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Worlds of Possibility:
Shakespearean
Seascapes

E I K O N
București, 2025

Contents

General Introduction: Worlds of Possibility or Possible Worlds?.....	9
Chapter 1: Metaphor, Transformation, and Early Modern Seascapes.....	27
1.1. Metaphoric Seascapes	29
1.2. Ecocritical Practice	39
1.3. Geocritical Transformations	52
Chapter 2: Ancient and Early Modern Epics of the Sea.....	59
2.1. Jonah Metamorphosed: Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> (1615).....	66
2.2. Mermaids: <i>The Worldes Hydrographical Description</i> (1595) by John Davis.....	102
2.3. True Reports of Whales.....	120
Chapter 3: Castaways and the Sea.....	137
3.1. The Storm-Tossed Ship: <i>The Winter's Tale</i>	146
3.2. Fortune and the Sea: <i>Pericles</i> and <i>The Tempest</i>	164
3.3. Double Shipwreck: <i>Twelfth Night</i>	207
Chapter 4: Dramatic Bodies and the Fluidity of the Sea:	
Shakespeare's Sea Creatures	227
4.1. Cleopatra as Mermaid in <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	230
4.2. Classifying Caliban and Other Sea-Creatures in <i>The Tempest</i>	245
4.3. Sea-Creatures and Aquatic Bodies	263
Conclusions.....	279
Works Cited.....	287

GENERAL INTRODUCTION: WORLDS OF POSSIBILITY OR POSSIBLE WORLDS?

Seascapes are extensive views of an expanse of sea, and these representations can be found in visual arts, such as painting (marine art), cinema, theatre, as well as in literary fiction, mainly novels, but also in the theatre. The issue with these marine metaphors represented in Shakespeare's theatre is that seascapes can rarely be shown on stage as such, so they become metaphoric spaces that speak for one symbolic environment or another. For example, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola is shipwrecked on the coast of Illyria, so the bare stage of the early modern theatre represents a seascape, through Viola's and the Captain's narratives; in *The Comedy of Errors*, even if the two sets of twins are separated at birth and shipwrecked on different coasts of the Mediterranean (East, in Ephesus and West, in Syracuse), the seascape of the twins being lost at sea during the storm is narrated by the father, Aegeon, so the fictional narrative of the family's separation at sea is recreated in the audience's imagination. Similar stories of shipwrecks are in Shakespeare's and Wilkins' *Pericles*, one of them during Marina's birth, when the audience experience the distress of the people caught in a ship tossed by storm, while the father's mind is tormented by ambivalent feelings. Finally, *The Tempest* begins with a ship tossed by a violent storm, and generations of directors and scenographers have faced the recurrent challenge of representing such a complex seascape on stage.

In terms of critical keys of analysis, this book examines geocritically and ecocritically Shakespeare's seascapes as represented in a corpus of twelve Shakespearean plays (*The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Comedy of Errors*, as well as *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Cymbeline* and *King Lear*). Additionally, the analysis focuses on early modern translations of classical texts, such as Homer's *Odyssey* (1615), as well as pamphlets and reports about mermaids and whales, exemplified in *The Worlde's Hydrographical Description* (1595) by John Davis, the anonymous *A True Report and Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-Monster or Whale* (1617) and *A most strange and true report of a monstrous Fish, who appeared in the forme of a Woman, from her waist upwards* (1604), as well as a report of an English expedition to Virginia by George Waymouth, entitled *A true relation of the most prosperous voyage* (1605). These texts provide some of the contemporary literary and informational background about the sea against which Shakespeare's plays are constructed. I argue that Shakespeare represents seascapes, tides, shipwrecks, and sea creatures (fish, whale, mermaids, nymphs, Neptune, sea monsters) as metaphors constructing multiple—often contradictory—spaces of risk and possibility. While human characters experience existential perils across the dangerous and unpredictable seas—often ending in shipwrecks—the metaphorical sea creatures represented in Shakespeare's plays are associated with human emotions, and often with individual faults (allurement, greed, envy, ingratitude, inconstancy, deceit). Seascapes, therefore, are natural environments against which these human traits are challenged, tested, exposed, and transformed. For this reason, theatrical representations of seascapes open new possibilities for exploration of the self.

