I. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: The Theological Dimension

In *King Lear* is the 'darkness of Revelation' as Swinburne said. In *Hamlet* is the light of Revelation — but not the light seen by the Saints. Over the world of *Hamlet* ... reigns a perpetual and terrible light — the light of truth, dissolving all into its elements.

— Edith Sitwell
*A Notebook on William Shakespeare*

An erudite journal published by the Jesuits at the University of Comillas in Spain has (on the occasion of Shakespeare's fourth centenary, and echoing a Parisian newspaper) conferred upon Shakespeare a remarkable title: *hombre océano* — Man Ocean.¹ The epithet was doubtless suggested by the breadth and profundity of Shakespearean thought; but it is possible to read into it a suggestion, likewise, of universality — as universal as the ocean that washes the shores not only of England, but of Europe and America and all the islands and continents inhabited by man. Nor is there any reason why the epithet, presumably intended to describe the entire corpus of Shakespearean writings, should not be applied to individual tragedies. For in some plays — notably *King Lear* and *Hamlet* — there is a vastness and depth as well as a mysteriousness that might indeed suggest the ocean.

The vastness of *Lear* is impossible to miss: but it is easy to underestimate the true dimensions of *Hamlet*. The reason is obvious. To a degree not allowed us in the case of other Shakespearean heroes,

we are admitted into Hamlet’s mind and are made to see the workings
of his tortured soul. That soul is so intriguing and so appealing to our
sympathy, that in attempting “to pluck out the heart of its mystery”
we may easily forget that there are other souls in the play, and that the
tragedy has wider horizons than are bounded by Hamlet’s psyche.
Professor Kitto, in a remarkable study of Hamlet and the Greek
tragedies, has put the matter succinctly: “Hamlet is not the centre of
the play; he is the epicentre.”

An excessive psychological preoccupation can lead a producer
astray. Probably one of the most daring interpretations of Hamlet’s
psychological state is that of the 1960 Texas production (later filmed)
which depicts Hamlet not as one person but as three.

But even without going to such an extreme, almost any attempt to
interpret the play in purely psychological terms — no matter how
valid those terms may be — must result in shrinking the dimensions
of the play. If Hamlet’s tragedy were merely that of an intellectual
incapable of action (as Coleridge conceived it); or of a person with an
Oedipus complex (as Ernest Jones contended); or of a Machiavellian
prince as wicked as the Borgias (as Salvador de Madariaga argues); or
of a man suffering from melancholy angst (in Miss Lily Campbell’s
phrase); or of a man who could not make up his mind (as Laurence
Olivier’s film announces), it would be difficult to explain the almost
universal appeal that this play seems to have, or the widespread
tendency to identify oneself with its protagonist. There is something
about the play which gives the impression of inexhaustible wisdom.
The experience of the well-known producer, Tyroone Guthrie, is a
case in point:

I have seen many of the great actors of our day play Hamlet — the
most accomplished and melodious was Gielgud, the most exciting
Olivier, the most interesting was Guinness — I have seen it played by

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3The three “Hamlets” were the “courtier,” the “human,” and the “matricidal.” First
staged at Baylor University and later produced at the Dallas Theater Center during the
1960-61 season, the idea was conceived and developed by Paul Baker in association
with Burgess Meredith, Charles Laughton, Virgil Beavers and Mary Sue Fridge. I am
grateful to Mr. Baker for providing me with details about his interesting production
that I had seen in the film version.
schoolboys and also by schoolgirls, I have seen it played in Hebrew in Israel, in Swedish in Finland, in Polish in ruined Warsaw. I have seen German and French, Irish and Canadian Hamlets; I have seen it in a rural Women's Institute with the Lady of the Manor as the Second Gravedigger. Some of these performances, as you may guess, were better than others. But none of them — not one — failed to shed new light upon some aspect of the play, and thence upon some aspect of real life.  

