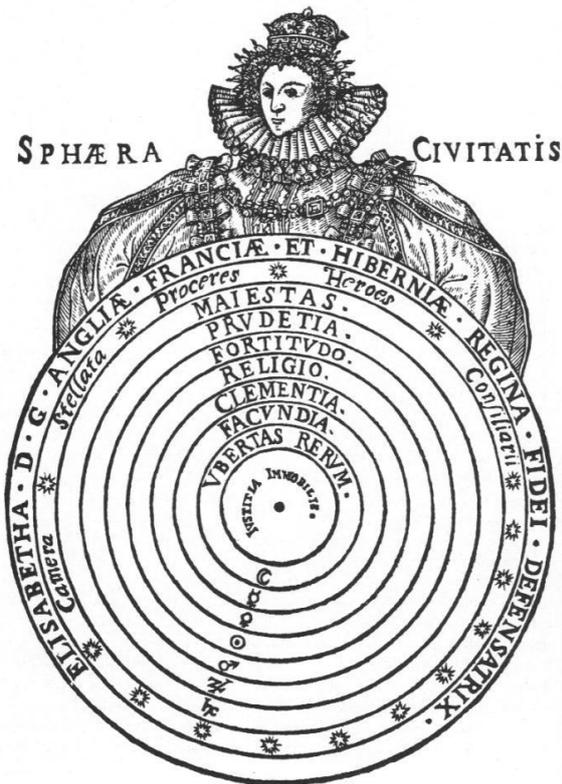


Shakespeare & the Elizabethan World View

The Elizabethan World View

John Case's Frontispiece of "Sphaera Civitates", illustrating the queen's position



- seven planets represent the queen's virtues:
 - moon = prosperity
 - Mercury = eloquence
 - Venus = mercy
 - sun = piety
 - Mars = strength (of mind)
 - Jove = prudence
 - Saturn = majesty
- sphere which overhangs all of them is called "Prime Mover"
- queen is the Prime Mover, sweeps along with herself the strivings of her people
- conditions of sphere and commonwealth harmonize → differ from one another, but depend on each other
- clear hierarchy, everything is ranked → if you disregard the hierarchy (by disobeying laws or not adopting to your position), you disturb the balance of the universe
- => people were very careful with their clothes etc., natural catastrophes were viewed as disturbances in the system

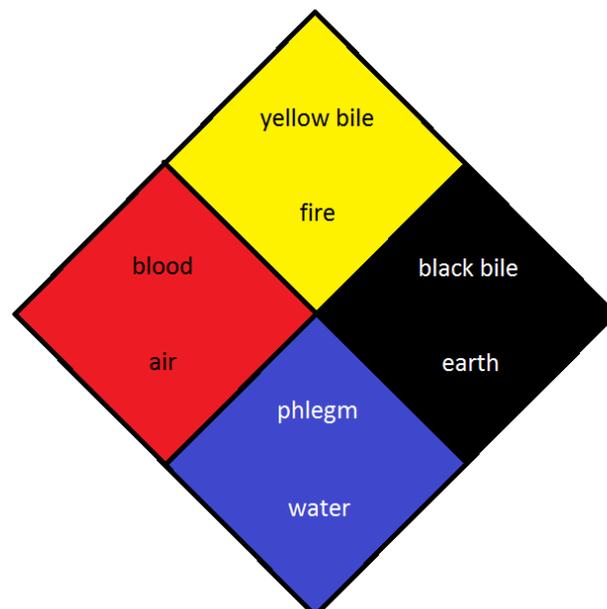
The Elizabethan World Picture

- clear view of the functioning of God's creation and of man's position within this creation
- firm belief in a well-structured system of order and hierarchy
- regions where Nature's order was constantly disturbed/threatened were owned by chaos
- occasional disturbances were inevitable, e.g. by cosmic disorder created by adverse constellations of the stars
- consequences: war among elements (e.g. thunderstorms) or animals defying nature (turning around the food chain)
- Nature ruled over three levels of Creation:
 - Moving and Fixed Stars in the Aethereum
 - sphere below the moon (earth with its objects, plants and animals)
 - man's social and political world

- law of Nature bound everything God had created into a hierarchy, a “Chain of Beings”
 - can be imagined as a great ladder with many rungs
 - lifeless things (stones, metals, etc.) at the bottom, then plants and trees, after them animals, then man and above man, angels
 - God on the highest ladder, watching over his creation (situated in Heaven outside the universe he had created)
- “correspondences” among man and universe
 - the position of a king was compared to an eagle among birds and a lion among animals
- change and development were seen very negatively; people were conservative and wanted harmony
- nature’s rule distinguishes the king from the pauper, the ox from the cat, the eagle from the falcon, etc. → varying degrees within
- civil law very important: man to obey civil law in order to establish order, based on the law of nature which is by God → if man obeys the civil law, he creates harmony within the political body
- women considered weak and unable of conflict-solving, were dependent on the men in their life (father, brothers, husband, sons) and were supposed to be obedient to men

