

I

Introduction

'Nature's fragile vessel'

(*Tim.*v.i.199)

I

By the middle of *Timon of Athens*, the hero, a man of enormous wealth and popularity, suddenly finds himself bankrupt and friendless. In despair, he abandons the city and takes to the wilderness, where he 'walks, like contempt, alone' (iv.ii.15), grubbing for roots to sustain his wretched life.

There are many references to Fortune in this play, and one can easily detect in it echoes of the medieval idea of tragedy as a steep fall from the heights of prosperity, a lesson on the terrible insecurity of mundane existence.¹ Dramatically arresting and poignant though it is, however, the material change which afflicts Timon is of far less significance than the transformation which takes place in his character and in his whole conception of humanity. Timon has been the bountiful and convivial friend of all men, one who 'outgoes / The very heart of kindness' (i.i.276–7). But now, playing bitterly on the word 'kind', he declares, 'I am Misanthropos, and hate mankind' (iv.iii.54). Leaving the city, he utters a litany of curses against its inhabitants which simply sums up his feeling that human nature is already accursed and can only get worse. Two sentences in this long speech merit special attention, for they are echoed repeatedly in the diction and imagery of the play and can be taken as signals to its controlling ideas. One occurs near the middle: 'Decline to your confounding contraries / And let confusion live'; the other comes near the end: 'Timon will to the woods, where he shall find / The unkindest beast more kinder than mankind' (iv.i.20–1, 35–6). The word 'confound' means to mingle things so that they become indistinguishable, lose form and identity; thus it also means to destroy, and so has become a virtual synonym for 'curse'. Of course 'confounding' or 'confusing' also has a psychological sense; it is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakespeare's tragic cosmos*

not explicitly invoked here, but dramatically it is very relevant. It signifies bewilderment, aporia, or what Shakespeare and his fellow tragedians characteristically referred to as 'amazement' (with an implicit emphasis on the root sense of the word): a state of mind which registers that sign and referent, name and identity, appearance and essence, have become wholly disjoined. What amazes Timon to the point of madness, turning him into the embodiment of hatred, and infecting his speech with paradox and oxymoron, is the discovery that mankind is not kind, not loving: or perhaps worse, men are monsters whose nature or kind is to be both loving and pitiless, humane and bestial: 'Courteous destroyers, affable wolves' (III.vi.95).

Timon of Athens is a late and notably imperfect Shakespearian tragedy (and perhaps not entirely Shakespearian at that); but it does expose with singular clarity certain ideas and patterns which are fundamental to all Shakespeare's tragedies, from *Titus Andronicus* to *Coriolanus*. Tragedy, Eric Bentley has remarked, offers us 'the experience of chaos'.² Most critics would agree that this is particularly true of Shakespeare's tragedies.³ In these plays, the bond which unites the hero with others, and forms the basis of his self-conception and his world view, is violently shattered. He is the victim or agent of some profound personal betrayal. But, above all, he betrays himself, that is, the noble self with which he is identified in his own and others' eyes; indeed his change is so extreme that he seems at times to have become his own antithesis.⁴ The phenomenon of psychic and interpersonal chaos is magnified by the hero's intense emotional distress and reflected in society at large, which is torn by civil strife if not civil war; it is also reflected in external nature, where terrible storms and other more 'unnatural' disorders prevail. And implicit in the whole play, but focussed particularly in the agonised consciousness of the protagonist, is an insistent questioning about the nature of men and women and the world we inhabit: in short, about the nature of nature or 'kind'. This questioning often points beyond nature, but when there is a suggestion that mundane happenings are subject to supernatural ordinance, it remains perfectly clear that supernatural power (the gods, divine providence, Fate) operates in complete consistency with the dynamics of nature. In effect, we are always returned to nature as to the heart of the problem.

