THE PERVERSION OF UNITY IN SHELLEY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CENCI.

by

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SUMMARY

Shelley's visionary ideal of the love-unity is celebrated in so many of his prose and poetic works that it is unusual to find its perverse opposite so intensely exposed in his tragedy, The Cenci. Not only is Shelley's "sad reality" unique for being the most classical of his works, but also for being the most professional and mature. Shelley deliberately strove to create a "work of art" based in mood and technique upon the ironic realism of Attic tragedy. From the personal viewpoint, we may see that in Shelley's determination to adhere to the Socratic principle of the necessity for self-knowledge, The Cenci was to be the "cross" upon which Shelley crucified himself in order to "live again" as man and artist.

My Introduction deals with the personal and professional circumstances of Shelley's life immediately before and during the writing of The Cenci. This is to show that his tragedy was a product of his acknowledgement of reality, rather than a product of his idealism. Chapters I and II consider the perversion of human integrity in the characters of Count Cenci and Beatrice in such a way as to reveal the depth of Shelley's psychological insight, unhampered by metaphysical speculation.

In Chapters III and IV, the focus is extended from the perversion of unity in the individual to its manifestation in "the family" and society of The Cenci. Chapter III endeavours to reveal Shelley's expertise in manipulating the technique of ironic peripiteia, as practised by the Greek masters, in order to probe, more keenly, the tragedy of a reality formed from the individual's capacity for self-deception.

Chapter IV examines Shelley's subtle and complex patterning of ironies, through imagery, around the central subject of self-ignorance, its suicidal and internecine tendencies.

Chapter V returns to a study of Shelley's positive values as revealed in the works after the "psychological purging" of The Cenci. Extracts from his religious prose works written shortly after the completion of The Cenci provide the universal back-drop against which to consider aspects of the worldly perversities in The Cenci.

The Conclusion attempts to bring this analysis full circle, back to Shelley and his reason for his own devaluation of his tragedy in the last year of his life, in contrast to his enthusiasm at its conception.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university, and (to the best of my knowledge and belief) no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text or notes.

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"One warring against the Evil Principle,"...when Shelley reduces the conflict from the realm of the immortals to a human reality, his One becomes, tragically one. In The Cenci the poet represents a world of endless decay, where the appearance can never ultimately match the reality, where evil is ultimately triumphant. The earthly manifestation of the spirit of harmony can, like all things, be violated.

(Stuart Curran, Shelley's Cenci, p.147)

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary criticism of The Cenci is, in comparison to the bulk of criticism which surrounds Prometheus Unbound, relatively scant. Two critical books upon The Cenci alone have been published. One, in 1908 by Ernest Bates, is A Study of Shelley's Drama - The Cenci, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1908). Although this work may be regarded as interpretatively superficial, it does contain a valuable amount of information. The other book is the 1970 publication of Stuart Curran's Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire, an excellent study which deals comprehensively with The Cenci as a poem and a drama, exploring, at far greater depth, the psychological dimension of the play, especially through the delineation of character, as well as acknowledging the metaphysical aspect of the drama as it centres upon the problem of good and evil.

Between these 1908 and 1970 studies of The Cenci alone, several very perceptive studies of certain aspects of the play have appeared in literary magazines. The focus in these articles has usually been limited to character study, Orsino and Beatrice being the popular choices. The best among these articles I consider to be Joan Rees' "Shelley's Orsino: Evil in The Cenci" in the Memorial Bulletin of 1961 and James Rieger's "Shelley's Paterin Beatrice" in Studies in Romanticism of 1965. Other criticism appears incidentally in various works upon Shelley, critical and biographical, varying from a page or less, to a chapter's length. The most discerning of these commentaries are contained in Ellsworth Barnard's Shelley's Religion (1964) Desmond King - Hele's Shelley: His Thought and Work (1962) and The Magic Plant, by Carl Grabo (1936). The most recent biography of Shelley by Richard Holmes, Shelley, the pursuit (1974) and the critical work, Shelley: The Golden Years, by Kenneth

Cameron (1974), both contain some very perceptive remarks upon The Cenci.[1]

With the exception of Grabo's study and, possibly, that of Bates, there is little to be gained from any criticism of The Cenci written more than two decades ago, except the realisation that the criticism was limited and distorted by the author's bias of either extreme sentimentality or hostility towards Shelley and his works. Perspectives have quite dramatically changed and broadened within twenty years, through the suspension of bias, enabling a proper revaluation of Shelley as man and poet to begin.

At the beginning of this century, Bates attempted to give Shelley's only stage drama its proper recognition as one of the best nineteenth century verse tragedies as did Curran, more successfully, in this decade. It is my intention in this thesis not to challenge but to complement Stuart Curran's admirable study by focusing my own perspective upon the metaphysical dimension of the drama as it reveals itself in what I consider to be the play's major but most subtle theme: that of the perversion of Shelley's ideal of unity. I shall also endeavour to establish that the drama's true significance is to be found in Shelley's intricate execution of this theme in relation to revealing the innermost processes of the human mind: his main concern in the writing of The Cenci.

I have found it necessary, in the analysis of the play from this perspective, to be as exclusive as possible in order to concentrate upon exposing the drama's deeply personal significance to Shelley as man and artist. In this respect my work is different from the more inclusive studies of Bates and Curran. The perspective I have taken

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[1] See bibliography for fuller details.

for my analysis precludes treating The Cenci as an acting play at length. However I have included in this introduction a relatively brief comment upon the particular significance of Aristotle and Sophocles' Antigone upon the execution of The Cenci. At far greater length I have written about the personal and professional circumstances and events in Shelley's life which surround the play's creation. My analysis proper concentrates almost entirely upon The Cenci as a poem.

James Rieger, in his article upon The Cenci, treats "the tragedy of Beatrice" as a "pyrrhonistic exercise in aid of the affirmation celebrated by Shelley's lyrical drama. In The Cenci the whole creation is a syphilitic chancre and the god of this world...a witty degenerate."[2] Stuart Curran writes that "In The Cenci the poet represents a world of endless decay, where evil is ultimately triumphant."[3] In her article upon The Cenci Arline Thorn perceives "the sense of evil at the heart of things" as closely akin to "the Jansenist feeling that man is indeed deep-dyed in original sin, the prey of irrational and uncontrollable passions which too long brooded upon precipitate irrational acts."[4]

The stimulus I have derived from opinions such as these arises not from disagreement but from the realization that evil per se in The Cenci has not been specifically analysed in spite of its being "at the heart of things" in Shelley's tragedy. James Rieger considers evil only indirectly, from the point of view of Shelley's "heresies".

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2 "Shelley's Paterin Beatrice", Studies in Romanticism, IV (1965), pp.169-184 - reprinted in The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley (George Braziller, New York, 1967), pp.111-128.

3 Stuart Curran, Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire (Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1970), p. 147. Hereafter referred to as Shelley's Cenci.

4 Arline Thorn."Shelley's The Cenci as Tragedy", Costerus, IX (1973), p.219.

Stuart Curran's inclusive study of The Cenci permits only brief but nonetheless acute considerations of its predominance in the drama and Arline Thorn's prime concern, in her article, is the influence of Attic drama upon Shelley's tragedy.

By focusing exclusively,in my study, upon multilateral evil as the perversion of unity in this drama, I hope to illuminate the extraordinary intensity and complexity with which Shelley, either consciously or unconsciously, kept to and executed this theme. I begin my study by discussing first the perversion of unity as the corruption of personal integrity, then considering the broader theme of "out-raged love" which "perhaps awakened hate."[5]

Shelley defines the principle of unity which formed the basis of his idealism at the beginning of A Defence of Poetry. He explains this principle in relation to reason and creative imagination.

> The one is the τὸ ποιεῖν , or the principle of synthesis and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the τὸ λογίζειν , or principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity,...Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.[6]

In the Preface to The Cenci, Shelley states that in his drama "the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another" and that the principle of unity, "imagination" takes upon itself the vestment of corruption, "flesh".[7]

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5 Thomas Hutchinson, ed. The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Oxford University Press, 1904) The Cenci II. ii. 36. This edition will hereafter be referred to as Poetical Works.

6 A Defence of Poetry in The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley Newly edited by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (Gordian Press, 10 vols., New York, 1965), Prose VII p.109. This edition will hereafter be referred to as Complete Works.

7 Poetical Works, Preface, p.277.

In 1815, Shelley expressed his ideal of unity in his essay "On Love". Love, he writes, is the bond of union between all created things, is identifiable with perfect goodness and has eternity for its goal. Its object upon earth is to establish a transcendental communion.

> We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise,...a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper paradise, which pain, and sorrow, and evil dare not overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it.[8]

This concept of perfect integrity of being found poetic expression in the incest theme of The Revolt of Islam composed in 1817 and Epipsychidion (II. 123-132) written in 1821, both of these works encircling the composition of The Cenci in 1819.

The incest theme had a powerful symbolic significance for Shelley. Primarily, as an ideal, incest represented, for the romantic sensibility, alienation from society and its despised conventions, and also a desire for the closest possible earthly union. This was certainly the symbolic intent behind Shelley's choice of incest as the theme of The Revolt of Islam.

> There we unheeding sate, in the communion
> Of interchangèd vows, which, with a rite
> Of faith most sweet and sacred, stamped
> our union. -
> Few were the living hearts which could
> unite
> Like ours, or celebrate a bridal-night
> With such close sympathies, for they had
> sprung
> From linkèd youth,...[9]

Such a love-union between a brother and sister might intensify an already deep and equable bond, as close as one might come to achieving a transcendent union on earth which mirrors divine union.

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8 "On Love" in Complete Works VI pp.201-202.

9 The Revolt of Islam (Laon and Cythna) Canto 6. XXXIX, 1-7.

In The Cenci, however, the incestuous union between father and daughter is a travesty of paternal love, unequal and chaotic. Beatrice's integrity of being at the beginning of the drama undergoes a process of gradual disintegration passing through intensifying stages of physical, mental and spiritual alienation, towards apparent annihilation. Instead of progression towards joyous unity we have regression towards anguished isolation. Instead of love and its regenerative power we have the degenerate force of hatred.

Curran regards The Cenci as evidence of Shelley's deepening pessimism concerning the realization of his idealism in his life-time.[10] The disillusionment and disappointment which Shelley brought with him from England intensified rather than abated in Italy. "Causes for dejection" which Shelley mentioned in a letter to Leigh Hunt[11] were many. Edward Trelawny, Shelley's friend in the last year of his life, recalls some of the principal causes for dejection.

> I was silent from astonishment: was it possible this mild-looking beardless boy could be the veritable monster at war with all the world? - excommunicated by the Fathers of the Church, deprived of his civil rights by the fiat of a grim Lord Chancellor, discarded by every member of his family, and denounced by the rival sages of our literature as the founder of the Satanic school?[12]

The immediate prelude to the writing of The Cenci and Prometheus Unbound was the death of his son William in June 1819. Shelley's references to his own and Mary's melancholy during the 1819-1820 period are frequent.[13]

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10 Shelley's Cenci, p.151.