Even the romanticists (who were as responsible as any for focusing attention upon Hamlet’s character) were aware that there was something in Hamlet transcending the merely idiosyncratic. Hardly anybody is tempted to identify himself with Lear or Macbeth, but there is something that impels people to say with Hazlitt: “We are Hamlet,” or with Coleridge to admit that there is “a smack of Hamlet” in them. Professor Gervinus of Heidelberg in mid-nineteenth century testified that “thousands” of Germans echoed the claim that “Hamlet is Germany.”

“Hamlet means so many things to so many men,” says Professor Levin, “because he invites them to put themselves in his place.” If so, there must be in Hamlet’s predicament something which many persons recognize as applicable to them. It is an image of a common human situation. His tragedy is in some measure the tragedy of humanity.

While the play explores the microcosm within Hamlet’s soul, Hamlet himself is placed within a wider context. “There is one thing in Hamlet more important than the Prince of Denmark, and that is Denmark,” says Robert Speaight. But “Denmark” itself is placed within a still wider context — a cosmic context bounded by those three places invoked by Hamlet in his anguished exclamation:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?  
And shall I couple hell? (I. v. 92-93)

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8The text used in these citations is that in Peter Alexander’s edition of the Complete Works.
The Figure of the Ghost

The theological dimension of the play is suggested in the opening scenes, which must be among the most spectacular ghost-scenes in dramatic literature. It has often been pointed out that a ghost in Seneca (like that of Thyestes) "is a piece of dramatic machinery," while Shakespeare’s Ghost "wafts across the stage a chill breath from another world than ours." The ghost of Andrea in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy sits on the stage and watches the action, as does the Spirit of Revenge. They are accepted as part of the dramatic convention and serve as chorus. They are not necessarily untrue; their truth is symbolic, conventional, "cerebral." But there is nothing merely symbolic or conventional about the Ghost in Hamlet. This ghost is real. Whatever Shakespeare’s real beliefs may have been about ghosts or the after-life, as a poet (as Dover Wilson points out) "he believed in this ghost"; this ghost is a character of the play "in the fullest sense of the term" — as much of a character as Polonius or Ophelia or Hamlet himself.10

Andrea’s ghost has to tell the audience who he is, what he was in life, and how the “churlish Charon” has refused him passage across the Acheron. The ghost in Hamlet does not have to tell the audience who he is. He is immediately recognized: there can be no mistaking his identity:

Marcellus. Is it not like the king?
Horatio. As thou art to thyself.

In Greek tragedy, a ghost’s identity has to be explained. “I come from the hiding places of the dead, leaving behind me the gates of darkness” (Hecuba, 1-2). So speaks the shade of Polydorus in the Hecuba of Euripides. He is a vague shade and he is vague about where he comes from. “[T]he hiding places of the dead” can mean anything, and “the gates of darkness” can be anywhere. How differently the ghost in Hamlet speaks of his “prison-house”:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

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Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (I. v. 15-22)

This ghost is not, like that in Hecuba, merely a messenger from Hades who performs the same function as a messenger from Athens of from Troy; there is no mistaking the preternatural character of the Ghost in Hamlet. The difference is partly an aesthetic one, illustrating the difference between the classic spirit in art and what Professor Schücking would call the baroque element in Hamlet. But it is also partly theological. Euripides and Kyd and Seneca used their ghosts merely to get things done on the stage (or, beyond the stage, to get things done on earth). Those ghosts need not come from beyond the grave; they might just as easily be phantoms of the imagination, or dramatic symbols, or personifications (like Kyd’s Revenge). By contrast, the Ghost in Hamlet does not appear merely to get things done — on the stage or in life; that is indeed one of his main objectives. But perhaps more important than that, his appearance has another purpose: it is a protest against a state of affairs that must not be allowed to continue. Professor Kitto has compared the apparitions of the ghost in Hamlet to the plague in Oedipus. Both are manifestations of an evil that has aroused the divine wrath.

