

Shakespeare's *Theatrum Mundi* and its Hungarian perspective

Agnes Matuska

University of Szeged, Hungary

The present day fame of the idea that the world is a stage comes undoubtedly from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and specifically Jacques' monologue on the seven ages of men.<sup>1</sup> The lines are recited by a figure described as melancholy in the list of characters, who in the famous *locus* seems to be mostly concerned with the fact that humans are entrapped by an inescapable theatrical situation through their lives. Jacques' monologue does not contain the explicit opposite of mere ephemeral playing, but Sir Walter Raleigh's poem expanding precisely the same play metaphor does.<sup>2</sup> According to Raleigh, we are players throughout our worldly lives; the tiring house is our mother's womb, and the graves will hide us when the play is done. The stage of life on earth, however, in Raleigh's understanding, is enclosed by a larger, cosmic reality, where God oversees the comedy of our lives. Jacques' monologue lacks this cosmic or divine perspective. Still, his speech has been interpreted both as a refutation of anti-theatricalist charges against theatre, as well as the celebration of the unique power of theater and its play.<sup>3</sup> This contradiction can be resolved by taking into account the consequences of the unique moment in history, when the interpretation of the image was diversified not only by its heterogenous roots, but also by the unique and revolutionary role theatre started to play with the appearance of popular theatres in Elizabethan England.

In this present paper I would like to highlight, as a first step, the diverse traditions of the metaphor and the way these inform critical interpretations of Shakespearean drama and theatre. The next step will be the presentation of a Hungarian perspective of the same. Which are the understandings of the image that surface in the Hungarian reception of Shakespeare, and which are the interpretations of Shakespearean drama and theatre that they result in? I cannot promise to give a complete, overall picture of the Hungarian scene, rather, I will highlight some examples that are revelative of the curious ways that interpretations juggle the sometimes contradictory traditions of a readily available metaphor with a seemingly obvious explanatory potential.

Jacques' passage, as well as Raleigh's example, are variants of the *vanitas* understanding of the topos which was the dominant understanding in Elizabethan times.<sup>4</sup> Stage versions of the same, however, complicate its meaning for obvious reasons. Theatre may claim or carve out a

---

<sup>1</sup> Tibor Fabiny, "Theatrum Mundi and the Ages of Man," in *Shakespeare and the Emblem*. ed. Tibor Fabiny (Szeged: Department of English, Attila József University, 1984)

<sup>2</sup> *English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray*. Vol. XL. The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001. [www.bartleby.com/40/](http://www.bartleby.com/40/).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *As You Like It*. The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London: Thomson Learning), 227n.

<sup>4</sup> Lynda Christian, *Theatrum Mundi: The History of and Idea* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), 22.

reality for itself, as it is done, for example, in Shakespearean prologues and epilogues that try to negotiate their own ontological status as theatrical play with their audience. The mere paradox of the theatrical self-reference, with which theatre stigmatizes itself as vanity but celebrates its unique power at the same time aligns well with the logic of naming a theatre “the Globe”, or allegedly choosing for its motto “Totus mundus agit histrionem”.<sup>5</sup>

Presenting an alternative to the tradition of the *theatrum mundi* as *vanitas*, Elizabethan theatre in several ways models itself not based on the earthly stage, but rather the cosmic one. Apart from the fact that the stage includes the entrance to Hell through its trapdoor, and features “Heavens” with its balcony, two important traditions have been explored that provide explanations for the continuity between the cosmic image of the *theatrum mundi* and the Elizabethan stage. The world is not *merely* a stage, and therefore separate from the entirety of the divine universe, just the opposite: the chance for us to join in the entirety of the cosmic scheme is precisely *through* theatre. Yates traces back the classical heritage for the structure and design of the Elizabethan theatre to a Roman source.<sup>6</sup> Stevens, on the other hand, stresses the medieval roots of playing, and the fact that the heritage of Elizabethan drama included mystery cycles as well, together with their strongly ritualistic function.<sup>7</sup> When comparing the representational logic of medieval mystery plays with Renaissance drama, it is frequently stressed by critics that the charge of the illusion of playing so familiar from puritan opponents of the theatre does not apply to earlier plays precisely because in ritualistic playing the events presented stand for the eternal truth and eternal reality, as opposed to the everyday of the audience.<sup>8</sup> It is possible to see the function of playing in this earlier, medieval context as a tool that elevates the everyday to the level of the divine, imbues it with the eternity of Biblical time and divine presence. Ritualistic playing turns the playspace – whether the marketplace or the whole medieval city – into the cosmic stage, allowing both its players and audience to participate in its cosmic reality. In Stevens’ understanding, thus, the playspace becomes a *theatrum mundi* due to the power of ritualistic playing. This tradition, in his opinion, also informs passages with references to the play metaphor in Shakespearean and other contemporary drama. It should be pointed out, however, that Stevens and Yates use the term not as a rhetorical figure, but rather as a *concept*, an idea for the cosmic design of the theatre, which later influenced specific uses of the metaphor, including the Shakespearean examples. Focusing on the verbatim trope *per se*, Lynda Christian stresses that there is actually a huge hiatus in the use of the metaphor between its last appearance in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by Salisbury and its reappearance in the writings of the Neoplatonists in the 15<sup>th</sup>, where its dominant