On Shakespeare's page and stage, oceans and seas appear as threatening and protective, liberating and confining, barren and luxuriant, depending on the play in which they are represented.

Merchant vessels set sail to return with precious cargo, or to sink; royal children, when cast adrift, either perish, or are saved and return to their kingdoms; terrible sea-storms divide families for the rest of their lives, or until a miraculous reunion occurs. The seascape furnishes a genuine metaphor for tempestuous grief, bottomless love, utter confusion, exceptional greed, unbelievable deceit, and many other psychological states, as well as other imaginary spaces of emotion summoned for the audiences. As plot element and metaphorical vehicle of space, Shakespeare's literary seascapes open multiple possibilities to the audience and offer them opportunities to understand the sensations and spaces represented on stage.

Organized around three key oppositional themes—classical and early modern images of the sea and its creatures, the dangers of seafaring (represented by shipwrecks and castaways), masculinity and femininity in relation to the sea and the sea-creatures—this book does not merely attempt to explain how one term of each oppositional metaphor governs its counterpart. Rather, my book argues that seascapes in Shakespeare's plays are always both at the same time, in point of representations of spatial metaphors of the sea; seas and oceans in Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies and romances are both safe and dangerous, free and constrained, masculine and feminine, rich and barren, developing and reductive, creative and seductive. Representations of seascapes in Shakespeare's plays are expressive and eloquent metaphors, not despite but because of their essential mutuality, combination, and contradiction.

Where does Shakespeare fit within the literary discussion of seascapes and aquatic creatures? How can ecocriticism and geocriticism use Shakespeare's plays to develop an analysis of seascapes in the early modern period? To answer these questions, I consider how Shakespeare's characters and plots reflect the frequency of sea travel during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Many characters in Shakespeare's plays

engage with the ocean or the Mediterranean Sea: Aegeon in *The Comedy of Errors*, Marina in *Pericles*, Caliban in *The Tempest*, and several Antonios (in *Twelfth Night*, in *The Merchant of Venice*, or in *The Tempest*). There are also sea captains, merchants, boatswains, sailors, and even pirates. Most of these sea-salty characters appear in Shakespeare's late romances (*The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*), which are influenced by the rising frequency of publication of travelogues in the seventeenth-century. Moreover, the romances highlight the adversities of fortune, because the sea has been used as a symbol of providential design ever since Homer's *Odyssey*.

Shakespeare's seascapes emerge as spaces of risk and self-determination, as well as spaces of possibility, while the sea creatures are often dangerous and strange, but suited to the humans' needs and their psychological states at different times during the development of theatrical action. Because of the fundamental risk involved in leaving the shore and taking to the vast sea, individual choice and its limits come to the foreground, and the sea offers metaphors for inner experience under extreme circumstances, as well as the ways of dealing with the uncontrollable elements of nature. Often, Shakespeare's literary sea serves as a metaphor for an interior representation of selfhood. When early modern English writers evoke risk, self-determination, and even individual freedom in maritime images and language, they mark those concepts as part of an elemental world governed by the seas and oceans; these notions are inherent and foundational to the physical world, to the individual and humanity. Shakespeare's romances portray the sea as a seemingly endless mass that separates family, inspires action, heals psychological trauma, and ultimately transforms body and soul. Thus, Shakespeare's seascapes reveal worlds of infinite possibilities.