11 Roger Ingpen, ed. The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Letters 1812 to 1818 (The Julian Editions 10 vols., London, 1926), IX p.289 To Leigh Hunt, March 13, 1818. This edition will hereafter be referred to as Letters.

12 Edward John Trelawny. Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author (Basil Montagu Pickering, London, 1878) I, pp.20-1. This edition will hereafter be referred to as Records. Trelawny's records of Shelley are regarded, by most critics, as of dubious veracity. However, they do have their basis in fact and I feel that he is a far more reliable source than Hogg.

13 Letters X pp.57, 60, 66, 67, 68, 69.

It was in Rome from March to June 1819 that the first three acts of his lyric drama were finished and The Cenci begun. The bulk of The Cenci and the last act of Prometheus Unbound were written directly after the death of William. Nevertheless it would be an error to regard these two works as the products of extreme despondency, one the expression of his bitter disappointment, the other serving as an escape from the experience of an unbearably harsh reality into the idealism of "wishful thinking". The dark despair of The Cenci is driven like a wedge of uncompromising reality into the idealistic creation of Prometheus Unbound.

A whole year lapsed between Shelley's reading of the Cenci manuscript,[14] and his writing of the play which was begun immediately after his visits to the Palazzo Colonna and the Casa Cenci. The prime stimulus was the supposed portrait of Beatrice Cenci which Shelley saw in the Palazzo. The impact which this portrait had upon his imagination is vividly revealed in the Preface to The Cenci and its effect was to establish a deeply personal rapport between the story's theme, its characters and his own self. It seems probable that Shelley strongly identified himself and his unhappy life with Beatrice Cenci and her victimization by her father and society.

> There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness.... The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched: the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which, united with her exquisite loveliness and deep

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[14] The Cenci manuscript was given by the Gisbornes to Mary, who copied it out for Shelley to read. See: Mary Shelley's Journal edited by Frederick Jones. (University of Oklahoma Press., Norman, 1947), p.98.
Hereafter referred to as Journal.

> sorrow, are inexpressively pathetic. Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another: her nature was simple and profound.[15]

Mary Shelley also recalls the influence of the "Reni" portrait upon Shelley's imagination in her "Note on the Cenci".

> We visited the Colonna and Doria Palaces, where the portraits of Beatrice were to be found and her beauty cast the reflection of its own grace over her appalling story. Shelley's imagination became strongly excited, and he urged the subject to me as one fitted for tragedy. More than ever I felt my incompetence; but I entreated him to write it instead and he began, and proceeded swiftly,...[16]

That the actuality of the Cenci scandal promised fresh artistic stimulation after Shelley's immersion in the universal idealism of Prometheus Unbound is noticeable in a cancelled passage at the beginning of the rough, preliminary draft to The Cenci:

> The Story upon which the "Family of the Cenci" is written is perhaps (the most) fearful domestic tragedy which was ever acted on the scene of real life....[17]

The enthusiasm and speed with which he began to write his tragedy were, perhaps, largely incurred by the difference of working in the field of human reality rather than in the remote realm of divinities. This time he was working from historic fact, rather than abstract ideas. In his letter of dedication to Leigh Hunt, May 29, 1819, Shelley wrote soberly,

> Those writings which I have hitherto published, have been little else than visions which impersonate my own apprehensions of the beautiful and the just. I can also perceive in them the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience; they are dreams of what ought to be, or may be. The drama which I now present to you is a sad reality.[18]

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15 Poetical Works, Preface, p.278.

16 Mary Shelley. "Note on The Cenci", Poetical Works, p.335. See also Journal pp.120-121.

17 H.Buxton Forman, C.B., ed. Note Books of Percy Bysshe Shelley (Phaeton Press, 3 vols., New York, 1968), II p.87. Hereafter referred to as Note Books.

18 Letters X p.51.

This letter also implies that Shelley considered his first tragedy to mark a new creative period in his life, that of his maturity as an artist. This, in turn, suggests that his prime motivation for writing The Cenci was deeply personal rather than merely reactionary. In her "Note on The Cenci", Mary Shelley remarks that the composition of the tragedy involved Shelley's desire to achieve completeness as an artist.

> He believed that one of the first requisites (in the writing of a successful tragedy) was the capacity of forming and following up a story or plot,...he laid great store by it as the proper framework to support the sublimest efforts of poetry. He asserted that he was too metaphysical and abstract, too fond of the theoretical and the ideal, to succeed as a tragedian....
>
> This tragedy is the only one of his works that he communicated to me during its progress. We talked over the arrangement of the scenes together. I speedily saw the great mistake we had made, and triumphed in the discovery of the new talent brought to light from that mine of wealth... - his richly gifted mind.[19]

Immediately prior to his reading of the Cenci story, Shelley's interest in the dramatic potential of renaissance Italy was seeking a creative outlet in the composition of a drama about the poet Tasso through which he would tentatively seek to establish himself as a dramatist. On April 20, 1818 he wrote to Peacock:

> I have devoted this summer, and indeed the next year, to the composition of a tragedy on the subject of Tasso's madness... But,you will say, I have no dramatic talent. Very true, in a certain sense; but I have taken the resolution to see what kind of a tragedy a person without dramatic talent could write. It shall be better morality than Fazio, and better poetry than Bertram, at least.[20]

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19 Poetical Works, pp.334-5.

20 Letters IX p.298.

The major part of The Cenci was written whilst reading the tragedies of the Spanish dramatist, Calderon.[21] Shortly after the completion of The Cenci, September 21, 1819, Shelley wrote again to Peacock, concerning his study of the Spanish language.

> It is a most powerful and expressive language, and I have already learnt sufficient to read with great ease their poet Calderon. I have read about 12 of his Plays; some of them certainly deserve to be ranked among the grandest and most perfect productions of the human mind. He exceeds all modern dramatists with the exception of Shakespeare, whom he resembles, however, in the depth of thought and subtlety of imagination of his writings, ... I rate him far above Beaumont and Fletcher.[22]

In his Preface to The Cenci, Shelley acknowledges Calderon as the source of Beatrice's speech upon the chasm.

> An idea in this speech was suggested by a most sublime passage in El Purgatorio de San Patricio of Calderon: the only plagiarism which I have intentionally committed in the whole piece.[23]

The influence of Calderon and Shakespeare may be seen in The Cenci but the abundant psychological action in place of physical action in the drama points to the influence of Greek tragedy upon Shelley.

In the note on Shakespeare which immediately follows the end of the draft-preface of The Cenci, Shelley reveals his admiration for Sophocles, "the Greek Shakespeare" whose influence upon the creation of The Cenci is thereby strongly suggested. Aristotle's theory of tragedy, itself based largely upon the dramatic arts of Aeschylus and Sophocles, is another considerable influence.

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21 A comprehensive list of Shelley's reading from 1814 - 1821, derived from Mary's records, is compiled in Appendix IV of the Frederick Jones edition of Mary Shelley's Journal.

22 Letters X p.83.

23 Poetical Works, Preface, p.277 n.

Aristotle emphasizes plot as the most important constituent of tragedy,[24] being its "end and purpose". Shelley opens his Preface with the description of the story which he found in the Cenci manuscript. Like Sophocles, who drew upon Attic legends for his plots, Shelley did not hesitate to alter the original story for dramatic effect, but not to the extent that the original story is entirely distorted. In the trial scene and that of the murder of Count Cenci in which Beatrice reproaches the reluctant assassins for their cowardice and decides to commit the deed herself, Shelley was faithfully following the manuscript source (which itself was derived from the Annali d'Italia of Muratori)[25] and not blatantly borrowing from the trial scene in Webster's The White Devil or the murder scene in Shakespeare's Macbeth. From the numerous outrages upon Beatrice related in the legend, Shelley intensifies dramatic effect by selecting the single act of incest as the prime motivation for Beatrice's act of parricide. Further dramatic intensity is achieved by compressing the original time span of the tale from one year to one week. The legend emphasizes the pious Catholicism of Beatrice and her victimized family in contrast to the atheism of the Count. Shelley maintains this importance given to religion in his drama but alters the Count's atheism to a perversion of Catholicism, and the piety of Beatrice to a non-conformist concern with the individual conscience and its direct relation to God. Further alterations consist of the development of the characters of Giacomo and Bernardo who are only briefly mentioned in the legend, and the introduction of two new characters, the calculating Orsino and the benevolent Cardinal Camillo.

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[24] Aristotle. On the Art of Poetry, trans. Ingram Bywater (Clarendon Press, London, 1920), 6, p.37. Hereafter referred to as Aristotle.

[25] Quoted in Stuart Curran's Shelley's Cenci, p.40.

Aristotle emphasizes the intrinsic importance of action in the tragic plot[26] and Shelley ends his discussion of plot with much the same emphasis.

> Such a story, if told so as to present to the reader all the feelings of those who once acted it, their hopes and fears, their confidences and misgivings, their various interests, passions, and opinions, acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.[27]

It is significant that the verb of action "Do" and its forms is the most often repeated word in the whole of the drama. The whole tragedy is the outcome of two fatal acts: that of Beatrice's violation and the consequent act of parricide. Shelley is clearly in line with the precepts of Aristotle, who writes:

> Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions - what we do - that we are happy or the reverse. ...We maintain therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak of Tragedy is the Plot; .... We maintain that Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action.[28]

Aristotle continues his discourse upon tragedy by stressing that it is an imitation, not only of action but of incident arousing pity and fear and that it is the mark of the true poet if he can achieve the effects subtly, without resorting to spectacle.

> Those...who make use of the Spectacle to put before us that which is merely monstrous and not productive of fear are wholly out of touch with Tragedy, not every kind of pleasure should be required of a tragedy, but only its own proper pleasure.
>
> The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation.[29]

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26 Aristotle, 6, pp.36-37.

27 Poetical Works, Preface, pp.275-6.

28 Aristotle, 8, p.37.

29 Ibid., 14, pp.52-53.

Shelley's own words, in his Preface, reveal the extent to which the Greek philosopher's theories impressed him.

> This story of the Cenci is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous: anything like a dry exhibition of it on the stage would be insupportable. The person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring.[30]

The complexity, unity and subtlety of tragic plot, which Aristotle emphasizes as the necessary goal of the poet and the measure of his greatness in the extent to which it is achieved, depends largely upon the creation and development of interweaving irony whether verbal or situational through character. Aristotle places character as second in importance to plot, in tragedy, and defines it as "that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents, i.e., the sort of thing they seek or avoid."[31] Sophocles, as Aristotle acknowledges and Shelley realizes by according him the epithet of the "Greek Shakespeare", is the master of plot, character and the technique of irony as set out in Aristotle's dictum. With Aristotle's theories in mind, Shelley clearly uses Sophocles as his model and in the delineation of the character of Beatrice, the inspiration was surely the Greek master's Antigone.[32]

Fate, or the supernatural, as manipulating the destinies of mankind, does not figure prominently in Sophocles as it does in Aeschylus. The most striking aspect of Sophocles' characters and the circumstances

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30 Poetical Works, Preface, p.276 (see Aristotle upon "suffering" p.48).