---

<sup>5</sup> Tiffany Stern, “Was *Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem* ever the motto of the Globe Theatre?” *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1997), 122-127; Richard Dutton, “*Hamlet, An Apology for Actors*, and the Sign of the Globe,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1989), 35-43.

<sup>6</sup> Frances Yates, *The Theatre of the World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 109.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Stevens, “From Mappa Mundi to *Theatrum Mundi*: The World as Stage in Early English Drama” in *From page to performance : essays in early English drama*, ed. John A. Alford (East Lansing : Michigan State University Press, 1995), 25-49.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ann Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), Briggs op.cit; Jean Cristophe Agnew, *The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986); Attila Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge. Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Szeged: JATE Press, 1995).

meaning included the parallel between macrocosm-microcosm, In Pico della Mirandola's understanding man (especially the creative artist) and God are both creators, as well as audiences contemplating the world as stage. Christian offers the most plausible reason for this hiatus: in the Middle Ages there were no theatrical institutions or buildings to which the metaphor describing the world as stage could have been connected.<sup>9</sup> Thus, from a perspective different from what Stevens or Yates propose, no *theatrum mundi* could exist during the Middle Ages. This latter argument is expanded by Anne Richter: the world can be equated with the stage, and thus make the play metaphor possible only *after* the moment the actors and the audience are separated, and play ceases to have a ritualistic function.<sup>10</sup> This viewpoint clearly excludes the cosmic interpretation of the *theatrum mundi*, and rather than anchoring the power of playing in a metaphysical resemblance between macrocosm and theatre, it celebrates the overall and practical social applicability of the latter.

Combinations of these backgrounds appear within the Hungarian critical scene in connection with the *theatrum mundi* as a Shakespearean device. The story, however, begins with a curiously steady nonobservance specifically of the best known Shakespearean example of the topos, namely Jacques' relevant speech of the world as stage, described in detail by Péter Dávidházi.<sup>11</sup> The first Hungarian version of Jacques' notable passage appeared in translation in 1860 among the poems Károly Bulcsú, a pastor and schoolteacher with literary affinities. His collection of poems was read and reviewed in 1861 by János Arany, at that time yet to be an ultimately canonical translator of Shakespeare into Hungarian. Although the translation of the dramatic passage indeed could seem like an original and free-standing poem, in its title, *Ages of men [Életkorok]* it included its own clue, specifying that it was "after Shakspere" (sic). The reviewer was misled by neighboring texts, and took the one in question as a poem inspired by the Shakespearean original, rather than the Hungarian rendering of the Shakespearean text. Although being a conscientious philologist himself, Arany has not checked the source, as he admits it in his review. Even more curiously, neither subsequent monographs, nor the critical edition of Arany's work published in the 1960s offer an explanation to this seemingly self-explanatory puzzle; though the editor of the latter tries to solve the crux, he picks up the wrong clue and looks for the original among Shakespeare's poems. Scholars dealing with Bulcsú and his critical reception were not familiar with Shakespeare's oeuvre, nor did they approach peers familiar with English literature. As Dávidházi points out, the reason can be found in the painful isolation of Hungarian English studies within the domestic circles of literary academia of the time – a situation arguably unchanged since then. The issue also reflects on the dilemma of any academic dealing with a corpus written in a foreign language and wandering about the proper audience of their research.