The intensity with which Shakespeare imagined 'Chaos . . . come again' (*Oth.*, III.iii.93) is inseparable from his profound awareness of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

cosmos, an awareness shared by his audience. Indirectly, his plays reflect also a keen interest in the socio-political problems of his own time, so that an interpretative method which approaches them by way of Elizabethan–Jacobean politics is entirely justified. But these are also plays which habitually locate socio-political as well as psychological issues in the universal context defined by cosmology, and to ignore that wider context is not only to diminish both the complexity and the grandeur of the plays but also to neglect something that appealed specifically to contemporary audiences. The Renaissance, as S.K. Heninger has recently reminded us in two fine studies, was an age in which cosmography flourished.⁵ It was also an age of microcosmography, when the nature of humankind was studied as never before – but almost always in the context of cosmos, and on the assumption that the microcosm and the macrocosm are constructed from the same basic substances, operate on identical principles, and are closely interconnected. Thus Renaissance culture abounded in brilliant emblems of the universe where man is always given a central place, and brilliant emblems of man which emphasise his physical and psychological subjection to cosmic influences. Even the introverted Montaigne did not so much reject the cosmic setting in his meticulous analysis of his own nature as substitute a Heraclitean cosmos (where all is conflict and change) for the traditional Empedoclean cosmos (wherein discord and concord, change and permanence, are reconciled).⁶

It should perhaps be recalled that from 1599 – when the Globe was opened – Shakespeare's audience was literally surrounded by cosmic emblems. On the so-called 'heavens' or extended canopy above the stage were depicted the sun and moon and other planets, whose unceasing influence was held to be responsible for all change in the sublunary world. And apart from this 'brave o'er-hanging firmament' (to which, no doubt, the actors pointed or looked at appropriate moments), there was the name and shape of the theatre itself. The Globe audience would have been encouraged by that name to see in the rectangular projecting stage surrounded by a circular wall the familiar images of the circularised square (an emblem of the cosmic tetrad) and of the squared circle (an emblem of the timeless and the infinite 'rendered finite and timely . . . by transformation into the square of the elemental tetrad').⁷ The tetrad was a schema devised to explain the fourfold system of nature, the structure of contrary elements whose balanced interchange constitutes a perfect unity, reconciling change and permanence, mo-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakespeare's tragic cosmos*

tion and stability – what Milton refers to when he speaks of the ‘Elements . . . that in quaternion run / Perpetual circle’ (*Paradise Lost*, v.180–2). Recent investigations into the architecture of the Globe have adduced further evidence of an underlying cosmic conception: an *ad quadratum* method of construction (which partners the square and the circle), orientation as a summer playhouse towards the summer sunrise, and a consequent correspondence with the structure of the universe and the movements of the heavenly bodies.⁸

Julius Caesar was probably written to grace the opening of the Globe in 1599, and if my own analysis of that play is correct, its complex symbolic design is elaborately attuned to the cosmic conception of the new playhouse, for it incorporates not only the elements, the stars, and the rising and setting sun, but also the circle, the tetrad, and a basic number symbolism derived from cosmological tradition (chapter 4). Antony’s concluding declaration that in Brutus ‘the elements/[were] So mix’d . . . that Nature might stand up / And say to all the world “This was a man!”’ (v.v.73–5) is utterly in keeping with the imaginative method of this play; but it may also be taken as exemplary of the tragedies as a whole. Shakespeare endows his principal characters with cosmic imagination. He makes them speak to and of the elements, the stars, the sun, the moon, and ‘all the world’. This trait not only invests their situation with magnitude and intensity, it also illuminates it. It is part of an endeavour to connect the tragic fate of the individual with the structure and dynamics of universal nature.

As I have been implying, Shakespeare’s understanding of nature was fundamentally traditional. Although the new science had already begun to change the whole picture of the universe and of humankind’s relation to it, there are no signs of this revolution in his work. On the contrary, he made full use of the established synthesis of cosmological ideas derived from Aristotle, Plato, and the Presocratic thinkers Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Empedocles, a system which had been reinforced over the centuries by Ptolemaic astronomy and Galenic medicine. Fundamental to this system was the correspondence of the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the fourfold structure of binary opposites inherent in all things – the elements (earth, water, air, and fire), the qualities (heat and cold, moisture and dryness), and, in man alone, the humours (choler, melancholy, blood, and phlegm). With its governing ideas of polarity, balance, and correspondence, opposition and interdependence, this system brought under one conceptual umbrella physics,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

biology, physiology, psychology, chemistry (alchemy), ethics, and aesthetics.

