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**A CRITIQUE OF THE RELATIVISTIC APPROACH
IN RECENT CRITICISM
TO THE TRAGEDIES OF SHAKESPEARE AND MARLOWE**

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Abstract

Recent Shakespeare criticism has tended to see Shakespeare's tragedies as harking back to a dying symbolic Order instead of leading to the relativism of the modern age. Order is not seen as a structure valid in itself. Belsey, for instance, sees Order as a 'lost Elizabethan utopia' constructed by critics and suggests, instead, the radical reading of texts as a transformation of power and a resistance to power, which brings about change. Serpieri allows that Order existed but sees it as a symbolic model which rarely permitted 'a positive perception of the syntagmatic model ushering in the relativism of the modern age.' Dollimore sees the plays of this period in terms of a contemporary reality which is materialistic and where the historical, the social, and the political displace the metaphysical.

This study contests these positions. It first tracks briefly developments in the metaphysical links of man and of society from Greek times, and then argues that Order is not an invention but a Christian theological conceptualisation of Creation with its relationships of man to God and man to man. This structure cannot be replaced or destroyed. It is an integral whole covering all human relationships, historical, social, and political, in terms of the metaphysical and transcendental. It is no model; it is a syntagma. Four plays of Shakespeare (Hamlet, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra and King Lear) are analysed in this light.

The study then argues that the relativistic episteme (the humanist, as seen in terms of the material, the historical and the socio-political) as opposed to the metaphysical and transcendental was seen as far back as the 12th century where it co-existed with Order. It is



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seen before Shakespeare in the plays of Marlowe. Four plays of Marlowe are considered in this light (Tamburlaine I&II, The Jew of Malta, Dr. Faustus, and Edward II).

The relativisation within the structure which commenced in the 12th century received an impetus in the 17th century. Dryden's All for Love and Otway's Venice Preserved are considered in this light. The former bears comparison with Antony and Cleopatra.

The changes that occurred in critical attitudes in the 17th century are also considered.