---

<sup>9</sup> Christian, *Theatrum Mundi: The History of and Idea*, 69.

<sup>10</sup> Richter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Péter Dávidházi, "'Shakspere után'. Egy rejtélyes műfordítás nyomában," *Filológiai Közöny* 3-4 (2005), 197-206.

Before moving on to reflect on specifically literary interpretations of the *topos* in Hungarian Shakespeare criticism, I would like to consider a remarkably modern theatrical example from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sándor Hevesi, playwright, translator and director of the national theatre (producing eight cycles of Shakespeare's plays during his career) staged *Hamlet* in 1911, following a concept that aligns perfectly with the idea that the Shakespearean stage is a cosmic one. An essay he wrote in 1917 reveals his cosmic vision of the theatre.<sup>12</sup> He considers the Shakespearean stage as the stage of infinite possibilities due to its lack of elaborate props and scenery, allowing for the poet to populate this microcosm with what he creates through the *word*. "The word is all," says Hevesi, a surely brilliant person of the theatre, to describe the creation of the Shakespearean world on stage. The image of the artist-playwright as creator of worlds through the word reflects the Neo-Platonic tradition of the *theatrum mundi*, but in order to describe the microcosmic idea, Hevesi draws on the tripartite division of the Elizabethan stage, encompassing heaven, hell and earth, and calls it medieval heritage. He does not seem to be concerned about the fact that the *idea* may be medieval only, not its theatrical realization. Hevesi's production of *Hamlet* proved inspiring for contemporary critics as well, resulting in interpretations picking up the idea of the *topos*, more specifically the version that celebrates play on a theatrical stage as parallel to playing on the cosmic stage. Dezső Kosztolányi, a seminal writer, poet and translator of the time praises Hevesi's simple *mise-en-scene* of *Hamlet* in 1911, noting that it looks like one simple, three-storey structure inserted on the real stage, a theatre within a theatre, the effect of which is that the audience is aware of the artifice throughout the drama, but the illusion of the play is maintained.<sup>13</sup> The art historian Arnold Hauser, also in 1911, praises several productions of Hevesi, especially his focus on emphasized comic action [Hauser's key word and theatrical ideal is movement and action], since in his mind "the whole thing should be comedy, nothing else," as this seems to be the device to help the audience reflect on (and thus distance themselves from) their own role-play, their acted pathos as theatre audience.<sup>14</sup> Hauser and Kosztolányi, inspired partly by Hevesi's staging, both seem to put their finger on what we could call metatheatrical self-reflection, or even *Verfremdung* in Brecht's terms, turning the whole world into a stage by making the audience acknowledge their own questionable roles and playing in a social setup.

Regarding text-oriented interpretations after Hevesi's theatrical one, I would like to highlight, as a first step, instances where critics use the *theatrum mundi* idea rather as an inspiration or a cursory remark than an explicit basis of an elaborated analysis. Finally, I will present two examples, both of which are fully fledged explorations of the *topos*, attentive to its heterogeneous potential of its interpretation.

It may seem curious that Dezső Mészöly, poet, dramaturg and translator of several Shakespearean and other Elizabethan dramas, finds what he calls Shakespeare's "dream

---

<sup>12</sup> Sándor Hevesi, "Az igazi Shakespeare," in *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör* (Budapest:Gondolat, 1984), 312-316.

<sup>13</sup> Dezső Kosztolányi, "Hamlet shakespeare-i színpadon" in *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984),345-346.

<sup>14</sup>Arnold Hauser, "A Nemzeti Színház Shakespeare-ciklusa: Shakespeare és a modern színpadi művészet problémája," in *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör* (Budapest:Gondolat, 1984),335-339.