In stressing Shakespeare's use of the traditional synthesis, I do not wish to suggest that his world view coincides with the Elizabethan world picture as described by James E. Phillips, Theodore Spencer, and (most notably) E.M.W. Tillyard.⁹ In this account, the cardinal principle of pre-modern cosmology as understood by the Elizabethans was that of hierarchy or degree; they saw the world as a stratified order where everything has its appointed place and identity. Thus Shakespeare always traces the cause of chaos to the disruption of hierarchy or violation of degree in the socio-political and the psychic spheres – to revolt against lawful authority, to the eclipse of reason and will by passion.¹⁰ Beginning with A.P. Rossiter, however, many critics argued that this view greatly simplifies the way in which Shakespeare presents the disintegration of the individual and society.¹¹ Such a reaction was perfectly justified; but it was not correct to infer, as so many have done, that pre-modern conceptions of natural order are, in consequence, of little relevance to the study of Shakespeare's tragedies and tragical histories. Ignored in this assumption is the fact that the Tillyardian account of the Elizabethan world picture was seriously incomplete; for pre-modern cosmology construed the world not only as a hierarchical structure of corresponding planes but also as a dynamic system of interacting, interdependent opposites. The two conceptions were commonly combined and treated as twin aspects of universal order – most obviously, in the notion of the world as a stratified arrangement of earth, water, air, and fire, each placed above the other in accordance with its degree of lightness or 'nobility'. The two conceptions are logically connected, since every scale of degree is constructed from opposites and constitutes in effect an attempt to mediate between them;¹² looked at from this point of view, the hierarchical conception of the world is essentially a refinement of the contrarious conception. Nevertheless, the two conceptions, although commonly conjoined, could easily be separated, or, when conjoined, priority of emphasis could be given to one of them; for the hierarchical arrangement of the elements was not thought to alter the fact that they *are* opposites with an entirely '*natural* desire to / Combat each with other'.¹³ Indeed everything in the sublunary world, including men and women, was thought to change, decay, and die precisely because it is constituted of opposing forces. Thus while it is true that Shakespeare's tragic universe is structured as a hier-

Shakespeare's tragic cosmos

archy of correspondent planes, the most striking manifestation of correspondence between the different planes is the violent conflict and confusion of opposites; this, rather than the disruption of hierarchy, is the outstanding feature of the world as seen in the tragedies.

In the contrarious conception of the world, however, conflict is not necessarily the primary force in nature. That was the view of Heraclitus, who argued that the stability of the world is maintained by Strife (War, Hatred): that is, by the continual friction and interchange of the elements.¹⁴ In this he was consciously opposing Pythagoras, who had taught that the blending or harmony of the opposites, both in the macrocosm and the microcosm, is the law of nature. Empedocles combined these two theories to produce the pluralist doctrine that nature is governed by both Love and Strife, sympathies and antipathies;¹⁵ and mainly from this doctrine came the notion of the world as a system of concordant discord or discordant concord.¹⁶ This is the world view defined by Ovid at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses*, by Chaucer at the start of Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde*, and by Spenser in his 'Hymn in Honour of Love'. In this view, the strife which forever agitates the opposites is kept in check by the harmonising force of love, which binds them together in a fruitful union while upholding the justice of separate roles and identities. The whole order of life – unity, peace, and continuity – is founded on this bond of opposites, just as disorder, chaos, and death are caused by its collapse under the pressure of strife. The cosmic doctrine of the two contraries, or reciprocal principles of nature, was world-wide in ancient mythologies (the Chinese myth of Ying and Yang is a well-known Oriental version).¹⁷ Obviously it is a projection on to the universe of the natural law of reproduction; for that reason, the sexual, marital, and familial relationship in the great writers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and especially in Shakespeare of the tragedies and tragical histories, is frequently central to an all-embracing cosmic vision.