For C.S. Lewis the reality of the ghost is so important that he says he must part company with any critic, however learned, who suggests that the Ghost is merely a figment of the mind.

Realistic Technique

It is interesting to inquire how Shakespeare achieves this effect of realism in his ghost. In the first place, an atmosphere of dread and of mystery is created. It is a cold night and it is dark on the battlements. The sentry’s question — “Who’s there?” — sets up reverberations in

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12 Form and Meaning in Drama, pp. 246 ff.
the mind which help to create an air of mystery. The talk of "martial preparations" in the first scene and the booming of ordnance in the fourth provide a suggestion of danger and of urgency and of great enterprises afoot. The ghost, when he does appear, does not just wander in; he appears at a dramatic moment:

_Bernardo._ Last night of all,
   When yond same star that's westward from the pole
   Had made his course to illume that part of heaven
   Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
   The bell then beating one—

_Marcellus._ Peace, break thee off; look where it comes again!
   (I.i.35-40)

He is a solid-looking ghost. There is nothing hazy about his appearance. Even his armor and the expression on his face are recognizable:

Such was the very armour he had on
When he the ambitious Norway combated;
So frown'd he once, when, in angry parle,
He smote the sledged Polacks on the ice.
'Tis strange. (I. i. 60-64)

It is indeed strange. Moreover, the ghost's bearing has attracted their attention. Repeatedly, they describe him as "majestical"; he is the "majesty of buried Denmark." They refer to the apparition with the impersonal pronoun "it" but they think of the ghost as a person.

The effect of such an apparition upon those who see it is one of fascinated terror combined with pity. Pity, of course, is a harrowing emotion in Hamlet after he hears the ghost's message; but even in the first scene there is a note of pity as well as of wonder in Horatio's description of its disappearance:

_A and then it started like a guilty thing
   Upon a fearful summons._

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¹⁴"Who's there?" might be the cry of a frightened child in the dark; it might also be the query of a metaphysician scanning the void for evidence of God" (The Question of Hamlet), pp. 20-21.
And there is regret besides wonder, in Marcellus's reply:

*It faded on the crowing of the cock.* I.i.

**Supernatural Identity**

This ghost claims to come from Purgatory. It is (as some critics have called it) a “purgatorial ghost.”

*I am thy father's spirit
Doon'd for a certain time to walk the night,
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
are bur'nt and purg'd away.* I.v.9-13

Apart from this, its very behavior is such as to suggest, dramatically, the ghost's supernatural identity.

The ghost in the first scene says nothing. He merely walks, silently and “with martial stalk.” A student of the theatre has called attention to the dramatic effectiveness of this silent walking. The guards have been whispering in the cold, dark night.

Then — and it is an incompetent production that cannot communicate some of the awe and mystery of this moment — they break off their excited whispering, as, in full armour, sorrowful and silverbearded, the majesty of buried Denmark comes slow and stately by. The ghost says nothing in the scene; in that afflicted silence the actor must plant the seed of his supernatural identity.  

There is an interesting stage direction in the First Quarto that must have suggested to an Elizabethan audience that this ghost was not a demon nor a hoax but genuinely what it claimed to be, a spirit from the Other World. In the opening scene, when the ghost appears,

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15David William, “Hamlet in the Theatre” in *Hamlet* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 5, London, 1963), p. 35. Mr. William, who had seen several productions of the play and acted in four — twice as Hamlet — complained that all the productions he had seen were deficient in this regard: “As far as I can remember the one thing which *all* the productions I have seen or played in lacked was a sense of the reality of the supernatural. I have never seen the ghost. It now seems to me that the paramount object of any production of *Hamlet* should be to establish the dramatic reality of the ghost as richly as possible” (*Ibid.*, p. 34).
Horatio says, "I'll cross it though it blast me." The First Quarto then inserts the stage direction: *It spreads his arms*. That stage direction is omitted in the Folio and in many modern editions. But it should be noted that the second Quarto was probably "printed from Shakespeare's autograph copy." On this point, as Dr. Greg points out, there is general agreement. Moreover, as Dr. Greg also points out in another place, the stage directions in the second Quarto are in the main the author's (i.e. Shakespeare's), and that those directions that are peculiar to this text (namely, the First Quarto), "are sharply imagined." 