world”<sup>15</sup> alive up to the present because in his opinion it subsists upon the reality of Elizabethan times. Paradoxically, this sense of reality remains a key issue in Mészöly’s appraisal of *The Tempest*: he considers Prospero’s island a “Theatrum Mundi”, “The Stage of the World, not only the world of the stage.”<sup>16</sup> Although he refers to the topos as medieval, his understanding does not include the idea of the macrocosmic resonances of the stage of ritualistic playing representing the entirety of biblical times or of the pilgrimage of the allegorical human being. In Prospero’s island he sees “the Shakespearean drama of human society: a senseless and merciless fight for power [...where] human ignobility is revealed in several ways throughout the plot”.<sup>17</sup> Mészöly’s *theatrum mundi* in Shakespeare, thus, is about revealing false illusions and vile ambitions for power, the vain roles of sinful humans. He sees the end of the play, with the conflation of Shakespeare-Prospero who gives up play, as a resigned exit from both stage and life. Jacques’s melancholy ruminations, the Christian/Stoic *vanitas*-understanding of life as a futile race for mundane success, as well as the idea of the microcosmic stage all find their way into Mészöly’s take on the *theatrum mundi*. Zoltán Szilassy, a university professor of English and Shakespeare critic relies, in turn, on Mészöly’s article in a study exploring traditions for iconographic interpretations of *The Tempest*.<sup>18</sup> The last section of this text is entitled “The tempest and the state after the tempest in the ‘Theatrum Mundi’”. He stresses that public stages in Shakespeare’s time modeled themselves after the presumed structure of the macro- and microcosm, and supports this idea with Prospero as master of ceremony, directing not only the plays within, but creating the world of the drama. Interestingly, however, due to his interest in symbolic and iconographic *tableaus*, he ends his essay with the following idea: despite the fact that *The Tempest* displays a highly complex theatrical play, it is still chasing time, and remains a representation, thus freezes moments into images. This conclusion (which follows the above quotation from Mészöly) is curious since no matter how diverse the understandings of the *theatrum mundi* can be, all versions involve a crucial sense of performance, and merge playing on the theatrical (sometimes ritualistic) stage with the social stage (which may be corrupt in the lay versions) or with the cosmic (and thus divine and eternal) stage. In other words, connotations generally evoked by the topos involve dynamic action, Szilassy’s view is unique in considering the *theatrum mundi* a static image and combining it with an element from Mészöly’s interpretation, echoing Raleigh’s melancholy. Prospero’s, Shakespeare’s and our play ends with death as an exit from the stage which is confined to the earthly one, and despite the reference to the *theatrum mundi*, seems ultimately uninfluenced by the cosmic potentials of playing.

A contrary interpretation stressing is provided by István Géher, professor and poet, and a prominent Hungarian Shakespeare critic of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a seminal book analysing all 37 plays that it attributes to Shakespeare.<sup>19</sup> The analysis in question is of As

---

<sup>15</sup> Dezső Mészöly, *Shakespeare új tükörben* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1972), 86.

<sup>16</sup> Mészöly’s interpretation relies heavily on Jan Kott’s analysis of the play, with both ideas and pages long paraphrases of Kott’s text. Jan Kott, “Prospero’s Staff,” in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1964), 244-261.

<sup>17</sup> Translations of Hungarian passages are mine.

<sup>18</sup> Zoltán Szilassy, “Adalékok A *vihar* ikonografikus értelmezésének lehetőségeihez,” in *A reneszánsz szimbolizmus*, ed. Tibor Fabiny et al. (Szeged: JATEPress, 1998), 91-102.

<sup>19</sup> István Géher, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó, 1991)

*You Like It*. Géher gives special importance to Rosaline's logic of multiple playing, and connects it both with the first line of Jacques's monologue, as well as with the supposed "*Totus mundus...*" motto of the Globe. Dodging the *vanitas*-aspects of Jacques's speech on the seven ages, his reading of the play suggests that the world is a theatre in the sense that the play-aspects of reality and the real-aspects of playing intermingle; reality is made questionable and relative through the power of play, which is, in turn, capable of shaping it. Ann Righter in her quoted monograph formulates a similar idea when she claims that the play metaphors (in her definition the comparison of the world with the stage), among others, "used within the 'reality' of the play itself, [...] remind the audience that elements of illusion are present in ordinary life".<sup>20</sup> However, while Righter thinks this idea as incompatible with medieval drama, Géher includes the discussion of the medieval *Theatrum Mundi* in the introductory chapter of his book on Shakespeare's theatre as an important influence,<sup>21</sup> although he does not make an explicit connection between this reference to the topos and his interpretation of the *theatrum mundi* in *As You Like It*.