I take my cue regarding the worlds of infinite possibilities opened by Shakespeare's plays from the study by Simon Palfrey,

entitled *Shakespeare's Possible Worlds* (2014). In the chapter entitled "Shakespeare the impossible" (33-42), Palfrey writes about Shakespeare's theatre as a form characterized by the following elements: "the instinct to split and double all phenomena, such that everything is shadowed by alternatives it cannot escape" (33); "a feeling of the potentiality of life, and for the release of or into emotions, in *all* things, animate and inanimate, including instruments of his craft, objects used in it, and abstractions" (33); and "a knowledge that every surface hides dimensions, and can be tended like a wound, or magnified into multiplicity, and that this spatial variety speaks equally of temporal extension, backward and forward in history, such that all phenomena contain their sources, their struggles, and their possible futures" (33). Nothing could serve more cogently to my argument than Palfrey's concise and coherent rendition of the meanings of spaces created by Shakespeare's theatre, through their suggestion of infinite worlds of possibilities.

Even more so, in the chapter entitled "Popular theatre and possibility" (43-55), Palfrey documents the situation of early modern theatre, where Shakespeare and his contemporary evolved, suggesting that this world was a stage which opened new possibilities for the audiences. As Palfrey observes, "Theatre preyed upon people's gullibility and hedonism, their willingness to abandon themselves to fancy, sentimentality, vindictiveness, vicarious greed: a baleful alliance of mob emotion and private fetish" (43). Indeed, human emotions raised among the members of the audience when viewing a play (by Shakespeare or by any of his contemporaries) surge like the waves of a sea, rippling and generating other spaces in their imagination, which generate the creation of various worlds of possibility.

The theatre provokes the liberation of varied emotions in the audience, such as compassion, fear, uncertainty, or hope. In a blue humanities approach to environment and texts, entitled "Is Compassion an Oceanic Feeling?" (2020), Steve Mentz

concludes: “The ocean operates simultaneously as physical object and poetic symbol, and one task of blue environmental criticism will be to trace the shifting tides that these forces generate in relation to each other (Mentz “Is Compassion” 127). As Mentz further observes, “literary culture’s oceanic obsessions can guide us toward richer, bluer and more unsettling ways of thinking about ourselves and our environments in the future” (Mentz “Is Compassion” 127). Mentz refers to the representations of the oceanic feeling of compassion in two novels (Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*), but the blue environmental approach to literature can be applied to Shakespeare’s theatre as well. Indeed, the emotion of compassion, together with other contradictory feelings, are raised in the minds of the audience when interpreting the spaces of possibility created by Shakespeare’s seascapes. Certain members of the audience interpret these emotions as human weaknesses—engendered by the theatre’s contact with humanistic culture—while others are radically changed and transformed by the contact with and immersion in these feelings. Whatever the case, the ample possibilities opened by theatrical art are prompted and enhanced by spatial metaphors revealing oceanic emotions.

A useful concept for my discussion of seascapes is “tropological space” (1013), used by Suparna Roychoudhury, in the article entitled “Mental Tempests, Seas of Troubles: The Perturbations of Shakespeare’s *Pericles*” (2015). As Roychoudhury observes, “Taken together, the ‘sea of troubles’ and ‘tempest of the mind,’ both proverbial in early modern writings, make up a dynamic tropological space, one that supports multiple views of subjectivity—of the felt quality of suffering, in particular. The interplay of the two tropes makes the sea an especially plastic figure for exploring the phenomenology of selfhood” (1013-1014). The term “tropological space” originates in Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; 2004, 126), who also refers to it as rhetorical space (Foucault 174). As

Roychoudhury further observes, “Against a marine backdrop that keeps the originating scene of the sea metaphors firmly in our sight, Shakespeare stages the fluidity with which feeling human subjects alternately own and disown their perturbations” (1014). Roychoudhury refers to the imaginary tropological space in *Pericles* as a space of subjectivity, which intersects with the character’s shaping of identity via the sea metaphor. Indeed, in the sea of rhetorical references, tropological spaces embodied by seascapes occupy an important role in Shakespeare’s theatre (not only in *Pericles*, but, by extension, in all the plays discussed in this book) because they represent metaphoric spaces of resistance in most of the plays.