What is it that Horatio does, and what is it that the ghost is directed to do by this stage direction? Some modern editors interpret the word "cross" as "walking across." They explain Horatio's meaning as "I'll cross its path." But an Elizabethan audience, although no longer Roman Catholic, would still have its Catholic cultural heritage. They would understand that Horatio is testing the genuineness of the ghost by making the sign of the cross. If the ghost is a demon from hell, it would indeed "blast" him. Instead, what does the ghost do? "It spreads his arms": the ghost extends its arms in the form of a cross. Horatio, by making the sign of the cross, makes a sign; the Ghost gives the countersign.

The important point about this ghost is precisely his "supernatural identity." For someone to come back from beyond the grave several nights together is so portentous that Horatio draws the obvious conclusion: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I. i. 69). Hamlet is more precise:

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\text{My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;}
\]
\[
\text{I doubt some foul play. (I. ii. 254-255)}
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Marcellus is more earthy and more expressive:

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\text{Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (I. iv. 90)}
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17On the meaning of "I'll cross him" see that curious but informative book, S. A. Blackmore, *The Riddles of Hamlet and the Newest Answers* (Boston, 1917).
A Cosmic Frame

From the darkness of the haunted battlements we are taken to the noonday brightness of the Danish court, thence to Ophelia’s house, and back again to the dark battlements for another rendezvous with the mysterious ghost. The contrast could not be greater. In the darkness the buried king holds sway, and men’s thoughts are turned towards death and the life beyond the grave; but in the court a new king is reigning and the preoccupation is with the business of living and of government: embassies are sent; the question of the succession is settled; a marriage has taken place and another (Ophelia’s) is forbidden; young men are granted or denied permission to study abroad in foreign universities; later an itinerant troupe of players arrives on the scene and everyone’s attention is turned to stagecraft. The king is often at his cups,

And, as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
The triumph of his pledge. (I. iv. 10-12)

The whole world and the heavens themselves are made to witness the king’s carousel:

... the great cannon to the clouds shall tell,
And the King’s rouse the heaven shall bruit again,
Re-speaking earthly thunder. (I. ii. 126-128)

Meanwhile, in Polonius’ house, a father gives advice concerning money, friends and clothes, and tells his daughter how to deal with a princely suitor. “Denmark” is a very earthly court, governed by principles of worldly wisdom and wrapped in a thoroughly mundane atmosphere quite different from the ultra-mundane atmosphere of the ramparts.

The fact that these two worlds are set side by side is dramatically significant. The ghost outside is a living commentary on the state of affairs in the court, just as Hamlet himself, inside, is, in his suit of mourning, also a living commentary on it. The ghost on the battlements is a real ghost, but his presence is dramatically symbolic. It is as if the playwright were setting the life in Denmark within a cosmic frame in which heaven, hell and purgatory are its containing boundaries.
There is an instance of this cosmic framing in lyric poetry by an entirely different poet, who incidentally (as is well known) was highly critical of *Hamlet*. T. S. Eliot, in “Sweeney among the Nightingales,” takes us out into the limitless heavens where the solar systems are whirling in their vast gyrations, and then drops us unceremoniously into a café where an apelike customer and his female companions are eating and carrying on a tawdry love affair.

The circles of the stormy moon  
Slide westward toward the River Plate,  
Death and the Raven drift above  
And Sweeney guards the horned gate.