31 Aristotle, 6, p.39.

32 R.C. Jebb, trans. Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments: Part III, The Antigone (Cambridge: At The University Press), 1891. Hereafter referred to as Antigone.

within which they find themselves is their humanity. It is the character of the individuals which moulds their fate and those involved with them and not vice versa. Thus, following the method of Sophocles, Shelley places all his dramatic emphasis upon the outstanding character in the story, Beatrice, and then examines her behaviour within a series of trying circumstances, contained in the action of the drama. The ultimate fate of corruption and destruction which Beatrice desperately endeavours to avoid through defensive action is, ironically, brought to pass through her determination to persist in her self-defence, through the act of parricide, and finally through her verbal defence in the trial scene: an irony which is evident in the character and fate of Sophocles' Oedipus as well as Antigone.

The most marked aspects of Antigone's character are the strength of her devotion to her family and the strength of her resolve. Shelley consistently reveals the concern of Beatrice for her family's welfare and stresses the fact that her subsequent acts for defence against the hostilities of her father are for the protection of her stepmother and brothers as well as for herself. Antigone's passionate idealism concerning what she considers to be morally right is clearly apparent in Beatrice, convinced that she is God's avenging angel. Another most admirable quality of Antigone's character which Beatrice also shares is her gentle tenderness, loyalty and purity. Antigone does not question that it is her religious duty to honourably bury her brother: her deep love for him and indignation at the outrage accorded to him leaves her no alternative but to act in spite of the king's edict: Beatrice shares the same choice as Antigone: she must choose between two laws, the unwritten universal law of Love and the written law of the State; her individual conscience leaves her no alternative but to choose to break the latter.

In the conflict between age and youth, individual liberty and established authority, there is a close parallel between Sophocles' and Shelley's drama. Creon, a much less malevolent and perverse despot than Count Cenci, is, nevertheless, the embodiment of state law and institutionalized religion. To Creon, the Family is the microcosm of the State, bound to obey unquestioningly the paternal authority which is the domestic representative of the political ruler. Order is maintained through obedience to this law, and the system of rewarding or punishing the people. Like Count Cenci, Creon believes that the will of the Gods reflects the laws of the State. Antigone equates God with universal love and individual conscience and its autonomy, just as Beatrice does. Antigone's defence before Creon in which these two irreconcilable views are presented parallels the trial scene between Beatrice and the Papal Judge.

The humanity of Sophocles' characters stems from the fact that they are not exceptionally good or evil. According to Aristotle it is the distinctiveness of the characters which counts in tragedy:[83] a distinctiveness which stems from the self-will which, whilst it might account for their nobility of character, is also, ironically, that fatal flaw which contributes toward the disaster which destroys them. Ajax, in the play of the same name, similarly to Beatrice, broods upon an injustice done to him until he becomes insane, commits a violent act, then, recovering his sanity, commits suicide. Aristotle stresses that the cause of a hero's tragic change in fortune is due not to his being surrounded by vice or depravity but to "some great error on his part."[84]

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83 Aristotle, 15, p.57. (See also pp. 50, 51, 55-6).

84 Ibid., 13, p.50.

Shelley, in his Preface, expresses much the same conviction that a human being is not so much a victim of circumstances, but a victim of self.[35]

> ...the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forebearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character:

The Chorus tells Antigone that "Thy self-willed temper hath wrought thy ruin."[36]

Neither Antigone nor Beatrice can see beyond their immediate reality of the outrage done to their families and themselves. This exclusiveness of their judgement certainly gives them heroic individuality but also accounts for the pathos of their essential humanity when the tragedy nears its end. Both Antigone and Beatrice isolate themselves and those close to them from the surrounding world through their passionate adherence to their individual conception of the exclusive validity of Divine Law over that of human law. Sophocles impresses this erroneous isolation through the use of a male chorus, rather than the more sympathetic female chorus, to answer Antigone's pleadings for sympathy, and her subsequent burial alive in an underground tomb. Isolation images concerning Beatrice abound in Shelley's drama and there can be no doubt that the nature of Antigone's death penalty must have interested him greatly as the numerous references in the Preface and the drama to the caverns and chasms of the mind as places of self-internment clearly reveal. Beatrice contemplates the horror of physical burial which becomes a bridal chamber within an underworld where she is doomed

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35 Poetical Works, Preface, p.276.

36 Antigone p.161.

to eternal ravishment by its ruler, her father. (V. iv. 60-67).

The Chorus in Antigone speaks of Antigone's live burial in the rock tomb as "thus passing to the bridal chamber where all are laid to rest."[37]

Beatrice and Antigone are not religious fanatics, prepared to lay down their lives for their beliefs. In fact the pathos of their situation and their human imperfection are expressed in both dramas through their desperate desire, when faced with death, to remain part of the material world. Antigone laments:

> See me, citizens of my fatherland, setting forth
> on my last way, looking my last on the sunlight
> that is for me no more; no, Hades who gives
> sleep to all leads me living to Acheron's shore;
> who have had no portion in the chant that brings
> the bride, nor hath any song been mine for
> the crowning of bridals; whom the lord of
> the Dark Lake shall wed.
> .....
> I pass to the rock-closed prison of my
> strange tomb, ah me unhappy! who have no
> home on the earth or in the shades, no
> home with the living or with the dead.[38]

Beatrice's lament is strikingly similar.[39]

> ... so young to go
> Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!
> To be nailed down into a narrow place;
> To see no more sweet sunshine; ...
> How fearful! to be nothing! Or to be...
> What? Oh, where am I? Let me not go mad!
> Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts! If
> there should be
> No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world!
> .....
> If all things then should be...my
> father's spirit,
> .....
> Masked in gray hairs and wrinkles, he
> should come
> And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix
> His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down,
> down!

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[37] Antigone, l. 805, p.149.

[38] Ibid., ll. 805-816, pp.149-151, ll. 849-851, p.157.

[39] The Cenci, Poetical Works, (V. iv, 49-67).

Their human imperfection is also evident in Antigone's and Beatrice's impatience with their weaker relatives. Beatrice's harsh words to Lucretia and Giacomo (V, iii, 20-47) closely resemble those of Antigone to her sister Ismene (11, 536-560).

The massive influence of Antigone upon Shelley in his character of Beatrice is clearly evident in the fact that both heroines are dominated by the necessity for action. Whilst the deed remains to be done and those representatives of all that they judge to be completely wrong remain, that is, Cleon in Sophocles' drama, and Count Cenci and his double, the Papal Judge in Shelley's, they are resolute in putting their "right" into action. Once the deed is accomplished and they are left alone with their thoughts, the reality of the consequences of their act overwhelms them. If their heroism stems from their simplicity so also does their uncertainty and bewilderment concerning the Divine powers who thrust such a responsibility upon them. Antigone exclaims:[40]

> What law of heaven have I transgressed?
> Why, hapless one, should I look to the gods
> any more,
> What ally should I invoke, - when by piety
> I have earned the name of impious?

Beatrice utters a similar dismayed uncertainty:

> ...I
> Have met with much injustice in this world;
> No difference has been made by God or man,
> Or any power moulding my wretched lot,
> .....
> You do well telling me to trust in God,
> I hope I do trust in Him. In whom else
> Can any trust? And yet my heart is cold.[41]

It is certainly to Shelley's credit that in spite of the similarities of his drama and its characters to Sophocles' Antigone and Shakespeare's tragedies, especially Macbeth, The Cenci and its principal character

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[40] Antigone, 11. 919, p.167. (See also Aristotle upon "action" 6, p.37).

[41] The Cenci, Poetical Works, (V. iv, 80-83, 87-89).

Beatrice have unique integrity. Following closely the precepts laid down by Aristotle, inspired by the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare, Shelley anticipated dramatic success for his play.

> I have written a tragedy, on the subject of a story well known in Italy, and in my conception, eminently dramatic. I have taken some pains to make my play fit for representation, and those who have already seen it judge favourably. It is written without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions which characterize my other compositions; I having attended simply to the impartial development of such characters as it is probable the persons represented really were, together with the greatest degree of popular effect to be produced by such a development.[42]

The Cenci, as Shelley frequently stresses in his letters, was "calculated to produce a very popular effect."[43] Amongst the members of Roman society, English and Italian alike, the details of the scandal had excited the most avid interest. With the story dramatized, how could it fail to produce the same interest and excitement amongst an audience? Shelley knew that "the multitude" for whom his play was written relished such gothic tales of horror, passion and vengeance.[44] The success of Lewis' The Monk, Walpole's Castle of Otranto and the mysteries of Mrs. Radcliffe certainly testified to this. Nevertheless, such a lurid story, plucked from the discreet surroundings of salon or drawing room, from hushed, intimate discussion or private reading, to be overtly represented on stage might have provoked quite a different reaction from an audience.

In the midst of his enthusiasm, Shelley realized this possibility and expressed his misgivings to Peacock.

> I send you a translation of the Italian M.SS. on which my play is founded; the chief circumstances of which I have touched very delicately; for my principal doubt as to whether it would succeed as an acting play hangs entirely on the question as to whether such a thing as incest in this shape, however treated would be admitted on the stage. I think however, it will form no objection, considering first that the facts are matter of history, and secondly the peculiar delicacy with which I have treated it.[45]

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42 Letters X p.61.
43 Ibid., pp.79, 148.
44 Ibid., p.61.
45 Idem.

Shelley did not let these misgivings dampen his enthusiasm for long and in the same letter he presents his plans for the production of his drama with eager anticipation.

> What I want you to do is, to procure for me its presentation at Covent Garden. The principal character Beatrice is precisely fitted for Miss O'Neil, and it might even seem to have been written for her (God forbid that I should ever see her play it - it would tear my nerves to pieces) and in all respects - it is fitted only for Covent Garden. The chief male character I confess I should be very unwilling that anyone but Kean should play -
>
> I think you know some of the people of that theatre, or, at least some one who knows them, and when you have read the play, you may say enough perhaps to induce them not to reject it without consideration.
>
> Write to me as soon as you can on this subject because it is necessary that I should present it, or, if rejected by the Theatre, print it this coming season lest somebody else should get hold of it, as the story which now exists in M.SS., begins to be generally known among the English.

Another problem concerning the acceptance of his play by theatre management or audience was that of the drama's authorship. Such notoriety was so unjustly associated with his name that Shelley considered it necessary to keep the authorship absolutely secret and thus improve his chances, with the help of Peacock's influence, for the play's acceptance.

> I wish to preserve a complete incognito, and can trust to you, that whatever else you do, you will at least favour me on this point. Indeed this is essential, deeply essential to its success. After it had been acted, and successfully (could I hope such a thing), I would own it if I pleased,...[46]

Mary Shelley also speaks of the necessity for secrecy in a letter written approximately two months after Shelley's to Amelia Curran, September 18, 1819.[47]

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[46] Ibid., pp.61-62.

