had passed eleven years after the defeat of Spanish Armada and there were four years to the end of the reign of Elizabeth I. The Golden Age of the British Empire was near to end and people were wondering who would be the successor of the queen. Moreover, the threat of war with Spain was still there to be prevented, and Queen Elizabeth was providing help to the Protestants in other countries (Hall, 1997). This historical and political background makes all the more apparent to us the fact that *Henry V* is not just one of those history plays of Shakespeare but that it embodies a profoundly important mission beneath its surface meaning. As Hall (1997) points out, "the play implicitly reflects Elizabethan England's desire for a peaceful succession of the monarchy" (p. 14) while expressing the gratitude towards the queen. The play is full of implicit references to Queen Elizabeth I herself, her current reign and her victory on Catholic force of Spanish Armada.

As for Berkoff, he waited four years to write his play, *Sink the Belgrano!* after the Argentine light cruiser General Belgrano was sunk by British nuclear-powered submarine Conqueror in 1982. It had been seven years since Lady Thatcher came to power and she would continue to rule the country for four more years. This meant that contemporary playwrights shifted their focus away from socialist and Marxist critique of capitalism to

an emphasis on Thatcherism (Cross, 2004) which aimed at low inflation through controlling the money supply in the economy, privatization and applying constraints on labor movement. Explicitly criticizing “the jingoistic patriotism of the Falklands War” (Cross, 2004, p. 170), Berkoff may try to warn about other inherent threats of Thatcher herself and Thatcherism.

When it comes to their portrait in the plays, however, the names under which they appear immediately attract our attention. Queen Elizabeth I is replaced by another Tudor king, King Henry V who is in the process of proving himself a great king and a hero as well through not only his victory at the war with France but also his decisions concerning the state and his old friends. On the other hand, Margaret Thatcher turns out to be Maggot Scratcher in the play. This name leaves the impression that she feeds on other people’s death like a maggot and it can be understood that she gives damage around herself slightly like in the act of scratching. She gains prestige and popularity by means of 400 dead bodies in sinking the Belgrano. Even John Nott and Francis Pym, who worked as Secretary of State of Defence during the Thatcher government, are called through different names: Nott becomes “Nit”, which means a silly or stupid person, and Pym as “Pimp”. These names make it clear how Shakespeare and Berkoff perceive their characters and their deeds as well.

The difference in their portraits becomes more visible in their deeds and speeches. First of all, both Henry V and Maggot Scratcher assert a claim on a land which is far away from the home. Henry V has a claim to the throne of France. His following question to the Archbishop of Canterbury suggests his already desire for such a claim: “May I right and conscience make this claim?” (I. ii. p. 446). Beneath such a question lies a sixteenth century fact. In this question, Henry V only looks for a justification for the war because in the sixteenth century there was the question of whether two Christian states could make war against one another (Campbell, 1970). And the Archbishop of Canterbury explains that one can not inherit the throne through the mother in France but Henry V can inherit that throne since there is not such a law in England and as he is the grand-grand-son of the daughter of the king of France, he can claim the throne to France. Thus, this claim is justified in the eyes of sixteenth century audience as well. However, there is something disturbing in Maggot’s claim on Falklands Islands. This is understood in what she says to Pimp: “the land is ours, that’s plain to see.” Maggot recognizes the islands as her own even though she does not know even how to locate on the map. At one point she asks “By the way Pimp... where is the Falklands??” Moreover, as one of the farmers living on the island states, it is Argentina but not England who concerns about their problems:

They’ve done sweet FA all these years
No roads are built, no hospitals...
When we are ill or hurt we fly
To Argy land where Argy hands
Repair our broken bodies or we’d die (Berkoff, 1994, p. 12)

Henry tries to show himself as a king who has been forced to make war against France. He achieves this by means of allowing the message from the French king to be delivered “freely” and thus showing himself as gracious (Hall, 1997):

We are no tyrant, but a Christian king;
Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
As are our wretches fetter’d in our prisons: (I. ii. p. 448)

Then he learns about the present of tennis balls from the French king. Realizing the mock under such a present, Henry states that it is a cause of a war:

And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his
Hath turn’d his balls to gun-stones;
...
Tell you the Dauphin, I am coming on,
To venge me as I may, and to put forth
My rightful hand in a well-hallow’d cause. (I. ii. p. 448)

However, Maggot is shown to have a big desire for war. For example, when Pimp tells her that the Argentine government wants to make peace terms, Maggot gets nervous and says:

They bloody what? Why peace terms no?
After they shit on our front door (Berkoff, 1994, p. 158)

It seems that she has not become happy with this news as she longs for a war in which she will make “a Spanish omelette”:

I’ll make a Spanish omelette!
At first I’ll crack some Argy eggs
Throw in some tasty British herbs
Well flavoured with strong English earth (Berkoff, 1994, p. 162)

She needs a war to “establish once again our might and strength, Shake our old mane, out fly the moths” as she states herself in the play. As Margaret Thatcher declared, “We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. We have

instead a new-found confidence, born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8.000 miles away” (Young, 1989, p. 281). This was a message generally to the rest of the world and more specifically to the leftists. In her great desire to prove this, Maggot Scratcher does not miss the chance to sink the Belgrano although it stays out the Zone and even returning back. Affected by the speech of Tell who tells her to be hard as steel befitting her name “Iron Lady”, Maggot says:

Then sink the bloody sod, that’s why I say
We’ll change the engagement rules ... OK (Berkoff, 1994, p. 181)

and then gives the order:

Then give the order... Let it be swift.
Anyway those bastards started it
Let them now take the consequence... (Berkoff, 1994, p. 182)