Another article discussing the concept of “tropological space” theoretically—without reference to Shakespeare—is the one entitled “Tropological Space: The Imaginary Space of Figuration” (2010), by Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska. Drawing on philosophy and logic, Chrzanowska-Kluczevska defines “tropological space as subspace of textual / discourse space” (28) and exemplifies with the literary use of “micro-, macro-, and mega (meta)-tropes” (29), or extended metaphors, or master-tropes (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 30), represented by various rhetorical figures—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, antithesis, inversion, chiasmus, catachresis, paronomasia, euphemism, suppression, exaggeration, anomaly, allegory, simile (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 31). From this theoretical study on the philosophy of rhetoric, I infer that Shakespeare’s seascapes are dramatic representations of tropological space, which make ample use of these rhetorical figures; they can be generally designated through the term “metaphor,” but include all the subsumed tropes. Shakespeare’s seascapes are extended metaphors, or “mega-tropes” (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska 29), which suggest subspaces of discourse that materialize the sea and ocean space as metaphors suggesting various emotions to the audiences, through the use of rhetorical tropes.

A theoretical differentiation between mathematical and perceived space in literature is the one achieved by Albert Cook in "Space and Culture" (1998). Cook discusses the cultural apprehension of space reflected in the spatial indications built into language. Indications of space in speech vary from one cultural group to another. Cook distinguishes between mathematical space and perceived space as he observes: "Space is perceived from the body outward, and in that perception the physical and the mental are fused" (551). As different from mathematical or geometric space, in perceived space "there is a central point, that of the human figure in space, with all the flow of qualitative discriminations that phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edward Casey have delineated, a space that is delimited, without any large opening to infinity, even given its horizons" (Cook 551). From the philosophical perspective given by the body in space, Cook moves to the vast spaces of the sea, while analysing various cultural representations of spaces (the city, the house, the street, Tibetan mandalas, Maya representations of space in diagrams, Homer's image of Achilles' shield). Cook discusses spatial metaphors evoking the Mediterranean Sea in Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or the space of the North Sea in Anglo-Saxon poems, and then moves to representations of the sea in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. Finally, as Cook concludes, "The nature of our science of space is a cultural construct that impinges on our assimilations of space" (570). This book, therefore, discusses such assimilations of space through seascapes in cultural constructs represented by Shakespeare's theatre, which are influenced by the body of texts circulating in his time.

Overview of Book

The first chapter, entitled "Metaphor, Transformation, and Early Modern Seascapes" (1), establishes the methodological

framework and the general argument of this book. Apart from presenting the critical literature, and the theme of the sea as a crucial concept in the blue humanities studies, the chapter explains how close-text analysis is informed by ecocritical and geocritical theories in order to reveal metaphoric representations of seascapes in Shakespeare's drama. The first subchapter of chapter 1, entitled "Metaphoric Seascapes" (1.1), defines the concept of seascape and shows the various uses of the metaphor of the sea in critical literature. The second subchapter of chapter 1, entitled "Ecocritical Practice" (1.2), defines the basic tenets of ecocriticism and explains the importance of looking at literary texts through the lens of nature and the environment, especially from the perspective of the blue humanities, which debates the meanings of oceans and seas in ecocritical practice. Finally, the third subchapter of chapter 1, entitled "Geocritical Transformations" (1.3), presents the distinctions between space and place in geocriticism and spatial literary studies, and the interactions of space and place in Shakespeare's drama. What this book brings new in point of methodological approach is a combination between these two critical methodologies (ecocriticism and geocriticism), as I argue that Shakespeare's representations of seascapes, shipwrecks, and sea creatures (fish, whale, mermaids, nymphs, Neptune, sea monsters) are dramatized as blue/ecocritical metaphors which reconstruct multiple and contradictory spaces of risk and possibility.