[47] Frederick L. Jones, ed. The Letters of Mary W. Shelley (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman State, 1946), I, p.79. Hereafter referred to as "Mary's Letters". (The square brackets are the editor's, not mine.)

> ...Shelley has finished his tragedy and it is sent to London to be presented to the managers - it is still a deep secret and only one person, Peacock who presents it, knows anything about it in England - with S[helley]'s public and private enemies it would certainly fail if known it be his - his sister in law alone would hire enough people to damn it - it is written with great care and we have hopes that its story is sufficiently polished not to shock the audience - We shall see.

With plausible hopes for its acceptance, Shelley had two hundred and fifty copies of the play printed in Italy, without his name,[48] and sent to the publishers, Olliers, in London.[49] Shelley's misgivings, which his enthusiasm had shoved aside, proved to be well founded. Covent Garden refused the play. Mary Shelley recalls the circumstances of its rejection in the "Note on The Cenci."

> The play was accordingly sent to Mr. Harris. He pronounced the subject to be so objectionable that he could not even submit the part to Miss O'Neil for perusal but expressed his desire that the author would write a tragedy on some other subject which he would accept.[50]

In two letters, one to Charles Ollier, March 13, 1820, and the other to Leigh Hunt, April 5, 1820, Shelley's disappointment and bitterness at the rejection is hardly concealed under the tone of apparent indifference. The former letter suggests, unless it is a slip of the pen, that the drama was also refused at Drury Lane.

> - My friends here have great hopes that "The Cenci" will succeed as a publication. It was refused at Drury Lane, although expressly written for theatrical exhibition, on a plea of the story being too horrible. I believe it singularly fitted for the stage.[51]

The letter to Hunt expresses the same suppressed anger at the bias against the incest theme, together with a wry remark that the cloak of secrecy surrounding his authorship might have been penetrated.

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48 Letters X p.95.

49 Ibid., pp.77, 134.

50 Poetical Works, p.337.

51 Letters X, p.151.

> ...I am afraid the subject will not please you, but at least you will read my justification of it in the preface. I lay much stress upon that argument against a diversity of opinion to be produced by works of imagination. The very Theatre rejected it with expressions of the greatest insolence. I feel persuaded that they must have guessed at the author. But about this I don't much care.[52]

The printed copies of The Cenci were published by Ollier's in 1820 and sold exceedingly well[53] which was, perhaps, only a small consolation to Shelley whose letters state that he had written it expressly for the stage. Nevertheless its popularity is evident in the fact that it was the only work of Shelley's to attain a second edition during his lifetime.[54] Criticism of the drama was varied: in the main, approbatory from his friends and condemnatory from the literary magazines. Archdeacon Hare, although personally unknown to Shelley, was a great admirer of his work and wrote the laudatory review of The Cenci in the Ollier publication which Shelley found most reassuring whilst under attack from the literary critics.[55] Byron's letter to Shelley, dated April 26, 1821, differs from him as to the dramatic fitness of the subject of incest but otherwise commends The Cenci as "a work of power and poetry."[56] Peacock did not share Byron's point of view. Shelley remarks upon his criticism in a letter to Maria Gisborne, October 13, 1819, but dismisses it lightly at this time when his hopes were still high for its acceptance and success on the stage.

> I have just heard from Peacock saying that he dont [sic] think my tragedy will do and that he dont [sic] much like it. But I ought to say, to blunt the edge of his criticism, that he is a nursling of the exact and superficial school in poetry.[57]

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52 Ibid., p.154.

53 Mary's Letters, p.111.

54 Letters, X, p.79n.

55 Ibid., pp.232-233

56 Rowland E. Prothero, ed., The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals. (John Murray, London, 1901), V, p.268.

57 Letters, X, p.94.

Wordsworth shared much the same opinion as Peacock. Trelawny, when he was journeying through Switzerland in 1820, recalls Wordsworth's opinion of Shelley's poetry.

> ...I asked him abruptly what he thought of Shelley as a poet.
>
> "Nothing," he replied, as abruptly.
>
> Seeing my surprise, he added, "A poet who has not produced a good poem before he is twenty-five, we may conclude cannot, and never will do so."
>
> "The Cenci!" I said eagerly.
>
> "Won't do," he replied, shaking his head, as he got into the carriage:...[58]

Leigh Hunt's letter to Shelley and Mary, April 6, 1820, was most encouraging.

> Shelley's tragedy is out and flourishing. I recently took, as his friend and representative, congratulations on all sides, upon the dedication, the preface, and the drama. Ollier, who thought it would not sell, had to tell Henry Hunt the other day, that the first edition had almost all gone off already...What a noble book, Shelley, have you given us! What a true, stately, and yet affectionate mixture of poetry, philosophy, and human nature and horror, and all redeeming sweetness of intention, for there is an under-song of suggestion through it all, that sings, as it were, after the storm is over, like a brook in April....[59]

Whilst most of the literary reviews managed to find some words of praise for Shelley's poetic talent, the hostile reaction to his choice of incest as the theme caused such acknowledgement of his "bold, vigorous and manly" style[60] "the vigorous, clear, manly turn of expression, of which he makes excellent use to give force and even sublimity to the flashes of passion and of phrenzy, [sic]"[61] to be embedded almost imperceptibly in a mass of bitter invective.

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58 Records p.7.

59 The Correspondence of Leigh Hunt: Edited by his Eldest Son (Smith Elder & Co., London, 1862.) Vol.I, p.154.

60 Contemporary criticism is reproduced in: Newman Ivey White. The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and His Contemporary Critics (Duke University Press, North Carolina, 1938). Hereafter referred to as The Unextinguished Hearth, in this case p.176.

61 Ibid., p.190.

> Of all the abominations which intellectual perversion, and poetical atheism, have produced in our times, this tragedy appears to us to be the most abominable...We have heard of Mr. Shelley's genius; and were it exercised upon any subject not utterly revolting to human nature, we might acknowledge it. But there are topics so disgusting...and this is one of them; there are themes so vile...as this is; there are descriptions so abhorrent to mankind...and this drama is full of them; there are crimes so beastly and demoniac... in which The Cenci riots and luxuriates, that no feelings can be excited by their obtrusion but those of detestation at the choice, and horror of the elaboration.... No; the whole design, and every part of it is a libel upon humanity; the conception of a brain not only distempered, but familiar with infamous images and accursed contemplation...[62]

It is not surprising that Shelley was disappointed and disheartened by the harshness of many of these reviews following upon the Theatre's rejection. That the play was selling well as "a shocker" and because of the author's notoriety would hardly have pleased Shelley considering the lofty hopes that surrounded its composition and the spirit of idealism with which he conceived the tragic story. These instances of praise barely compensated for the welter of vituperation as the flat tone of Shelley's letter to Charles and James Ollier, January 20, 1821, suggests

> The Reviews of my "Cenci" (though some of them, and especially that marked "John Scott" are written with great malignity) on the whole give me as much encouragement as a person of my habits of thinking is capable of receiving from such a source,... My next attempt (if I should write more) will be a drama, in the composition of which I shall attend to the advice of my critics to a certain degree, but I doubt whether I shall write more.[63]

The tone of despondency is even more apparent in a letter to Byron, written four months later in May 1821. So disappointed was Shelley that, quite contrary to fact, he states that The Cenci had even failed as a "good seller".

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62 Ibid., p.168 ff.

63 Letters X p.232.

> My "Cenci" had, I believe, a complete failure - at least the silence of the bookseller would say so. I am aware of the unfitness of the subject, now it is written, but I had a different opinion in composition. I wish I could believe that it merited - or that anything of mine merited - the friendly commendations that you give them....
>
> This attempt in Italy has certainly been a most unfortunate business. With no strong personal reasons to interest me, my disappointment on public grounds has been excessive. But I cling to moral and political hope, like a drowner to a plank.[64]

One may indeed wonder why Shelley could so easily and quickly forget how controversial a subject incest was to the English as to make it the central theme of his first tragedy. Only one year earlier, April, 1819, The Quarterly Review, in the midst of its condemnation of Laon and Cythna (The Revolt of Islam) singled out its theme of incest as the most perverse instance of the author's idealism of "lawless love".[65] Shelley's idealism of unconsciously perpetrated incest as a symbol of the perfect love-union was of vastly different character from the premeditated, aggressive incest of The Cenci. Yet, if the former instance of his use of the theme had incited such censure what else but its dramatic representation should incite even greater condemnation? That this obvious reason for the unfitness of an incest theme did not occur to Shelley during the play's conception and composition, suggests that the writing of the drama had an intensely personal significance for him which went deeper even than his desires to establish himself as a dramatist.

Shelley's letter to Maria Gisborne, November 16, 1819[66] mentions the positive and negative symbolic significance of incest in a way in which the poet's point of view merges with that of the psychologist in its scrutiny of human behaviour. The latter part of the statement's relevance to the treatment of the incest theme in The Cenci is clearly discernible.

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64 Ibid., p.266.

65 The Unextinguished Hearth, p.136.

66 Letters, X, p.124. See also Trelawny's Records, p.108.

> Incest is like many other incorrect things a very poetical circumstance. It may be the defiance of everything for the sake of another which clothes itself in the glory of the highest heroism, or it may be that cynical rage which, confounding the good and the bad in existing opinions breaks through them for the purpose of rioting in selfishness and antipathy.

No less important, symbolically, than the portrait of Beatrice Cenci was the Casa Cenci

> The Cenci Palace is of great extent; and though in part modernized, there yet remains a vast and gloomy pile of feudal architecture in the same state as during the dreadful scenes which are the subject of this tragedy. The Palace is situated in an obscure corner of Rome,... in which Cenci built the Chapel to St. Thomas), supported by granite columns and adorned with antique friezes of fine workmanship, and built up, according to the ancient Italian fashion, with balcony over balcony of open-work. One of the gates of the Palace formed of immense stones and leading through a passage, dark and lofty and opening into gloomy subterranean chambers, struck me particularly.
>
> Of the Castle of Petrella, I could obtain no further information than that which is to be found in the manuscript.[67]

Shelley's description of the Cenci Palace is reminiscent of the downward winding entrance to the kingdom of Hades, dark and claustrophobic which, in his play, serves also as a metaphor for the inner recesses of the human mind. The latter part of the above description of the Palace parallels Shelley's description in the Preface of the events in The Cenci.

> ...acting upon and with each other, yet all conspiring to one tremendous end, would be as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.[68]

The subtle and sinister processes of the human mind which produces such perverse acts of incestuous rape and murder, rather than the acts, per se,

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[67] Ibid., pp.300-301.