Gloomy Orion and the Dog  
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;  
The person in the Spanish cape  
Tries to sit on Sweeney’s knees.\(^{18}\)

The contrast between the gigantic worlds in the heavens and the trivial goings-on in the café is a devastating commentary on the latter and puts it, as it were, in cosmic perspective.\(^{19}\)

Such is the framing in *Hamlet*: except that it is not merely cosmic but supernatural. The day-to-day business of the court is boxed within the mystery of the world beyond: and in that world beyond the grave, there can be no dissimulation:

foul deeds will rise,  
Though all the world o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes.  
(I. ii. 256-257)

Nor is this cosmic framing confined to the first act. Even later in the play the mysterious world beyond the grave is never far away. C. S. Lewis, in a lecture given to the British Academy in 1942, affirmed that in his opinion that subject of *Hamlet* is death.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{20}\) C. S. Lewis, “Hamlet, the Prince or the Poem.”
That is indeed true; but it is equally true that Hamlet’s preoccupation is with what happens after death, in that “undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns.” The ghost of his father is often in his mind. His father’s “audit” is a cause of anxiety to him. He does not want his uncle’s soul to be saved but to be “as damn’d and black as hell whereto it goes.” The thought of what happens after death prevents him from committing suicide. In the closet-scene an impassioned dialogue is interrupted by the reappearance of the ghost. In short, the spirit world is not far from Hamlet’s Denmark.

This nearness of the spirit world draws attention to the true state of affairs in the kingdom. In appearance all is well; in reality there is a rottenness that corrupts society.

“Rank Corruption”

It is in fact a corrupt court. It is a world in which double dealing and espionage are the order of the day, and in which it is more important to seem than to be. But the particular rottenness that draws down the ire of heaven is a multiple crime which, legally speaking, may be called regicide, fratricide, sacrilege, and usurpation.21 This multiple crime is compounded by a type of “incest” to which an Elizabethan audience may be expected to be sensitive as it would undoubtedly recall the circumstances surrounding the reigning queen’s birth.

But the ghost does not look upon these crimes with merely legal eyes. He speaks of them in emotional language as “unnatural”: as unnatural as the daughters’ ingratitude in Lear, whose ferocity is imaged by the storm; as unnatural as the murder of Duncan in Macbeth, whose unnaturalness is symbolized by the portents that accompany it.22 The crimes are unnatural because they destroy the

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21Regicide and fratricide, because it is the murder of a king by his brother; sacrilege, because it is the violation of the sacred oath of allegiance as well as of the person of the Lord’s anointed and of the “divinity that doth hedge a king”; usurpation, because it is the dethronement of the lawful king by his brother who supplants him. This is independent of the further question whether or not Claudius should also be considered a usurper in another sense, since he has come “between the election and Hamlet’s hopes” as heir to his father’s crown.

right order of nature, and tend to dissolve the bonds that should bind
men together in society. They are not only crimes but sins which
outrage God and man. In Hamlet the “unnatural” sins are the “damnéd
incest” that stains the “royal bed of Denmark” and makes its perpetrator
an “adulterate beast” and a particularly heinous form of murder:

Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
   But this most foul, strange, and unnatural. (I. v. 27-28)

It is possible, of course, to argue that the ghost, being an interested
party, is looking upon these crimes with a subjective emotion that
exceeds their objective malice. Such an argument, however, would
miss the significance of the ghost. The ghost is disembodied, beyond
emotion. What the ghost says, in effect, is the judgment of eternity
upon the rottenness in Denmark.

This rottenness is represented as a “rank corruption, mining all
within” that infects unseen.” Miss Caroline Spurgeon observes that the
dominant image in Hamlet is that of an ulcer or a tumor, and that the
play is full of images representing disease or bodily deformity.23 The
imagery is significant. Kitto remarks that in Greek tragedy, one sin
begets another, and this a third, by an action which he calls
“rectilinear”; but in Hamlet, the “rank corruption” of the king’s murder
and the new king’s “incest” contaminates everything in the kingdom
by an action which he describes as “complexive.”24 From this
contamination, no one is exempt: not even Hamlet, or Ophelia.