It should be emphasised that the Empedoclean model of the world, as elaborated over the centuries, retained a strong Heraclitean component. Uncontrolled strife was held to be the ultimate negation of natural order, but limited strife was viewed positively as something necessary to the scheme of things, a force which contributes towards differentiation and balance. Thus in the following passage Louis le Roy narrowly escapes conceding that the strife of the opposites is just as important in the dynamics of nature as is their concord or 'tempering':

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

In like manner is the Earth, and every other thing in the world, tempered and conserved by things of dislike and contrary qualitie. It is not then without cause, that nature is so desirous of contraries, making of them, all decency, and beautie; not of things which are of like nature. This kind of tempering is the cause, that such things as before were divers and different, do accord and agree together, to establish, intertain, and embellish one another, the contrarietie becomming unitie, and the discord concord; the enmitie amitie; and contention covenant. Wherefore Heraclitus said, that discord, and concord, were the father and mother of all things. And Homer, that whosoever spake evill of contentions, did blame nature. Empedocles maintayned not of discord by itselfe, but that with concord, it was the beginning of all things; meaning by discord, the varietie of things that are assembled, and by concord, the union of them. But the union in this assemblie ought to exceede the contrarietie. Otherwise the thing should be dissolved, the principles dividing themselves. So we see in the Heavens contrarie movings to preserve the world: Venus placed in the midst neere unto Mars, to asswage his fiercenes, which of his own nature is corruptive.¹⁸

It is this view of universal nature which prompts so many Renaissance authors to refer to war – ‘the humour radical / Of Violence’ – as a necessary form of bloodletting for sick states, a surgical preserver of ‘This Equilibrium, wherein nature goes’.¹⁹ It also underlies Machiavelli’s remarkable claim – in defiance of every other writer on politics – that discord and contentious violence can actually strengthen a state (by generating laws to protect the liberties of its various groups) (*The Discourses*, I.iv).

What I am suggesting, then, is that pre-modern cosmological tradition offered in effect two world models, each of which could inspire or sanction quite different feelings about the human situation, different habits of thought. The idea of the universe as a hierarchical system of corresponding planes where everything has its appointed place and identity suggests a fundamental stability and rationality in things and induces a mood of metaphysical confidence in every attempt to interpret the facts of experience. But the notion of the universe as a tense system of interacting, interdependent opposites reminds us that every pattern of harmonious order, every structure of identity, is of its very nature susceptible to violent transformation: of a sudden (to recall Timon), bonds collapse, things decline to their confounding contraries, and confusion prevails. Moreover, since it presumes that both subject and object are duplex and changeful, the contrarious model militates against philosophical certainty, fostering modes of thought and expression which are dialectical rather than categorical, relativist and para-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Shakespeare's tragic cosmos*

doxical rather than absolute and univocal. Finally, since it is rooted in the assumption that the world was created from Chaos, and that the forces of chaos are intrinsic to its functioning, the contrarious model insistently implies that disorder, aggressive egoism, and blind passion are not just blemishes on nature caused by sin and the Fall, but are as natural as order, altruism, and reason. Thus the model stood in potentially subversive relationship to the philosophy of Natural Law which all the ideological orthodoxies of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance took for granted. It acknowledged as natural that side of human nature which Machiavelli and Hobbes were to treat as the whole.

It is not to be thought that universal contrariety is simply another name for mutability, the condition of relentless changefulness which in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance became the principal focus for complaint about human nature and about the sublunary world below the 'changeless heavens' to which we belong. The two are intimately connected indeed, but the relationship is one of cause and effect, mutability being due to the contrary motions of the stars and the influences which these motions have on the elements and the elements on each other. But mutability is only one of the darker aspects of human experience which could be traced to the contrarious model of nature; as a cosmological idea, it was potentially much less unsettling than its parent concept.

Both in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, exponents of the religio-political status quo inevitably made much of the hierarchical model of the universe; it was a convenient way of naturalising the structure of feudal society. Shakespeare undoubtedly made use of it too; in my view, however, he found – like Chaucer, Kyd, and Marlowe before him – that the radically paradoxical notion of nature as a system of concordant discord or 'harmonious contrariety', moved incessantly by the forces of love and strife, answered the facts of experience more truthfully.²⁰ This model satisfied in him the characteristically human need for a unitary frame of reference while at the same time accommodating his sense of the profound contradictions in human nature and the perceived world. In addition, it gave universal validity to human passions and feelings, the stuff of tragedy. Since conflict and dialectic are 'the essence of drama', and division and extremes the essence of tragedy, it was ideally suited to the structure of his medium. It served, too, as a focal point for many of the other great dualisms which were the common coinage of his culture and which he himself probed with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56605-6 - Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos

T. McAlindon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

uncommon penetration – passion and reason, barbarism and civility, the individual and the community, nature and nurture. (Such indeed was its usefulness as an explanatory model that it had long since been employed to account for the body/soul antithesis,²¹ and even the paradox of free will and pre-determination – so fundamental to the tragic vision – was explained in terms of it²²).