[68] Poetical Works, Preface, p.276.

were the real foci of Shelley's interest and scrutiny in the writing of the play and it is in his shrewd analysis of the human mind in order to expose the reason for perverse behaviour that the play's true emphasis is revealed; a fact which contemporary criticism overlooked in its censorship of Shelley for displaying what they superficially judged to be morbid self-indulgence in diabolical perversity. Shelley's absorbing interest in the processes of the human mind in connection with his writing of The Cenci is further corroborated by the footnote to the draft - preface of The Cenci, concerning a line of Sophocles' poetry.[69]

> And the Greek Shakespeare - Sophocles
>
> πολλας δ' οδους ελθοντα φροντι. πλα. & seq & c.
>
> a line of an almost unfathomable depth of poetry, yet how simple are the images in which it is arrayed.
>
> "Coming to many paths in the wanderings of careful thought"...
>
> What a picture does this line suggest of the mind as a wilderness of intricate paths, wide as the universe which is here made its symbol, a world within a world - which he, who seeks some Knowledge with respect to what he ought to do, searches throughout, as he would search the external universe for some valued thing which was hidden from him upon its surface.

With this data taken into consideration it would seem unlikely that the writing of The Cenci was motivated merely by despondency of spirits. Nor would Shelley's interest in the incest theme seem to arise simply from a predilection for gothic horrors or even, as Shelley himself suggested at a later date, by a decision to write a good "pot-boiler".[70] The immediate circumstances surrounding the writing of The Cenci at the Villa Valsovano in Leghorn were indicative of a man facing reality, rather than running away from it.[71] Mary Shelley recalls these

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69 Notebooks, II, pp.101-102.

70 Records, I, p.124.

71 Ibid., p.100.

circumstances in her "Note on The Cenci":

> At the top of the house there was a sort of terrace, ...very small yet not only roofed but glazed. This Shelley made his study; it looked out on a wide prospect of fertile country and commanded a view of the near sea. The storms that sometimes varied our day showed themselves most picturesquely as they were driven across the ocean; ...At other times the dazzling sunlight and heat made it almost intolerable to every other; but Shelley basked in both, and his health and spirits revived under their influence. In this airy cell he wrote the principal part of The Cenci.[72]

The completion of The Cenci was accomplished in the remarkably brief time of only two months, which fact, taken with some remarks in a letter of Shelley's to Thomas Peacock, August 1819, implies a deeper cathartic purpose behind his drama's creation, even though Shelley does say that writing The Cenci was, physically, an ordeal.

> ...I have been much better these last three weeks - my work on the Cenci, which was done in two months, was a fine antidote to nervous medicines and kept up, I think, the pain in my side as sticks do a fire. Since then, I have materially improved.[73]

It would seem that in "the airy cell" at Villa Valsovano, Shelley undertook the exorcism of the demons of self-pity and doubt incurred by his experience of the recent personal tragedies which had indeed severely shaken the idealistic principles upon which he had always based his life. In 1811 Shelley had expressed a doubt, in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener, concerning the realization of his ideals.

> You talk of a future state: "is not this imagination", you ask, "a proof of it?" To me it appears so: to me everything proves it. But what we earnestly desire we are very much prejudiced in favour of.[74]

Eight years later in 1819 this doubt seemed to reaffirm itself most harshly and for Shelley, demanded resolution if the fetters of doubt were to be

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72 Poetical Works, pp.335-336.

73 Letters, X, p.73.

74 Bertram Dobell, ed. Letters from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Elizabeth Hitchener (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1908), p.106.
(Hereafter referred to as Hitchener Letters).

cast off. Thus it was quite in character for Shelley to face the ultimate reality by putting all he held sacred, that is, his ideals, to the test. This "trial by ordeal" took the form of the writing of The Cenci.

Considered as an embodiment of psychological tensions, The Cenci, in its examination of the labyrinthine depths of his protagonists' minds, may well represent the uncompromising exploration of Shelley's own mind, which "he who seeks some knowledge with respect to what he ought to do searches throughout." An idealist would term this knowledge "Truth"; for Shelley, it was also the reality of wisdom. Accordingly, Shelley declares in the Preface that the

> ...highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion to the possession of which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant and kind.[75]

The critic, Ellsworth Barnard, in his interpretation of Shelley's religious beliefs,[76] regards the poet's demand for the necessity of self-knowledge as not characteristic of Shelley. More fundamental to the poet's beliefs, he argues, is the necessity to put knowledge and will into action if good is to triumph over the forces of evil:

> ...that in such passages as those quoted, Shelley is for once confused as to the issues and temporarily accepts the Socratic (and Godwinian) doctrine of the identity of knowledge and virtue without recognising that it is incompatible with his own fundamental belief that the existence of evil and its possible conquest by good both depend directly upon the human will.

I consider that Shelley's fundamental belief concerning the efficacy of human will against evil underwent a radical change at the time of The

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75 Poetical Works, Preface , p.276.

76 Ellsworth Barnard, Shelley's Religion (Russell and Russell, New York, 1964), p.261.

Cenci's composition. The whole drama is a remarkably subtle and complex projection of the actual impotence of beneficient human will against the forces of evil in the world, suggesting indeed that such will even contributes to the power of evil. (I consider this paradox more at length in Chapter five.)

Stuart Curran remarks upon the extraordinarily frequent appearance of the verb "do" in the drama.[77] When "do" becomes "done", however, the consequences are invariably evil or tragic whether the act stems from an apparently selfish or a generous impulse. These are the ironic facts, Shelley plainly states in the Preface, which constitute Beatrice's error and tragedy.[78] Its passive resistance stemming from the virtue of self-knowledge which Shelley clear-sightedly advocates.

It seems extremely doubtful whether the drama, with its masterly manipulation of ironic contradictions, could ever have been written without Shelley's realization that the attainment of virtuous self-knowledge was indeed incompatible with his hitherto fundamental conviction that the triumph of good over evil depended upon volition. In his final work "The Triumph of Life" (1822), Shelley sadly pondered the "reality" which he had first realized in The Cenci.

> And much I grieved to think how power and will
> In opposition rule our mortal day,
> And why God made irreconcilable
> Good and the means of good;...
>
> (228-231)

I have endeavoured, in this introduction, to reveal and establish mainly through the evidence of such contemporary documents as Shelley's own letters and working note book, the depth of Shelley's personal involvement in the writing of The Cenci. From the point of view

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[77] Shelley's Cenci, pp.133-134.

[78] Poetical Works, Preface, p.276.

of his concern with his artistic skill, The Cenci was to be the measure of his true worth as an artist, representing a new and important stage in his artistic career. From the viewpoint of Shelley, the idealist, it represented a courageous determination to find the truth in the reality of human experience rather than in the dream regions of his imagination.

Shelley's creative output throughout his life was concerned mainly with expressing the political, social and spiritual problems of his time. The difference with The Cenci is that this concern becomes almost incidental through the shifting of the focus from the world of the individual and his or her personal problems, and even further inwards to probe the universe and its essential paradox. As such the play's true concern is with the world within, even though the outer world is a powerful presence in the play. Thus I have attempted to place the "black pearl" of The Cenci within its proper setting: against the immediate adverse circumstances of Shelley's life, both in its personal and professional aspects, which brought the work into being.

"The True value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self."

(Albert Einstein.
From: Mein Weltbild, 1934, quoted in Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein, 1956)

CHAPTER ONE

COUNT CENCI'S "MORAL DEFORMITY"

The critics, in Shelley's day, of his characterization of Count Cenci were, in the main, united in their vociferous indignation against such a horrific concept.

> ...he is a mere personification of wickedness and insanity ...There is no mode of expressing depravity in words which Mr. Shelley has not ransacked his imagination to ascribe to his wretch. His depravity is not even that of human nature; for it is depravity without passion, without aim, without temptation:...No such being as Cenci ever existed; none such could exist.[1]

The Count is regarded as little else than one of the monsters of Shelley's own thought, "the conception of a brain not only distempered, but familiar with infamous images, and accursed contemplations."[2]

Such criticism is united in denying Count Cenci's character anything in common with humanity. The perverse count is too monstrous to be human and this naturally evidences weakness in the conception and creation of such a character. Yet, such disparaging criticism could not, and often does not, deny the fact that the Count's character has an extraordinary power.

> That "one with white hair and imperious brow" should satiate his hatred by an expedient of this sort, it is impossible to believe, and yet there is something so devilishly malignant in such a consummation; so rashly wicked, and immeasurably fearful, that it contributes more than any other feature of this tragedy to feed the dark splendour and extent of Mr. Shelley's genius. We feel "sick with hate" at this picture of atrocity, and yet what finer compliment can be paid to its power, than the excess of such a painful sensation.[3]

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1 The Unextinguished Hearth pp.212-213. See also pp.192-193.

2 Ibid. p.168.

3 Ibid. p.179.

A character, weak in concept and execution, is rarely compelling. If Count Cenci were no more than a monster of Shelley's thought; a projection of his unresolved adolescent eroticism, then Cenci's character, his thoughts and deeds, would be too absurd to promote anything but a response of laughter or indifference. Yet Count Cenci's character has the power to disturb and frighten in the mere energy of his evil, expressed through the lack of harmony between the rational and irrational functions of his mind, his unslaked appetite for power, and his perverse sexuality. Count Cenci's character is horrific but not ludicrous, and the power sustained by his presence in the drama stems from his reality as a human being.

Stuart Curran, in his masterly study of Cenci's character, acknowledges the subtle penetration of Shelley's conception of the Count by noting

> ...that the Count is an artist, conscious of his every effect, careful of the placement of accents on this canvas over which he is master, relishing each bold and dramatic stroke. Cenci is both spectator and participant, and especially in this first act we sense a secondary personality behind the first, a shrewd critic, aware of the slightest flaw in texture or technique and capable of its instant correction....Cenci has refined his art to the point where the subtlest nuance has impact, where the simplest means achieve the greatest possible effect. His art has become a distillation of purest evil.[4]

In the evil of Count Cenci, Shelley has given an extraordinarily perceptive study of insanity, its symptoms and behaviour, and made it all the more frighteningly realistic by bringing it to life and power in his drama. Certainly Shelley's dramatic conception and execution of the Count's "moral deformity" was pre-Freudian, but even Freud agreed that the romantic poets had an instinct for psychological insight into human

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[4] Shelley's Cenci pp.73, 74.

behaviour, both normal and particularly abnormal[5] Writes Stuart Curran: "Shelley's delineation of the inmost mind of a criminal psychopath is stunning in its perception."[6] The negative power of Count Cenci's character may be seen to stem, not illogically from his lack of humanity, but from the perverse humanity of a psychotic.

The positive progress from childhood to maturity may be regarded as one of harmonious integration, both personal and social, towards the goal of the realization of the whole of oneself. This benevolent ideal of unity through human fellowship finds its negation in Count Cenci's ideal of horror through the wilful perversion and disintegration of such unity, represented individually in his daughter, Beatrice, and collectively, in his whole family. The process of perversion is already accomplished in the character of the Count when the play begins. Except for one final act of degradation yet to be undertaken, all others have been performed and the focus is upon the mind which could, and still hungers to, conceive such corrupt deeds.

