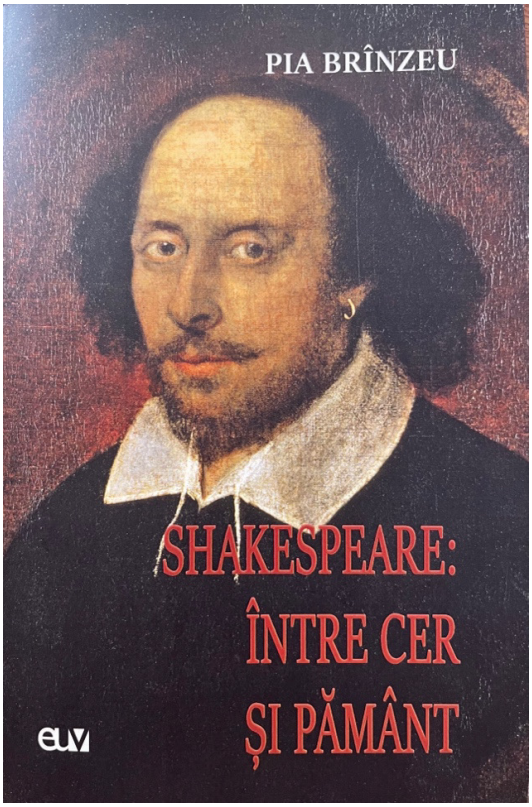
STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXX, 2, 2025, p. 290 - 292
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

Pia Brînzeu, *Shakespeare: între cer şi pământ*, Timişoara: Editura Universităţii de Vest, 2024, 456 p.



The idea of Shakespeare as a demiurge is not new. Critics such as Harold Bloom famously argued that Shakespeare "invented the human," and Thomas De Quincey considered the Bard to be much more than an artist and compared Shakespeare's works to natural phenomena that exist beyond human capabilities (*On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*). The idea infiltrated even Romanian poetry. Marin Sorescu opened one of his poems with the line: "Shakespeare created the world in seven days."

Building on such interpretations, Pia Brînzeu offers an in-depth analysis that both supports and expands previous theories. What sets her study apart is the way she approaches the Shakespearean cosmos from a surprising angle: she examines Shakespeare as a demiurge who, like a primordial creator, relies on all four classical elements – earth, water, air, and fire – to construct his fictional worlds. By doing so, Brînzeu provides a fresh perspective on how Shakespeare shapes not only his plots, but the very fabric of his dramatic universe.

In the Preface, Brînzeu places her approach within a broader historical and philosophical context. She traces the idea of analysing the world through the four primordial elements back to Empedocles, the ancient philosopher who first articulated

this cosmological framework, and the medieval and early modern infatuation with his philosophy of nature. This perspective, she argues, offers a new lens for examining Shakespeare's works – both at microscopic and macroscopic level.

The first chapter examines Earth as a passive and feminine element, fundamental to existence, and central to both creation and stability. Brînzeu explores various natural elements, including mountains, trees, caves, sand, stones, and gems, which symbolize either a "world that is heavy and asleep" (25) or one imbued with its own intrinsic energy. The chapter investigates all the references to Earth as dust, clay, and powder. Hamlet, for instance, famously perceives the world and humanity as "the quintessence of dust" (Hamlet, II.2). Brînzeu studies the planet's gravitational pull, which compels characters to kneel – a solemn act that signifies humility, remorse, submission, prayer, or the pursuit of forgiveness. Next, the focus shifts to Earth as land, highlighting Shakespeare's attention to geographical accuracy. As Brînzeu notes, "the locations mentioned by him in his plays belong to correct maps" (66), with only two notable exceptions: *The Winter's Tale*, where Bohemia is placed by the sea, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which suggests a water route between Verona and Milan. Interestingly, Shakespeare's geographical descriptions come alive in depictions of parks, alleys, streets, castles, and inns, yet remain minimalistic or even absent in battlefields and dungeons, where fateful events unfold. As Brînzeu notes, "it is evident that for Shakespeare, life on stage is not truly lived if its geographical variety does not also include imagined territories" (68).

