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Professor McAlindon argues that there were two models of nature in Renaissance culture, one hierarchical, in which everything has an appointed place, the other contrarious, showing nature as a tense system of interacting opposites, liable to sudden collapse and transformation. This latter model informs Shakespeare's tragedy throughout his career. It can be seen in his broad conception of tragic action as a reflection of 'Chaos . . . come again'; in the characterisation of the hero as a man who becomes his own opposite; in symbolically polarised settings; and in the web of elemental imagery which roots the action in the dynamics of universal nature.

A preliminary chapter on Chaucer's Knight's Tale explains the literary antecedents of Shakespeare's model and its manifestation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The following chapters take the tragedies one by one. This approach to the tragedies shows that Shakespeare at his most characteristic was profoundly indebted to the cultural inheritance of his own time.

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To Mark, Shane, and Mel

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So the war of the elements that has raged throughout eternity continues on equal terms. Now here, now there, the forces of life are victorious and are in turn vanquished. With the voice of mourning mingles the cry that infants raise when their eyes open on the sunlit world. Never has day given place to night or night to dawn that has not heard, blent with these infant wailings, the lamentation that attends on death and sombre obsequies.

(Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trs. R.E. Latham)

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.

(Shakespeare, *King Lear*)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi
1. Introduction: 'Nature's fragile vessel'	1
2. A medieval approach: Chaucer's tale of love and strife	25
3. <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	56
4. <i>Julius Caesar</i>	76
5. <i>Hamlet</i>	102
6. <i>Othello</i>	126
7. <i>King Lear</i>	158
8. <i>Macbeth</i>	197
9. <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>	220
<i>Notes</i>	258
<i>Index</i>	301

Preface

In *English Renaissance Tragedy* (1986) I examined the tragedies of Shakespeare's major contemporaries in the light of a broad referential framework drawn from their shared ideas, preoccupations, and methods, and clarified, where necessary, by reference to their cultural context. Although I did not deal directly with Shakespeare, the referential framework was based on Shakespearian as well as non-Shakespearian texts, it being my conviction that Shakespeare's tragedies and those of his contemporaries are interdependent and mutually illuminating. Given the diversity of authors and texts I was synthesising in this introductory section, the framework was wide, embracing such common concerns as violence, change, time, and permanence; the interrelated themes of justice and love, law and marriage; the problem of personal identity and the theme of self-loss; Christian and Stoic conceptions of the noble death, and the pattern of redemption or renewal; the symbolic uses of ritual and play; the language of tragic reality. A central and pervasive concern was that of duality and polarity, my argument being that the ancient model of natural order as a dynamic system of interacting opposites had a much more profound effect on the Renaissance interpretation and representation of tragic experience than did the related notion of universal hierarchy. The present study proposes to examine a range of Shakespeare's tragedies in the light of this central claim and will be to that extent complementary to the book on Shakespeare's contemporaries. In dealing with Shakespeare, I have narrowed my critical focus in this way because no other tragedian of the period wrestled so long with the universal drama of Love and Strife or dramatised with such power and inventiveness the experience of confounding contrariety in the inner and the outer world. My focus, however, is not so narrow as to preclude consideration of other aspects of cosmological tradition (such as the theme

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of time and the symbolism of number) which bear on the central phenomenon of confounding contraries and 'Chaos . . . come again'.

The historicist methodology to which this study relates is that of the 'history of ideas'. However, as applied to a method of literary and dramatic interpretation the term is somewhat misleading, for as Paul Bénichou has observed, 'ideas, which are abstract by definition, cease to be so when they are embodied in a literature and given corporal form' (Tzvetan Todorov, 'Conversation with Paul Bénichou', in *Literature and its Theorists: a Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.20–1). It will be obvious, I hope, that traditional ideas about the natural order are of interest to me only insofar as they contribute to a construction of reality which is imaginatively embodied in action, characterisation, symbolism, and style.

It will be equally apparent that speculative, genetic inquiry of the kind undertaken by the 'new historicists' and 'cultural materialists' into the socio-political conditions which lie behind Shakespeare's ideas about conflict and contradiction is not my concern. My purpose is simply to identify those ideas and the world model they constitute, to stress their traditional nature, and to show how fruitfully they have been deployed in the dramatic and poetic exploration of tragic experience.

Both in the text and in the end-notes I have on occasion expressed disagreement with other Shakespearians: with old and new historicists, with Tillyardians and Marxists and the various descendants of the old 'new critics'. But I have also registered my profound indebtedness to the work of critics and scholars of all kinds. Although in a sense this book began in disagreement, it is in no way polemical: I make no claim to having wielded the great Cutting Edge of a combative and radical new theory. My intention has been to present an argument which establishes Shakespeare's intimate rapport with his contemporaries, and in the process to amend, correct, refute, confirm, and refine interpretations arrived at by other means.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank those friends whose suggestions and corrections have helped to improve the quality of this book – Robin Headlam Wells, Rowland Wymer, Elizabeth Story Donno, Gilian West, and Angela Leighton. Nor must I forget the anonymous publisher's reader who gave invaluable advice on its organisation. The well-worn formula, however, is as necessary as ever: for those flaws which remain, I alone am responsible.

My thanks are due also to the University of Alberta (Edmonton), which honoured me with an invitation to give a series of lectures in September 1987 that formed the beginning and the basis of the book; and to the Fellows and Trustees of the Huntington Library, California, where the award of a Mellon Foundation Fellowship gave me four delightful months in which to complete it.

Abbreviations

Shakespeare's plays and poems

<i>Ado</i>	<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
<i>AWW</i>	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>
<i>AYL</i>	<i>As You Like It</i>
<i>Cor.</i>	<i>Coriolanus</i>
<i>Ham.</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>
<i>1H4</i>	<i>Henry IV, Part I</i>
<i>2H4</i>	<i>Henry IV, Part II</i>
<i>H5</i>	<i>Henry V</i>
<i>JC</i>	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
<i>Lr.</i>	<i>King Lear</i>
<i>Luc.</i>	<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i>
<i>Mac.</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>
<i>MND</i>	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
<i>MV</i>	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
<i>Oth.</i>	<i>Othello</i>
<i>R2</i>	<i>Richard II</i>
<i>R3</i>	<i>Richard III</i>
<i>Rom.</i>	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	<i>Timon of Athens</i>
<i>Tit.</i>	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>
<i>Tmp.</i>	<i>The Tempest</i>
<i>Tro.</i>	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
<i>WT</i>	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>

Periodicals and series

<i>Archiv für das Studien der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen</i>
<i>CQ</i> <i>Critical Quarterly</i>

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Abbreviations

<i>CR</i>	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
<i>EIC</i>	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>ELR</i>	<i>English Literary Renaissance</i>
<i>HLQ</i>	<i>Huntington Library Quarterly</i>
<i>MAE</i>	<i>Medium Aevum</i>
<i>MED</i>	<i>The Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>PBA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<i>REALB</i>	<i>Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature</i>
<i>ShakS</i>	<i>Shakespeare Studies</i>
<i>SJ</i>	<i>Shakespeare-Jahrbuch</i>
<i>ShS</i>	<i>Shakespeare Survey</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
<i>SQ</i>	<i>Shakespeare Quarterly</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Sewanee Review</i>
<i>SUAS</i>	<i>Stratford-upon-Avon Studies</i>
<i>TSE</i>	<i>Tulane Studies in English</i>
<i>TSSL</i>	<i>Texas Studies in Language and Literature</i>

NOTE. Except where otherwise indicated, all citations of Shakespeare's plays in this book are from *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951).