Accordingly, the first scene of the drama is concerned with the questioning of the rationale for the Count's perverse behaviour from the sympathetic, if rather naïve, Cardinal Camillo.

> Talk with me, Count, - you know I mean you well.
> I stood beside your dark and fiery youth
> Watching its bold and bad career, as men
> Watch meteors, but it vanished not - I marked
> Your desperate and remorseless manhood; now
> Do I behold you in dishonoured age
> Charged with a thousand unrepented crimes.
> (I. i, 48-54)

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5 The influence of romantic theories and observations upon the unconscious is discussed in Philip Rieff's Freud: The Mind of the Moralist (The Viking Press, New York, 1959), pp.34-36, 41-42, 93-94, 345-346, and Lancelot Whyte's The Unconscious Before Freud (Basic Books Inc., New York, 1960).

6 Shelley's Cenci, p.86.

To this the Count replies, with Marlovian candour,

> Seeing I please my senses as I list,
> And vindicate that right with force or guile,
> It is a public matter, and I care not
> If I discuss it with you. I may speak
> Alike to you and my own conscious heart -
> (I. i, 68-73)

Thus directly, almost eagerly, Count Cenci provides the explanation for his "bold bad career" with a brief but vivid analysis of his own character and its perverse development from youth to old age. Quite clearly it is the character of the Count and not his deeds which is to be of more interest in the drama. If Shelley were concerned with conceiving the Count merely as a gothic villain or erotic self-projection, the deeds which are only summarily and indirectly spoken of in the Count's speech, would have been given prominence in the action of the drama, with the result that only the superficial aspects of his character, his lust and cruelty, would have been detectable. However, Shelley deliberately and subtly shifts the emphasis, so that deeds past and present are to be grasped as the mere expression of the complexity of his character, which is continually being exposed, as Count Cenci is made "to speak alike" to all willing to listen, "from his conscious heart". By this method only can the symptoms both overt and, more importantly, implicit, of the Count's neurosis be revealed.

> All men delight in sensual luxury,
> All men enjoy revenge; and most exult
> Over the tortures they can never feel -
> Flattering their secret peace with others' pain.
> But I delight in nothing else. I love
> The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
> When this shall be another's, and that mine.
> (I. i, 77-83)

The Count's intense materialism, that delight taken in "sensual luxury", has centred upon the power of revenge: lust, taken to its extreme, commutes readily to sadism, just as dominance can become malicious tyranny.

Earlier, Count Cenci boasted of four basic attributes of his personality, "strength, wealth, and pride, and lust" (I. i, 31) all of which have undergone perversion in his old age. Strength has been corrupted into vindictive oppression, concern with wealth into avarice, pride into egoism, even latterly as egotheism, and lust into sadism as the latter part of his speech reveals.

> True, I was happier than I am, while yet
> Manhood remained to act the thing I thought;
> While lust was sweeter than revenge; and now
> Invention palls:- Ay, we must all grow old -
> And but that there yet remains a deed to act
> Whose horror might make sharp an appetite
> Duller than mine - I'd do - I know not what.
> (I. i, 96-102)

Shelley does not seem to regard material desires as perverse in themselves; perversion occurs only when these desires become intensified into an exclusive passion, unequal, profane, and demanding constant stimulation. "Evil passions" and "the difficulties of the material world",[7] Shelley writes in his "Essay on Christianity", are able to be conquered by man,

> ...so long as he accords no veneration to the splendour of his apparel, the luxury of his food, the multitude of his flatterers and slaves. It is because, o mankind, ye value and seek the empty pageantry of wealth and social power that ye are enslaved to its posessions [sic] Decrease your physical wants, ...men...have cultivated these meaner wants to so great an excess as to judge nothing valuable or desirable but what relates to their gratification. Hence has arisen a system of passions which loses sight of the end which they were originally awakened to attain. Fame, power and gold are loved for their own sakes, are worshipped with a blind and habitual idolatry. ...It is from the cultivation of the most contemptible properties of human nature, that the discord and torpor and [sic] by which the moral universe is disordered essentially depend.[8]

So involved has Count Cenci become in the physical world that it is the sole basis of his sense of his own reality. He has come to

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7 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI p.244.

8 Ibid., pp.244, 246.

depend upon his experience of all the material world can offer and which is his for the taking: sensual pleasure and absolute power. The need for intense physical pleasure now has to be mingled with the experience of pain inflicted not only upon others but upon his own self in order to be gratified. Sexual indulgence has now become sexual perversion in which sadistic and masochistic traits have become combined in the one person. Shelley reveals this, subtly, in the lines quoted earlier in which the Count, not content with horrifying the kindly Camillo with his revelation, must also horrify himself (I. i, 100-2). The ideal of sensual pleasure has, in old age, become perverted into the ideal of horror, the acts of which alone, have the power to excite sexual appetite.[9]

> When I was young I thought of nothing else
> But pleasure; and I fed on honey sweets:
> Men, by St. Thomas! cannot live like bees,
> And I grew tired: - yet, till I killed a foe,
> And heard his groans, and heard his children's
> groans,
> Knew I not what delight was else on earth,
> Which now delights me little....
> (I. i, 103-109)

Shelley makes Count Cenci the epitome of the erroneous man who makes pleasure an end in itself and thereby contributes to the moral evil of the world. Sensual pleasure has become, in Count Cenci's old age, almost exclusively a mental experience: the idea rather than the act excites him. Thus, the rape which he plans for Beatrice may be sensual, but incest adds a perverse idea which predominates. The Count, in his arrogance and determination to avoid a closer personal relationship with the Cardinal, who is, it would seem, attempting to achieve this with a therapeutic aim in mind, takes malicious pleasure in admitting his true

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[9] See also: II. i, 123-127.

decadence. Sadism is not merely pleasure taken in the act of inflicting torture but delight in the idea of suffering undergone by the victim.

> ... I the rather
> Look on such pangs as terror ill conceals,
> The dry fixed eyeball; the pale quivering lip,
> Which tell me that the spirit weeps within
> Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ.
> I rarely kill the body, which preserves,
> Like a strong prison, the soul within my power,
> Wherein I feed it with the breath of fear
> For hourly pain.
> (I. i, 109-116)

Such an admission to his gentle companion is consciously aimed to maintain his own separate existence from the threat of human fellowship as represented by the Cardinal's attempt to "draw him in" and confide his problems. If the Cardinal, at the beginning of their conversation, felt an affinity with the Count based upon their closeness in years and as fellow Christians, at the close he is aware only of alienation. Even the Cardinal realizes that such an explanation for his perverse behaviour points to a disordered personality, apart from, and in contention with the rest of society, united as one body in Christ.[10] The Cardinal expresses this realization by comparing Count Cenci, as one would in that period of history, with a devil; an outcast from all that represents the normality of order and benevolence, a figure of chaos and perversion.

> Hell's most abandoned fiend
> Did never, in the drunkenness of guilt,
> Speak to his heart as now you speak to me;
> (I. i, 117-119)

The Count's explanation that his perverse behaviour stems directly from his lust for physical pleasure is too simple to be entirely true. Although the Cardinal should believe him he says, "I thank my God that I believe you not" (I. i, 120). The answer for such repulsive

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[10] See the "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI pp.245, 247.

aspects of human nature, which horrify the audience no less than they do the Cardinal, is decidedly complex, far more complex than the Count himself consciously realizes. The depth of Shelley's insight into "the moral deformity" of a personality such as the Count's, is revealed most subtly in his technique of letting the Count's own words disclose, unwittingly, the true source of his neurosis. Camillo's friendly enquiry has served to bring into the consciousness of the Count his murderous, perverse, and as is shortly revealed, incestuous fantasies, so that one may perceive that the key work to unlocking the grisly mystery of such a perverse character is not "delight" but "youth".

Hamlet's criticism of Polonius that "an old man is twice a child"[11] has a sinister ring if we apply it to Count Cenci and Shelley's theme of the perversion of unity. Biologically Count Cenci has completed the process from child to adult. Psychologically there has been no progression, as his own words testify. The youth obsessed with sensuous "delights" is now the old man still in need of the same stimulation but able only to achieve it at the expense of another's well-being. Sensual gratification has become inextricably bound up with the perverse need to dominate or tyrannize over his fellow creatures. This "calamitous and diseased aspect" of the Count's character is "overgrown...with the vices of sensuality and selfishness." Unlike the wise man Count Cenci does not "strip sensuality of its pomp and selfishness of its excuses" which, if effected, would enable him to "feel the meanness and the injustice of sacrificing the leisure and the liberty of his fellowmen to the indulgence of his physical appetites and becoming a party to their degradation by the consummation of his own."[12]

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11 Hamlet II. ii, 388-389.

12 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI p.246.

When the process from child to adult involves the harmonious integration of the individual into society, then the adult may be regarded as having achieved maturity at one with sanity. The Count's perverse behaviour clearly discloses the child, concealed grotesquely behind an adult exterior. He boasts gleefully of his ability to do whatever he wants, delights in his wilfulness, constantly strives to be better than, or superior to all others. Consider also his childish enjoyment of frightening and shocking others, as well as himself, evident not only in the opening scene with Cardinal Camillo but particularly in the banquet scene, when he deliberately shocks his guests by celebrating his sons' deaths (I. iii. 43-50). The incontinency of his behaviour is intensified when he turns this macabre celebration into a perversion of the Eucharist.

> Cenci (filling a bowl of wine, and lifting it up). Oh, thou bright wine whose purple splendour leaps
> And bubbles gaily in this golden bowl
> Under the lamplight, as my spirits do,
> To hear the death of my accursed sons!
> Could I believe thou wert their mingled blood,
> Then would I taste thee like a sacrament,
> And pledge with thee the mighty Devil in Hell,
> Who, if a father's curses, as men say
> Climb with swift wings after their children's souls,
> And drag them from the very throne of Heaven,
> Now triumphs in my triumph! - But thou art
> Superfluous; I have drunken deep of joy,
> And I will taste no other wine to-night.
> Here, Andrea! Bear the bowl around.
> (I. iii, 77-89)

The infantile and the primitive often seem to merge[13] as twin sources of neurotic behaviour, and the "black mass" sequence testifies

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13 See A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII, p.110.

to Shelley's perception of this aspect of "moral deformity". The Count also displays the childish curiosity in, and fascination for, that which is forbidden and placed out of reach, a trait which Shelley subtly implies in Cenci's admission of his most recent source of sensual stimulation, the torment of the soul itself. With the equally infantile determination to bring the forbidden into his grasp, Cenci has drawn the individual soul into his power (I. i, 110-116).

The compulsive drive for power in an adult often involves aggression in its passion for tyranny. In the child, displays of aggressive self-assertiveness, bound up with its desire to be freely independent may be regarded as being at one with, and ameliorated by the positive direction of the child's progression towards maturity. In an "adult child" like Count Cenci, such traits are entirely negative as the process to maturity is stagnant. The infantile traits of insecurity, aggression and need for independence and power depend upon his being isolated from, not at one with, humanity: such is "the selfish man" who holds humanity's soul captive and "feeds it" with the "hourly pain". (I. i, 108-116).