This is the rottenness that Hamlet is called upon to excise. But in
excising it, he cannot act like a surgeon who wields the knife without
himself suffering a wound. Hamlet’s role is rather that of a sacrificial
victim — as Professor Tillyard and others point out — by whose
suffering the corruption must be purged away.

Significance of the Theological Dimension

It is against that cosmic setting — a corrupt court on earth whose
crimes are judged in the World Beyond — that the tragedy of Hamlet
is played out. There are of course other dimensions to the drama. The

23 C. Spurgeon, Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us (reprinted Cambridge,
24 Form and Meaning in Drama, pp. 246ff.
playing out of the tragedy will involve mostly ethical rather than theological issues. But the theological dimension gives added (and ultimate) depth to the action. The cosmic setting mediated by the ghost reminds us that human actions are not trivial. They are judged and evaluated in another world where the criteria are established in accordance with ultimate realities.

II. The Realistic Fallacy

Many years ago, while spending the summer at Stratford-upon-Avon in the English midlands, I joined a group that went by bus to a village near Birmingham where a theatrical festival was being held of Shakespeare's plays. That afternoon's presentation was Romeo and Juliet. I watched the play for a while and then left in the middle of it. It was an attempt to perform Shakespeare's play in a realistic fashion, and like all such attempts, succeeded only in trivializing it.

One of those who rode with us in the bus was an English writer (not very well known) and when I met him the following day at Stratford, I asked him what he thought of the play. His answer was devastating: "It was a successful attempt to translate poetry into prose."

Shakespeare wrote that play early in his career, perhaps as early as 1591 when he was still a young man in his middle 20s. It is the kind of play that only a young person could have written: full of the zest and enthusiasms and emotional vagaries of youth. He took the story from an English translation of a French romance in verse, which in turn was based on an Italian novella. Elements of the plot could be traced to Greco-Roman times, but (although the Shakespeare scholars do not mention this) the main storyline seems to have been based on an episode in real life. In Teruel, in what had been the kingdom of Aragon in Spain, they have a monument to two young lovers belonging to rival and feuding families, who had each committed suicide out of frustrated love. They are known as the Teruel Lovers — los amantes de Teruel.
Depending on how that story is told, it could be a sordid tale, or a morality play illustrating the terrible consequences of family feuds. There is a popular verse satirizing the lunacy of infatuated lovers:

Los amantes de Teruel,
tonta ella y tonto él.

In Shakespeare’s hands the story is transformed into a beautiful idyll of young love, with a tragic ending, and the beauty lies in Shakespeare’s poetry.

A poetic play thrives in the enchanted land of poetry. It withers under the scorching sun of realism.

This is a play in which one does not say “I took an early walk this morning.” One says instead:

An hour before the worshipp’d sun
Pierc’d forth the golden window of the east,
A troubl’d mind drove me to walk abroad. I. i. 125 ff

In this play, one does not say “It’s already morning.” Instead one says:

Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountaintops. III. v. 6 ff

At a dance in a play like this the lovers make their coquettish wooing in rhyming quatrains. Romeo, holding Juliet’s hand, which he calls a “holy shrine,” says (using the rhyme-scheme a b a b):

If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

And Juliet replies (using the scheme c b c b):

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much
Which mannerly devotion shows in this:
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.

And when the dialogue intensifies into one or two-line retorts, they still form a rhyming couplet (rhyme-scheme d d) and a quatrain (f g f g):
J. Saints do not move, though grant for prayer's sake.
R. Then move not, when my prayer's effect I take.
    Thus from my sins my lips by yours are purg'd.
J. Then have my lips the sin that they have took.
R. Sin from my lips? Oh trespass surely urg'd.
    Give my sin again —
J. You kiss by the book. I. v - 95 ff

That is not ordinary love-talk. That is as graceful and as stylized as
the measured steps of a formal dance — a quadrille or a rigodón de
honor. Convert that into a Hollywood-style lovers’ talk and you
trivialize the play.