The second chapter focuses on Water. While also passive and feminine, it is the source of life, embodying adaptability, emotion, and renewal. For Shakespeare, the seas and the oceans are a symbol of infinity and of the life-death duality. Shakespeare's seas transform characters – they stand for survival, dominance and enthusiasm. The sea represents one of the most comprehensive symbols in Shakespeare's works: man is compared to a drop of water, kings are likened to the ocean and the sea, and life itself is seen as a long sea journey (especially in *Pericles*). Because he grew up next to the Avon, Shakespeare's fascination for rivers is substantial, much more so compared to other Elizabethan playwrights. The action *flowing* is also of significance to the Elizabethan playwright, as he lends this quality to a multitude of other things – love, thought, spirit, speech, truth, pride, joy, to name a few. A different, but equally important type of water is the water of the eye – tears. Tears of joy, of sorrow, tears flowing like a river – Shakespeare is generous with them. "The chemistry of the water inside the character's bodies is surprising" (220) – if they are the result of true sorrow, of pure nature and feeling they are as clear as dew, holy tears, precious jewels. If they are "wet tears", they are sincere tears, but if they are "muddy", they stem from falseness.

Fire, an active and masculine element, is a burning force that can either purify and sanctify or bring destruction and chaos. The origins of fire can be traced to a fundamental duality – demonic and divine, it purifies but also scorches. Fire is used by common folk – to illuminate their homes, to get warm, to boil water and brew magic potions. At the same time, fire burns both in heaven and in hell; it is simulataneously man's enemy and friend. Love is an important source of fire. It is also the flame that burns most strongly in Shakespeare's works – the playwright even compares it with the sun (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.2). Love's fire ranges in complexity: it is innocent in *Pericles*, a

blind passion in *Romeo and Juliet*, it stands for the body's pleasure in *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* or it is entirely false in *Timon of Athens.* Brînzeu, talks about the most important source of fire in the Shakespearean universe: the Sun. Even though the characters are always under the sun, nothing happens without it. It brings the world out of darkness (Juliet must part from Romeo during the day), and is praised by Belarius and Guiderius in *Cymbeline*: "Hail to thee, Sun!" and "Hail Sun" (III.3).

The last chapter focuses on Air – an active and masculine element. It is the primordial force that sets the world in motion, representing breath, spirit, and transformation. It also stands for spirituality, the unseen life, and serves as the perfect medium for light, flight, colours, and perfume. Air means sky. In English, Brînzeu points out, there is a clear distinction between *sky* (appearing 60 times in Shakespeare's works) and *heaven* (more than 500 occurrences). The characters make this distinction evident: Hamlet exclaims "Heaven and Earth!" (I.2), Iago refers to the all-knowing powers of the Venetian skies (III.3), and Pericles acknowledges this when wishing his daughter happiness, despite her birth amid a tempest (III.1). The sky both blesses and curses, showing pity for the weak while remaining ruthless with the powerful.

Wind emerges as another elementary force in the Shakespearean cosmos. By kissing everything in its path (*Othello*, IV.2), the wind is unpredictable and inconstant, behaving like a prostitute (*The Merchant of Venice*, II.6). Tempests are common in Shakespeare's works, functioning as background information or comedic devices that separate characters and enable their reunions (*The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, Pericles, The Tempest*). Human lives depend on these storms – both literally (when travelling at sea) and metaphorically (when tested by Providence). In tragedies, tempests are devastating, because they mirror the characters' inner turmoil – *King Lear* instantly comes to mind.

To conclude, the book represents a valuable resource for students and researchers of Shakespeare. It offers an impressive in-depth analysis of the four primordial elements – earth, water, fire, and air – in all their representations and forms, and in all of Shakespeare's plays.

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