Shelley conceives that a child's detachment from sympathizing with the pain suffered by his nurse or mother is "attributable rather to ignorance than insensibility".

> ...Thus an infant, a savage, and a solitary beast is selfish, because its mind is incapable [of] receiving an accurate intimation of the nature of pain as existing in beings resembling itself....The only distinction between the selfish man, and the virtuous man, is that the imagination of the former is confined within a narrow limit, whilst that of the latter embraces a comprehensive circumference....Selfishness is thus the offspring of ignorance and mistake; it is the portion of unreflecting infancy, and savage solitude, or of those whom toil or evil occupations have [blunted and rendered torpid;][14]

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14 "Speculations on Morals", ("upon Benevolence") in Complete Works VI, pp.75-76. (The brackets in this extract are the editor's, not mine.)

Count Cenci is afraid of nothing and no-one in the pursuit of his perverse pleasures.

> And I have no remorse and little fear,
> Which are, I think, the checks of other men.
> This mood has grown upon me, until now
> Any design my captious fancy makes
> The picture of its wish, and it forms none
> But such as men like you would start to know,
> Is as my natural food and rest debarred
> Until it be accomplished.
>
> (I. i, 84-90)

Shelley writes in his essay "On the Punishment of Death"[15] that men "capable of committing acts wholly selfish" such as murder, rape and plunder are usually impervious to fear or pain. Apparently, Count Cenci fits into this perverse category very well indeed. However, Shelley also reveals, ironically, that the fear Count Cenci instils into his victims and by which he sustains power over them (I. i, 114-116) is also the inner spur to his compulsive drive for power. Cenci's claim to fearlessness is prompted, paradoxically, by the infantile insecurity which demands that he must arrogantly and repeatedly assert his superiority over his fellow creatures. Shelley makes this aspect of his neurosis disturbingly apparent early in the drama, by portraying its typical manifestation in the Count's paranoid behaviour.

> (Looking around him suspiciously)
> I think they cannot hear me at that door;
> What if they should? And yet I need not speak
> Though the heart triumphs with itself in words.
> O, thou most silent air, that shalt not hear
> What now I think! Thou, pavement, which I tread
> Towards her chamber, - let your echoes talk
> Of my imperious step scorning surprise,
> But not of my intent!...
>
> (I, i, 137-144)

Shelley's acute insight into perverse traits of human thought and deed is well born out by his technique of revealing, firstly, the overt

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15 In Complete Works, VI, p.188.

symptoms of paranoia in the Count's character and then by exploring its more subtle and complex manifestations in the Count's relationships with the members of his family. The mature ideal of unity involves an individual's progress through equal relationships with other individuals, all of whom are comprehended, and "loved" as "wholes":

> You ought to love all mankind, nay, every individual of mankind; you ought not to love the individuals of your domestic circle less, but to love those who exist beyond it, more. Once make the feelings of confidence and affection universal and the distinctions of property and power will vanish: nor are they to be abolished without substituting something equivalent in mischief to them, until all mankind shall acknowledge an entire community of rights.[16]

Shelley discloses that a selfish personality, such as the Count's, cannot possibly comprehend, or accept such a concept of community. Already, Cenci imagines (and paranoia is delusional) that he is the innocent victim of unprovoked persecution: "they" are plotting to weaken and destroy him although he is the one who hates and avoids his fellowmen. Shelley brings out these paranoid traits most vividly in Count Cenci's violent outburst against Lucretia:

> Lucretia (advancing timidly towards him).
> O husband! Pray forgive poor Beatrice.
> She meant not any ill.
> Cenci Nor you perhaps?
> Nor that young imp, whom you have taught
> by rote
> Parricide with his alphabet? Nor Giacomo?
> Nor those two most unnatural sons, who
> stirred
> Enmity up against me with the Pope?
> Whom in one night merciful God cut off:
> Innocent lambs! They thought not any ill.
> You were not here conspiring? You said
> nothing
> Of how I might be dungeoned as a madman;
> Or be condemned to death for some offence,
> And you would be the witnesses? - This
> failing,
> How just it were to hire assassins, or
> Put sudden poison in my evening drink?
> Or smother me when overcome by wine?
> Seeing we had no other judge but God,
> And He had sentenced me, and there were none

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16 "Essay on Christianity" (upon the "Equality of Mankind") in Complete Works VI pp.245-246.

But you to be the executioners
Of His decree enregistered in Heaven?
Oh, no! You said not this?
Lucretia So help me God,
I never thought the things you charge me
with!
Cenci If you dare speak that wicked lie again
I'll kill you....
(II, i, 129-150)[17]

Such perverse delusions excite the aggressive impulses which arise from the Count's insecurity. This is especially evident after his confrontation with the rebellious Beatrice in the banquet episode; "So much has passed between us as must make/Me bold, her fearful" (II. i. 123).

Inequality is the perverse standard of the Count's personality. His egocentricity stems from a perverted belief that he can only be whole at the expense of his fellow-beings.[18] This applies particularly to the members of his own family whom he resents and fears as "particles of his divided being": his wives by law, and his children by blood.

The Count's perverse concept of unity is a materialistic one. Determined to preserve at all costs his self-containment, he reacts aggressively towards his children who, as they represent individually "parts" of his own being, contain also the threat of future, if not present, equality. Hence, his hatred of his sons Rocco and Cristofano is compounded by their demands upon one of his sources of individual power, his money, and this justifies his desire for their deaths.

There came an order from the Pope to make
Fourfold provision for my cursèd sons;
Whom I had sent from Rome to Salamanca,
Hoping some accident might cut them off;
And meaning if I could starve them there.
I pray thee, God, send some quick death
upon them!
.....
My disobedient and rebellious sons
Are dead! - Why, dead! - ...
.....

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17 See also: I. i, 16-23; 60-65; 137-142; IV. i, 1-5.

18 See "Speculations on Morals" (upon "Justice") in Complete Works VI p.77 (1st paragraph).

> And they will need no food or raiment more:
> The tapers that did light them the dark way
> Are their last cost. The Pope, I think, will not
> Expect I should maintain them in their coffins.
> Rejoice with me - my heart is wondrous glad.
> (I. i, 129-134; iii, 43-50)

His constant fear of being dominated gives rise to Cenci's obsession with maintaining inequality, especially in the already close relationships existing in the family unit. Hence his detachment and superiority as expressing his independence and complete disregard of other individuals. Shelley expresses these paranoid traits most realistically in the Count's attitude to his daughter, Beatrice, an attitude which parallels, albeit with greater intensity, that towards his sons. The perverseness of this attitude is discernible when the Count speaks of his daughter as

> ...this my blood,
> This particle of my divided being;
> Or rather, this my bane and my disease,
> Whose sight infects and poisons me; this devil
> Which sprung from me as from a hell,...
> (IV. i, 116-121)

Affectionate ties cannot exist for Count Cenci. He fears such ties as involving the putting of oneself into another's power, thus allowing his personality to be invaded and dominated. Accordingly, Cenci despises his second wife, Lucretia, as surely as he despised his first wife whose "loathed image" he sees in his youngest son, Bernardo (II. i, 120; I. i, 135-136).

Beatrice is the one who seems, to the Count, most surely to threaten his perverse independence. She is the one who most closely resembles him by inheriting the indomitable "Cenci will", evidence of an "equality" which the Count cannot tolerate. The only solution to this threat of losing his identity in his daughter, is not to destroy her, but to completely possess her. "To poison and corrupt her soul", "To bend

her to my will" (IV. i. 45, 77). The extreme egoism of the Count finds, in sexual possession, the means of taking back into himself that "part" of his being and thus precluding its having any identity of its own. In order to maintain the utter dependence of his son, Giacomo, Cenci reduces him, and his family, to poverty.

> Giacomo. Well, I will calmly tell you what
> he did.
> This old Francesco Cenci, as you know,
> Borrowed the dowry of my wife from me,
> And then denied the loan; and left me so
> In poverty, the which I sought to mend
> By holding a poor office in the state.
> It had been promised to me, and already
> I bought new clothing for my ragged babes,
> And my wife smiled; and my heart knew repose.
> When Cenci's intercession, as I found,
> Conferred this office on a wretch, whom thus
> He paid for vilest service.
> (III. i, 298-309).

Essentially jealous attitudes such as those of Cenci towards his children arise from "love of self",

> ...a love which is self-centred, self-devoted, self-interested: it desires its own interest: it is the parent of jealousy.... Selfishness, monopoly, is its very soul; and to communicate to others part of this love were to destroy its essence, to annihilate this chain of straw.[19]

The Count's immaturity makes him quite incapable of fulfilling the parental role with any of his children. In the act of incest, Cenci not only abrogates parenthood but perverts the moral and spiritual ideal of harmonious unity in a sexual relationship. The situation is grotesquely one-sided; an essentially predatory act. Shelley defines such an act as the outcome of an "excess of hate".

> ...that cynical rage which, confounding the good and bad in existing opinions breaks through them for the purpose of rioting in selfishness and antipathy.[20]

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19 Hitchener letters (12 November, 1811), p.81.

20 Letters To Maria Gisborne,(November 16, 1819) X p.124.

Alarmed and infuriated by Beatrice's show of defiance before all his guests at the banquet, Count Cenci experiences and reveals loss of control, not only over his daughter, but over himself. This necessitates some form of aggressive action in order to regain his omnipotence. This fatal loss of control with its sudden onset of fear is subtly expressed in these lines:

> My brain is swimming round:
> Give me a bowl of wine! (To Beatrice)
> Thou painted viper!
> Beast that thou art! Fair and yet terrible!
> I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame,
> Now get thee from my sight! (Exit Beatrice)
> Here, Andrea,
> Fill up this goblet with Greek wine. I said
> I would not drink this evening; but I must;
> For, strange to say, I feel my spirits fail
> With thinking what I have decreed to do. -
> (Drinking the wine)
> Be thou the resolution of quick youth
> Within my veins, and manhood's purpose stern,
> And age's firm, cold, subtle villainy;
> (I. iii, 164-175)

The short, exclamatory phrases, which underscore the Count's agitation, contrast well with the arrogant self-possession evident in his earlier speech to his guests (I. iii, 55-89).

Count Cenci would hardly acknowledge fear. He prefers to consider his violation of Beatrice as yet another way of whetting his jaded appetite.

> ...'Tis an awful thing
> To touch such mischief as I now conceive:
> So men sit shivering on the dewy bank,
> And try the chill stream with their feet;
> once in...
> How the delighted spirit pants for joy!
> (II. i, 123-127)

No doubt Shelley intended that such an explanation for a parent's violation of his own child be seen as absurdly superficial and, indeed, he renders it so, by emphasizing once again the Count's intense fear as the only valid reason for the act. It is ironic that the act undertaken

by the Count to maintain control is shown by Shelley to be the very expression of his loss of control.