Four Humours

- humourism/humoralism = theory of the makeup and workings of the human body (nowadays discredited)
- adopted by Greek and Roman physicians and philosophers
- thesis: an excess or deficiency of any of the four distinct body fluids in a person directly influences their temperament and health
- when a patient suffered from a surplus or an imbalance of one fluid, their personality and physical health would be affected
- yellow bile (fire), black bile (earth), phlegm (water), blood (air) (phlegmatic / melancholic / sanguine / choleric)



The Elizabethan Stage

- Mystery Plays (10th century)
 - representations of biblical scenes (such as the birth and death of Jesus Christ [at the corresponding time of the year])
 - lives of saints were portrayed
 - organized by clergy
 - purpose: more effective way of spreading the word of God
- Miracle Plays (12th century)
 - short plays, first in Latin, later in English
 - required a larger scenery, “mansions”/“houses” were built
 - placed outside the church, since the organisation passed on from the clergy to the guild
 - new method: “pageant” (theatre on wheels)
- Morality Plays (15th/16th century)
 - intended to teach audience a moral by showing the struggle of virtue against vice
 - personifications of Death, Goodness, Knowledge or Sin appeared on stage
 - stages often temporarily
 - stages to be found in the yards of large inns
 - interference of authorities
- development
 - Mystery Plays inside churches
 - Miracle Plays with larger scenery, wooden boxes; first inside, later outside churches
 - pageant
 - Morality Plays: wooden platform, supported by beams and barrels, erected between two pageants
- some people (especially authorities like mayors and clergymen) opposed to theatre because of its effect on society
 - youth is corrupted and their manners infected by the reality presented on the stage
 - apprentices and servants are withdrawn from their work
 - people are withdrawn from sermons and other Christian exercises
 - theatre mingles people that are usually separated and sorted out (e.g. rich and poor) → against law of nature
 - people take theatre and characters as a role model
 - theatre gives opportunity for conspiracies which otherwise could be prevented
 - => presents a danger to the balance of correspondences and therefore a danger to nature and man
 - (moral degradation: boys performing as women; might trigger homosexual thoughts)

William Shakespeare & the Elizabethan World View

William Shakespeare

- born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, died April 1616 at the same place
- English poet and playwright
- works comprise about 38 plays and 154 sonnets
- married Anne Hathaway in 1582 (age 18)
- three children: Susanna, Hamnet (died at the age of 11) and Judith
- 1585 – 1592 “lost years”, little/nothing known about these years

Theatrical life in London during the time of Shakespeare

- London’s first playhouse (theatre), the “Red Lion”, built in 1567
- by the time Shakespeare arrived in London (presumably late 1580s), theatres arose all over London
 - mostly in the areas outside the city walls, where the laws and regulations were invalid → on the same step as brothels, prisons, graveyards, and lunatic asylums
- animal baiting in playhouses as popular as theatre → an audience could be as touched by a play as it could be entertained by the display of animal deaths => an age of “panem et circensis”
- Queen did not allow to have any kind of public amusement limited and thus, bowling alleys, theatrical productions and gaming houses (although illegal) experienced a boom
- plays were still restricted
 - the Master of the Revel checked if the plays were performed in a respectful and orderly manner → if not, imprisonment and punishments were not uncommon (e.g. to lop off their ears and/or noses)
- plays took place in the afternoon and were often very long (four hours or longer)
- admissions: groundlings (those who stood in the open around the stage): 1 penny - a seat: 2 pence - a seat with a cushion: 3 pence → a day’s wage was about 12 pence or less
- no (official) toilets in theatres
- little scenery that could hint time, place and circumstances of the scene → had to be set with a few verbal strokes
- women were played by young boys
- costumes did not always apply correctly to the time the play was set in (e.g. Tudor costumes in a play set in ancient Rome)
- animal blood and organs used to depict human ones in murder/battle scenes
- acting styles developed from being very bombastic to naturalism → as plays became longer and more complex, actors were required to act more naturally
- since competition ran high, it was necessary to change the plays constantly to keep customers coming → each company performed five to six different plays a week
- frequently outbreaks of diseases (e.g. the plague)

The Elizabethan World View in Shakespeare's plays

- Shakespeare's plays are known to differ from the Elizabethan World View
 - his creation of strong female characters (e.g. Beatrice in "Much Ado About Nothing" and Katherine in "Taming of the Shrew")
 - his portraying characters in a way unfitting to their social position in the natural hierarchy (e.g. Dogberry in "Much Ado About Nothing", who as a policeman, is supposed to embody the civil law (see "*Elizabethan World Picture*" for importance of civil law) but is the caricature of a self-satisfied yet unqualified constable whose foolishness is emphasized by his constant use of malapropisms)
- still, the deeply enrooted ideas of the Elizabethan World View can also be found in Shakespeare's plays: most of the time, his strong female characters are tamed by love (= a man) in the end and the conflicts are usually solved by men instead of women

Sources

- Bill Bryson: *Shakespeare. The World as a Stage*, HarperPress, Great Britain, 2007
- teaching materials from the Q2.1