My last example takes us back to what Dávidházi referred to as the unfortunate isolation of English studies in Hungary. The essay in question, written by Tibor Fabiny is a fully elaborated, and highly inspiring essay providing an overview of the understandings of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor in its relation to Shakespeare,<sup>22</sup> as well as the emblematic traditions shaping its reception. The study, however, is the odd one out in the series of my examples, since it is written by a Hungarian scholar not in Hungarian but in English. The essay is completed with an analysis of *Richard III*, in which Fabiny provides us with a detailed account of the diverse aspects of Richard's play. Aware of both the mundane and the cosmic versions of the *theatrum mundi* ranging from the pagan, through the Christian and the renaissance understandings, for some reason, however, Fabiny combines the metaphor (which he analyses as an emblem) with another one, "the wheel of time". This combination, ultimately, frames his rich interpretation of Richard's play, and thus evades what I consider the ultimate crux of the *theatrum mundi* on Shakespeare's stage: what Richard does as director and player of his own play is not simply a creation of an illusory and thus false world (as Fabiny seems to believe), but also a way to celebrate the metaphor not unlike the way Shakespeare's Globe celebrates it with its name and supposed motto. Once the function of playing is addressed on the stage of the Elizabethan theatre, it cannot be illusion confined to an institution allowing fictitious play, but will appear rather as a model of a larger scheme, be it social, cosmic or divine. So perhaps not surprisingly, in a less precise but more widespread sense, the uses of the topos display the combination of all these – at least in the Hungarian reception of the Shakespearean contexts of the metaphor.

*Research for this paper was aided by a Bolyai János Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.*

---

<sup>20</sup> Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Géher, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> A similar overview is done by Dávidházi in the study quoted above – also in relation to Jacques' monologue, which is the missing link in the plot he depicts. Dávidházi, "Shakspere után'. Egy rejtélyes műfordítás nyomában", 204.

## Bibliography

- Agnew, Jean Cristophe. *The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Christian, Lynda. *Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987.
- Dávidházi, Péter. "'Shakspere után'. Egy rejtélyes műfordítás nyomában," *Filológiai Közöny* 3-4 (2005): 197-206.
- Dutton, Richard. "Hamlet, An Apology for Actors, and the Sign of the Globe," *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1989): 35-43.
- English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray*. Vol. XL. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14. Bartleby.com, 2001. [www.bartleby.com/40/](http://www.bartleby.com/40/).
- Fabiny, Tibor. "Theatrum Mundi and the Ages of Man," in *Shakespeare and the Emblem*, edited by Tibor Fabiny, 273-336. Szeged: Department of English, Attila József University, 1984.
- Géher, István. *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv*. Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó, 1991.
- Hauser, Arnold "A Nemzeti Színház Shakespeare-ciklusa: Shakespeare és a modern színpadi művészet problémája," In *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör*, edited by Sándor Maller and Kálmán Ruttkay, 335-339. Budapest: Gondolat, 1984.
- Hevesi, Sándor. "Az igazi Shakespeare," in *Magyar Shakespeare-tükör*, edited by Sándor Maller and Kálmán Ruttkay, 312-316. Budapest: Gondolat, 1984.
- Kiss, Attila. *The Semiotics of Revenge. Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy*. Szeged: JATE Press, 1995.
- Kosztolányi, Dezső. "Hamlet shakespeare-i színpadon." In *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör*, edited by Sándor Maller and Kálmán Ruttkay, 345-346. Budapest: Gondolat, 1984.
- Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. London: Methuen, 1964.
- Mészöly, Dezső. *Shakespeare új tükörben*. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1972.
- Righter, Ann. *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967.
- Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. The Arden Shakespeare, edited by Juliet Dusinberre. London: Thomson Learning.
- Stern, Tiffany. "Was *Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem* ever the motto of the Globe Theatre?" *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1997): 122-127.
- Stevens, Martin. "From Mappa Mundi to Theatrum Mundi: The World as Stage in Early English Drama" in *From page to performance: essays in early English drama*, edited by John A. Alford, 25-49. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995.
- Szilassy, Zoltán "Adalékok A vihar ikonografikus értelmezésének lehetőségeihez." In *A reneszánsz szimbolizmus*, edited by Tibor Fabiny et al., 91-102. Szeged: JATEPress, 1998.
- Yates, Frances. *The Theatre of the World*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.