Many critics have argued that the contradictions inherent in Shakespeare's response to tragic experience mirror a fundamental conflict of ideas about the nature of humankind, society, and the physical world that dominated the intellectual life of his time; the polarised world views are variously characterised by scholars as old and new, religious and secular, optimistic and pessimistic, idealistic and realistic, Hookerian and Machiavellian (or Hobbesian).²³ This is a critical position which has won almost universal assent, the only source of disagreement being the question whether Shakespeare inclines to one view of nature or the other, or maintains a position of honest and fruitful scepticism about both. To challenge a position which commands assent on all sides of the critical spectrum seems presumptuous in the extreme; yet it appears to me that this one requires substantial modification. Shakespeare's acute sensitivity to the intellectual, religious, and socio-political conflicts of his own time is beyond question. Clearly he was well aware that the orthodox view of nature (propounded by Hooker) as an orderly system which dictates reason, altruism, benevolence, and community (as well as hierarchy) was being challenged by a conception of nature as dictating violence, egoism, and the destruction or domination of the weak by the strong. My contention is that he regarded these polarised attitudes as polemical simplifications, having already at his disposal an imaginatively liberating and comprehensive world model which incorporated both viewpoints. This was an inherently paradoxical model which allowed him to interrelate and explore without evasion or reductiveness what he considered to be the most fundamental contradictions in humankind and in our experience of the world in general.

I would stress, moreover, that it enabled him to do so in a manner which was fully intelligible to his audience. Shakespeare's bias towards contrariety has been associated by one critic with the work of certain contemporary continental writers (Castiglione, Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, and Montaigne) and to some extent imputed to their influence.²⁴ Its intellectual roots, however, were much more homely and familiar, and its literary background was entirely na-

Shakespeare's tragic cosmos

tive. The tragedy of confounding contrariety began with Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*;²⁵ its original source of inspiration, moreover, was probably the first and most philosophical of *The Canterbury Tales*. In the Knight's Tale, Chaucer consistently, and with immense subtlety, associates the contradictions of chivalric heroism (a twin ideal of valour and love, aggression and courtesy), and so also the contradictions of civilised human nature and society, with the discordant concord of a natural order whose governing forces are Love and Strife, Mars and Venus (see chapter 2). The chivalric sentiments, splendid pageantry, and formal complexity of this tragi-comical romance made it perhaps the most popular of all Chaucer's works during the Renaissance. Shakespeare's special interest in the poem is apparent both at the beginning of his career, when he borrowed its story of quarrelling lovers and friends for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and at the end, when (with John Fletcher) he dramatised it as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; both plays show an enthusiastic appreciation of its dialectical vision and proliferant paradoxes. None of Shakespeare's tragedies, of course, discloses any concrete link with the poem (no more than did the Kyd and Marlowe tragedies); but my claim that there is a fundamental affinity and an almost certain indebtedness involved here will seem much less improbable if we reflect on the fact that Chaucer's narrative, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, operates throughout on the verge of tragedy, and might easily have ended as such. The conception of natural order which guides Chaucer (in this poem) and Shakespeare (in all his work), that of a precarious balance of contrary forces, insistently implies that comedy (love and union) is potential tragedy, and that tragedy (division and violence) is comedy *manqué*.

The model of world order which Shakespeare acquired from the past not only encouraged ambivalent, paradoxical, and subversive responses to many of the official pieties of his own time. It also links him very concretely with nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinking. The notion of reality – of nature, history, society, or the self – as a dynamic system of interacting opposites has acquired a whole new life in this period: consider its various formulations in Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx; in Blake, Yeats, and Lawrence; in Jung, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss. To a large extent, twentieth-century responsiveness to the contrarious and dialectical character of Shakespeare's work (especially the tragedies) has been due to the influence of Hegel and Nietzsche, who chose to apply their life-