Since early modern literary representations of the sea are influenced by ancient sea metaphors, the second chapter, entitled "Ancient and Early Modern Epics of the Sea" (2) explains the ways in which this dynamic is manifested through early modern translations of ancient literature (Homer's *Odyssey*) and how it is further reflected in sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century pamphlets and travelogues about the sea and its creatures. In the subchapter entitled "Jonah Metamorphosed: Homer's *Odyssey* (1615)" (2.1), I argue that the sea is interpreted as both a friend and

an enemy in ancient texts, but George Chapman's 1615 translation of the *Odyssey* particularly associates the sea with the explorer's mentality, as Ulysses and his son Telemachus defeat perils in their search for new lands. While the biblical story of Jonah being swallowed by the waves suggests human resilience against the adversities of fortune, Ulysses is transformed into the hero who succeeds in defeating nature through rational dominance. This is especially revealed in the dedicatory epistle to Chapman's translation of the *Odyssey*, where the translator identifies Ulysses as the first explorer of humanity and extrapolates the idea of human success over nature as a remarkable feat in ancient and early modern times.

The second subchapter of chapter 2, entitled "Mermaids: *The Worldes Hydrographical Description* (1595) by John Davis" (2.2), examines the record of three Elizabethan voyages by John Davis, aimed at finding the Northwest Passage to China, in order to show that sea creatures and the vast icy expanse of the northern sea are viewed as tameable and accessible by early modern explorers who dare to venture to these remote places. Nature, represented by the riches of the seas, coasts, ebbs and flows of the tides, depths, and marine creatures, appears, throughout these voyages, and it is shown as opening new possibilities for navigators. Even if the three voyages by John Davis ended in apparent defeat (as the explorers did not discover the northwest passage through Canada to China, but just the islands and bays of Greenland), the narrative is transfigured by the idea of hope and the pragmatic thought that, through constant endeavour, human resilience can defeat the powerful forces of nature, represented by extreme cold, icy shores, and deprivation of food resources. The vast sea, therefore, can be defeated by resistance to the opposing forces of nature.

The third subchapter of chapter 2, entitled "True Reports of Whales" (2.3), examines an anonymous published pamphlet entitled *A True Report and Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-Monster or Whale*

(1617), as well as the maritime evidence of spotting live whales on the coast of Virginia, in the Maine region, as documented in *A true relation of the most prosperous voyage made this present yeere 1605, by Captaine George Waymouth* (1605), written by James Rosier. In these early modern narratives about the sea and its creatures, the vastness of the seascapes is impressive, yet explorers attempt to tame its depths and defeat its dangerous creatures. The living sea creatures inhabiting these newly discovered worlds are useful for food (such as codfish, salmon, caplin, haddock sea birds); if huge and dangerous, however (such as the beached whale), these sea creatures are passive, unable to harm people, because they are dead. The live whales sighted by the English explorers off the coast of Greenland or Virginia, on the other hand, are signs of the riches of the sea rather than fearful monsters of the deep. In this way, early modern accounts of voyages overseas are success stories of exploration, meant to encourage further voyagers to attempt defeating the vicissitudes of the sea.

Seascapes in Shakespeare's plays are sites of danger and challenge, anxiety and hope, but also revealing worlds of unforeseen possibilities. The third chapter of my book, entitled "Castaways and the Sea" (3), examines theatrical figures of castaways, such as Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*; Prospero and Miranda as castaways on their island in *The Tempest*; Marina's birth at sea in *Pericles* and Thaisa's being cast away in a casket at sea; as well as Viola and Sebastian's shipwreck on the coast of Illyria in *Twelfth Night*. These dramatic castaways suffer a sea-change throughout the play's action, as they demonstrate strength and resilience, which emerge from vulnerability and loss. Even if the female social castaways are alien to the sea-shores they reach (such as Viola in Illyria, Thaisa in Ephesus, Marina in the brothel in Mytilene, Perdita on the sea-shore of Bohemia, or Miranda on the desert island), they overcome the perils and learn who they are through this life-threatening incident. Male castaways (such as Pericles, Leontes, Antigonus, Sebastian, Caliban, the Neapolitan

party, and also Prospero) are equally resilient, but their defeat of the natural obstructions of the sea (as represented by fate) is rather like a romantic tale told several times over, which suggests meta-theatricality.