One scene that arouses the realistic instincts of directors and actors
is the Garden Scene in the Second Act. They portray Juliet standing
on a balcony (as in Zeffirelli's film) and Romeo goes up so that the
dialogue takes place with the lovers in each other’s arms. But
Shakespeare’s play does not speak of a balcony. It speaks of a window
that is suddenly thrown open and Juliet looks out. Romeo, concealed
in the darkness of the garden, sees her in the window and says;

    But soft, what light through yonder window breaks:
    It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. II. i. 2 f.

The tone changes at play's end. It is no longer the lovely nature
poetry of young love. It is the deeper tone of tragedy. About to die at
Juliet’s tomb, Romeo says:

    Oh here
    Will I set up my everlasting rest,
    And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
    From this world-weary flesh. V iii. 109. f

That is almost the tone of Othello. The actor who catches that tone
and conveys it to the audience is a very good actor indeed.
The attempt to perform poetic plays realistically is fairly common. One example was an American production of *Troilus and Cressida* in which the setting was changed from the Trojan War to the American Civil War. Instead of Trojans and Argives, the men were dressed in the blue uniform of the North and the gray of the South. Cressida became an entertainer playing the piano at a bar.

Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* is said to have had great success when it first opened in Paris in 1897 with Coquelin as Cyrano. There is an excellent English translation, and it was this that was produced twice in Manila; the first time in the early 1930s at the Ateneo with Narciso Pimentel as Cyrano. A quarter of a century later, a private group revived the play with an excellent cast. But the play was transformed into a modern Hollywood-style realistic love story. An American who sat beside me in the audience said at the end, “This has been spoken of as a great play. It does not seem great at all.” No wonder. The stress on realism had trivialized it.

Take for example that play on Roxane’s name: No one in his right senses would tell a girl in ordinary conversation

> Thy name is like a bell hung in my heart.  
> When it rings I tremble.  
> And it rings and it swings: Roxane. Roxane.

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A poetic play is by its very nature unrealistic. Realistic drama tries to depict human actions and emotions exactly as they occur in real life. In a realistic style one says, “Human joys do not last long.” In *Midsummer’s Night’s Dream* human joy is described as

> … momentany as a sound,  
> Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,  
> Brief as the lightning in a collied night  
> That in a spleen unfolds both heaven and earth.  
> And ere a man hath power to say ‘Behold!’  
> The jaws of darkness do devour it up:  
> So quick bright things come to confusion.

*MND I. i. 141 ff.*
In a realistic play (as in the real world) it would sound silly to describe strange noises and dreams as does Caliban in the *Tempest*:

... The isle is full of noises:
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not
Will hum about my ears; and sometimes voices
That if I then had wak’d after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again. And then in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak’d,
I cried to dream again.

*Tempest* III. iii. 144 ff.

That is the language of poetry, very different from the way people talk in real life.

The basic fallacy involved in any attempt to convert a poetic play into realistic drama is the assumption that the only really important thing in a play is the plot. “What happens next? What do the characters do?”

That is of course the case with realistic drama. Agatha Christie’s *Mousetrap* has been on the boards in London for several decades because it is an excellent action play that entertains the audience and holds them in suspense. Mystery follows upon mystery. An atmosphere of fear and anxiety is created.

In a poetic play, although what happens is important, of greater importance is what is said and how it is said. It is a language-play. Shakespeare’s genius consists in the fact that he was able to combine language with action. His poetic plays are both language-plays and action-plays.

*Romeo and Juliet* is both. *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is also both, with music added to enhance its special magic. A successful performance of a Shakespearean poetic play must succeed in reproducing that magic.