However, Margaret Thatcher herself did not admit that the Argentine battleship was sailing back home when she was questioned on TV a year later during the 1983 election campaign. Mrs. Diana Gould asked the reason to sink the Belgrano while it was in fact drawing away from the Falklands, the answer of Thatcher was that “But it was not sailing away from the Falklands” (Young, 1989, p. 286). As Peacock (1999) observes, the decision to sink the battleship was heroic for her. In such a decision, she demonstrated her characteristics of decisiveness and fortitude that Young (1989) talks about in his work. If we refer to the play once again, we come across Berkoff’s explicit criticism in one of the speeches of the Chorus:

Around the world, in every pub,
In every dining room and lounge
The voice of England can be heard
Discussing the Falklands with angry sounds
As if the family jewels had been thieved.
Outraged. The telly on, the pot of tea
Refueling parched throats for verbal war
You’d never believe until last week
They didn’t know Falklands from Leigh-on-Sea. (Berkoff, 1994, p. 169)

Berkoff here criticizes the English public supporting Thatcher on this war and presenting jingoism to a place that they have not known about anything hitherto. The jingoistic attitudes of the ordinary public are because of the fact that there exists petrol in Falklands Islands. There is irony in the words “family jewels” pointing out the fact that the Falkland Islands and the petrol there do not already belong to England.

Contrary to this portrayal, Shakespeare presents Henry V as an ideal hero and achieves to create a mood of exultation throughout the play (Campbell, 1970). For example, Henry V does not hesitate to execute his former friend, Scroop when he betrays the king. This shows that Henry V attaches more importance to the safety of the country than his relationships (Hall, 1997). When Scroop begs forgiveness, King Henry says:

Touching our person, seek we no revenge;
But we our kingdom’s safety must so tender,
Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws
We do deliver you. Get you, therefore, hence,
Poor miserable wretches, to your death: (II. ii. p. 451)

King Henry once more proves himself when he learns that one of his old friends, Bardolph was killed in the battle field. He was already sentenced to death by King Henry because of stealing a “pax” from a French church. This is also evidence to the fact that King Henry gives importance to show respect towards the conquered country and that “the expedient military leader can not afford to be sentimental” (Hall, 1997, p. 88) as in the case of Scroop:

We would have all such offenders so cut off. – and we give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom the gentler gamester is the soonest winner (III. v. p. 458)

However, celebrating Elizabeth I reaches its fullest expression in the speech Henry delivers before the battle of Agincourt. This speech becomes “the ultimate proof of Henry’s strength as a leader” (Hall, 1997, p. 90). Stating that they will fight for honour, justice and glory, Henry manages to encourage and inspire his soldiers and make them feel that to fight shoulder to shoulder with the King is a sign of brotherhood:

If we are mark’d to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men the greater share of honour.
God’s will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold;
Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;
Such outward things dwell not in my desires:
But if it be a sin to covet honour,
I am the most offending soul alive.

....

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that shed his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition: (IV. iii. p. 464)

This famous St. Crispin's Day Speech immediately reminds one of Queen Elizabeth I's address to her troops at Tilbury on 19 August 1588, when they were at the preparation to meet with the Spanish army:

My loving people, we have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our selves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear. I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good-will of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust. ... I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. ... but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people (Hibbert, 1992, p. 221).

Both of these speeches present King Henry and Elizabeth I as rulers devoted to their country, individuals who would give their right arm for the sake of their kingdom and their people. Thus, celebrating Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare conveys the message of the importance of obedience to the throne and tries to convince the Elizabethan audience that a skillful and powerful leader's concerns lie only with the well-being and stability of the kingdom and its people. And just as King Henry, Elizabeth I has been a great king and a hero; she had "the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too" (Hibbert, 1992, p. 221) as the queen herself states at her Tilbury speech.

As can be deduced, there are a number of parallels between Queen Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher. Even both have a nickname. Elizabeth I was called the "Virgin Queen" as she chose to remain single throughout her life, namely her reign. Margaret Thatcher is known as "Iron Lady" because of her tough-talking. Even tough the women share many similarities in their character and political history, one is celebrated by the theater of Shakespeare and the other receives harsh criticism from contemporary leading playwrights. While in the former theatre becomes a propaganda machine for the governments to strengthen their power and maintain order in the society, in the latter it turns out to be a means for the playwrights to attack the governments and their foreign policies. All these make it clear that theatre has served as a means of reflecting the characteristics of the time and some important personalities.

References

- Berkoff, S. (1994). *The Collected Plays*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Blewitt, T. (2008). Introduction. In T. Blewitt, A. Hyde-Price & W. Rees (Eds.), *British Foreign Policy and Anglican Church: Christian Engagement with the Contemporary World* (pp. 3-8). Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Campbell, L. S. (1970). *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*. London: Methuen.
- Carter, E. H. & Mears, R. A. F. (1960). *A History of Britain*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Cross, R. (2004). *Steven Berkoff and the Theatre of Self-Performance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Evans, E. J. (2004). *Thatcher and Thatcherism*. NY: Routledge.
- Hall, J. L. (1997). *Henry V: A Guide to the Play*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Hibbert, C. (1992). *The Virgin Queen: The Personal History of Elizabeth I*. London: Penguin.
- Peacock, D. K. (1999). *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Reitan, E. A. (2003). *The Thatcher Revolution: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979-2001*. USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Shakespeare, W. (1987). *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, (Ed.). London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group.

Thomas, J. R. (1998). *Behind the Mask: The Life of Queen Elizabeth I*. NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Young, H. (1989). *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Macmillan.