The first subchapter of chapter 3, entitled “The Storm-Tossed Ship: *The Winter’s Tale* (3.1), examines social and psychological castaways in Shakespeare’s romance in order to demonstrate that the characters are both castaways, survivors of shipwrecks on the seas of life, and skilled navigators on these seas, when they are guided by reason in conquering their passions. Leontes is a castaway lost in the seas of his own emotions in Sicilia, but he manages to find some equilibrium only when he subdues his passions of jealousy and suspicion. Polixenes is the king of Bohemia, but he is a castaway on his anachronistic sea-shore as long as he is dominated by feelings of mistrust and social inadequacy, because he cannot accept his son’s marriage with a shepherdess. Antigonus dies tragically on the sea-coast of Bohemia (eaten by a bear) but his dramatic fate has the role of pushing the action forward. Cleomenes and Dion travel across the seas to the island of Delphos, so they are catalysts of the plot. Hermione only seems a social castaway, subsequently believed dead, but she regains her royal status through an amazing coup-de-theatre. Perdita only seems a social castaway and a literally shipwrecked baby, cast away on the barren but non-existent sea coast of Bohemia, but eventually she regains her status as a princess by defeating the separating powers of the sea. All characters in *The Winter’s Tale* are metaphorical / theatrical castaways because the play’s spatial coordinates are illusional. The seas in this play are both imaginary geographically (as in the fictional seacoast of Bohemia) and metaphoric seas of emotion, which reveal the characters’ identity.

The second subchapter of chapter 3, entitled “Fortune and the Sea: *Pericles* and *The Tempest*” (3.2), examines the storms and shipwrecks in the two romances as symbols of fortune, and the

ways in which sea metaphors are powerful forces dominating the dramatic spaces of these plays. Shakespeare’s and Wilkins’ *Pericles* features two sea storms and one shipwreck, while *The Tempest* is dominated by the metaphor of the magical shipwreck, which sets the theatrical action. As in the classical stories about the sea, such as the *Odyssey*, the metaphorical sea storms dramatize changes brought about by destiny. However, this sea-change is a meta-theatrical one because the transformations brought about by the sea are not real, but illusionary, summoned by the power of language in the theatre. In *Pericles*, sea storms are described through the intercession of Gower (the Chorus of the action), while in *The Tempest* the shipwreck is the result of Prospero’s manipulative action and lies at the basis of the play’s meta-theatricality. In both plays, however, metaphorical shipwrecks are pathways to self-knowledge, so the condition of castaway is both real and metaphorical.

The third subchapter of chapter three, entitled “Double Shipwreck: *Twelfth Night*” (3.3), examines the double and symmetrical shipwreck in Shakespeare’s romantic comedy in order to show that the shipwreck is seen as both a tragic and traumatic experience (which separates twin brother and sister and presages family disaster) and a formative experience for all characters interacting with these identical twins. The sea represents an agent of destiny, embodied by the figures of the two sea captains who save Viola and Sebastian, and whose role is to further the mistaken-identity plot. Viola is a social castaway on the unknown shore of Illyria, so she is forced to assume an androgynous false identity as page Cesario, which exposes her to false social interactions. Sebastian is also a social castaway in the world of Illyria, forced to hide his identity, and so is the sea captain (Antonio), who saves him. Even Orsino and Olivia are castaways in the seas of their own emotions; Orsino thinks he is romantically involved with Olivia, and his love is as deep as the sea, which he thinks to assuage with the sounds of pleasant