> Cenci. Then it was I whose inarticulate
> words
> Fell from my lips, and who with tottering
> steps
> Fled from your presence, as you now from
> mine.
> Stay, I command you - from this day and
> hour
> Never again, I think, with fearless eye,
> And brow superior, and unaltered cheek,
> And that lip made for tenderness or scorn,
> Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of
> mankind;
> Me least of all. Now get thee to thy
> chamber!
>
> (II. i, 112-120)

The Count is the agent of the process of degradation which is directed towards all those whose closeness to him imply a threat to his omnipotent self-containment. The process involves not only physical, but moral and spiritual degradation as well. The Count cannot tolerate differentiation from himself, especially as that differentiation, in his own children, threatens his independent integrity. Accordingly, "dragging down" images abound in the Count's aggressive thoughts and acts directed at his family, and often in the victims' account of their mistreatment by him. In reference to his sons Rocco and Cristofano, Count Cenci demands that their souls be "dragged down" from the very throne of heaven (I. iii, 85), Lucretia and Bernardo are as good as "dead and damned" (I. i, 136), and Giacomo's degradation is shown as a fall "From thrice-driven beds of down, and delicate food,/ An hundred servants, and six palaces,/ To that which nature doth indeed require" (II. ii, 13-15). The moral degradation is accomplished by Giacomo himself out of self-pity and his desire for revenge, thus completing the process begun by his father.

> ...Is it a father's throat
> Which I will shake, and say, I ask not gold;
> I ask not happy years; nor memories
> Of tranquil childhood; nor home-sheltered
> love;
> Though all these hast thou torn from me, and
> more;
> But only my fair name; only one hoard
> Of peace, which I thought hidden from thy hate,
> Under the penury heaped on me by thee,
> (III. i, 289-294)

The completion of the process from pauper to parricide ironically pre-empts his desire to regain his "fair name" and the precious "hoard of peace" and results only in his death. Shelley warns against "the passion of revenge" as a feeling which ultimately "loses sight of the only object for which it may be supposed to have been implanted, and becomes... a duty to be pursued and fulfilled, even to the destruction of those ends to which it originally tended." Both Giacomo and Beatrice represent "the mind over-shooting the mark at which it aims."[21]

Beatrice is the one most degraded by her relationship with her father. He degrades her materially, through the sexual violation which Beatrice recalls in images of physical corruption (III. i, 16-23, 42-48); spiritually, by "stabbing her soul" and "poisoning/ The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!" (III. i, 22-23). Consequently her conviction in God's protection of his innocents is undermined (III. i, 247-255). Beatrice, like Giacomo, completes the moral degradation herself, in accordance with her father's desire that

> ...her stubborn will
> Which, by its own consent shall stoop as low
> As that which drags it down.
> (IV. i, 10)

Ironically, for the Count, his victory is achieved only at the cost of his own life.

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[21] "On the Punishment of Death" in Complete Works VI p.189.

Count Cenci's angry jealousy of his daughter is aggravated by that extreme form of narcissism which fears too close a resemblance to that which is exclusively his own. So perverse is the Count's self-love, that the normal desire, on a parent's part, to hold a mirror to himself and see, in regard to his child, that his creation is both good and in his own image, is in him corrupted to the desire that his daughter be degraded into an evil image of himself. The distorting mirror of the Count's subjectivity may be seen as reflecting back to him only his own "moral deformity". An important part of his plan to degrade his daughter and thus utterly consume her individuality and independence, is that she should have a child, the offspring of their incestuous union. This child, in its mental and physical deformity, will reflect both the corrupted image of his mother and their mutual father. It would be difficult to conceive of a more perverse unity than this, especially with its suggestions of a further act of incest in the future between child and mother.[22]

> ...May it be
> A hideous likeness of herself, that as
> From a distorting mirror, she may see
> Her image mixed with what she most abhors,
> Smiling upon her from her nursing breast.
> And that the child may from its infancy
> Grow, day by day, more wicked and deformed,
> Turning her mother's love to misery:
> And that both she and it may live until
> It shall repay her care and pain with hate,
> Or what may else be more unnatural.
> (IV. i, 145-155)

Mirrors, and their connection with narcissistic projection and reflection are evident in the Count's curse upon his daughter. The anamorphic quality of the reflection "from a distorting mirror", the play

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22 Consider the incestuous union between Satan and his daughter Sin, and her own rape by the child of that incest, Death, in Milton's Paradise Lost. Bk. II 740-800.

of light and shade, imply a metaphysical dimension to the Count's personality.

Within the negative unity of the Count's personality there is no light, only darkness and shadows.

> ...I bear a darker deadlier gloom
> Than the earth's shade, or interlunar air,
> Or constellations quenched in murkiest cloud,
> In which I walk secure and unbeheld
> (ii. i, 189-192)

In such a being there can be no reflection, according to Shelley's concept of ideal personal unity, of the feminine antitype of purity and beauty which, united to the masculine, completes the harmonious integrity of each individual. In his essay upon "Love",[23] Shelley uses the mirror image to convey this concept of ideal unity which he regards as being one and the same with the human soul.

> We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man. Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particles of which our nature is composed; a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness; a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper paradise,...

The "mirror" of the Count's divided self exists without, not within, the separate identity of Beatrice who reflects all those positive, innocent qualities which the Count has long since relinquished. From the Count's point of view the reflection of his "divided being" reflects everything he now loathes and fears because he has forfeited his right to it: it is his "paradise lost". The Count feels compelled to overwhelm this bright image with his own "darkness" through the act of incest: a forced re-entry into the womb of Paradise in order to implant the seed of further corruption and destruction. By breaking Beatrice in this way he shatters the mirror of his immortal soul, so that all it can possibly reflect is the dark perversion of his own personality.

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[23] Shelley, P.B. "On Love", Complete Works VI pp.201-202.

> Come darkness! Yet what is the day to me?
> And wherefore should I wish for night, who do
> A deed which shall confound both night and day?
> 'Tis she shall grope through a bewildering mist
> Of horror: if there be a sun in heaven
> She shall not dare to look upon its beams
> Nor feel its warmth. Let her then wish for
> night;
>
> (II. ii, 181-187)

Count Cenci, like that other greedy and ruthless seeker of power, Marlowe's Tamburlaine, believes in the absolute superiority of his own ego. Even God is not recognised as apart from, and superior to his mortal self. Shelley was careful to make his villainous Count a devout Roman Catholic and not merely an atheist. It is the quality of Count Cenci's faith and his relationship with his God which illumines even more the complexity of his paranoid personality.

Count Cenci's "at-oneness" with God, is not a relationship at all. God, like Cenci's children, is not distinguished as a separate object but is treated only as part of the subject. This is an emotionally immature attitude. God is"degraded" to the level of the Count's conscious ego and a perverse unity is created in which God's will is hardly differentiated from Cenci's will.

> With what but with a father's curse doth God
> Panic-strike armèd victory, and make pale
> Cities in their prosperity? The world's
> Father
> Must grant a parent's prayer against his
> child,
> Be he who asks even what men call me.
> Will not the deaths of her rebellious
> brothers
> Awe her before I speak? For I on them
> Did imprecate quick ruin, and it came.
>
> (IV. i, 104-111)

In his prayers to God, Count Cenci both beseeches and commands God to do his bidding. He regards himself as God's scourge, the agent of a superior force (III. i, 316) and yet, almost in the same breath, can claim that God does his bidding upon demand.

This constant shifting of omnipotent will between God and himself, as revealed in the Count's speeches, underscores the perverseness of his

faith. God, from Cenci's point of view, is little else than the sum of his own parts, and not, according to the concept of the religious ideal, a Whole which encompasses and transcends all "parts". Thus, Cenci's relationship with God and his conviction that they are united in a father's purpose against their subversive children is delusory.

Shelley shows that a conviction based upon delusion cannot be discussed tolerantly with other people. Rather, the emotional intensity with which a delusion is experienced and upheld precludes the ability to be maturely objective and to realize the necessity of doubting one's own views and appreciating the validity of those of other people. Count Cenci's conviction that he alone is right and his actions, however abominable, are justified and sanctified by God, leads him to disregard entirely the beliefs of others and their individual integrity.

> Cenci. That is well
> Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God,
> Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie!
> For Beatrice worse terrors are in store
> To bend her to my will.
> .....
> As she shall die unshrived and unforgiven,
> A rebel to her father and her God,
> Her corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds;
> Her name shall be the terror of the earth;
> Her spirit shall approach the throne of God
> Plague spotted with my curses. I will make
> Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin.
> (IV. i, 72-76, 89-98)

With a persistent fanaticism either in the company of other people, or alone, in his prayers, Count Cenci aggressively defends his egotheistic delusion. He alone has a monopoly of truth, and everyone else must be wrong.

Cenci prays to God that He will deliver a curse of spiritual and physical corruption upon Beatrice. As far as the Count is concerned, it is already a fait accompli. Cenci's will or desire that she "be encrusted round/With leprous stains!..." (IV. i, 129-130) is enough, with

or without God's aid, to make it a reality, as his reply to Lucretia's warning that God "punishes such prayers" (IV. i, 138) clearly reveals,

> Cenci (leaping up, and throwing his right hand towards Heaven).
> He does His will, I mine!
>
> (IV. i, 139)

For a man whose personality will not tolerate equality with man or God to suddenly and fearlessly claim equal power with and independence from God, can only mean that Cenci's God is no more than a shadowy projection of his own personality.

Apparently, the Count is claiming equality in will. Essentially, this testifies only to delusion, and the claim can only be one of superiority: the man who is convinced he is God's scourge is actually and ludicrously, in thought and deed, acting out an infantile fantasy. Shelley subtly yet firmly underscores this fact by placing Count Cenci's last prayer to God precisely where it belongs, not in conscious reality but in the unconscious realm of dream.

> ...when the old man
> Stirred in his sleep, and said, 'God! hear, O, hear,
> A father's curse! What, art Thou not our Father?'
> And then he laughed. ...
>
> (IV. iii, 17-20)

The dream world is a delusive reality, entirely subjective, where self-created, self-projected images constantly blend and interweave with one another and one talks only with one's own self. The three father-figures in the play, The Pope, Count Cenci and their God, may be regarded as shadowy projections of each other's ego (II. ii, 52-56).

The undervaluing of the object, whether man or God, may be due to the idea that the values of the disordered personality are in the inner world of self. This is, as Orsino remarks to Giacomo:

> ...the inmost cave of our own mind
> Where we sit shut from the wide gazed day,
> And from the all-communicating air.
>
> (II. ii, 89-91)

This inner world, which strongly suggests the confines of a prison, is where Count Cenci feels he is most secure from the ever-present threat of being overwhelmed by his fellow men (II. i, 174-193). The Count's compulsive drive for worldly omnipotence depends upon a desire for self-sufficiency. This is intensified by emotional immaturity and its insecurities, compounded by the encroaching debility of old age, all of which seem to increase a tendency towards isolation.

> The all-beholding sun yet shines; I hear
> A busy stir of men about the streets;
> I see the bright sky through the window panes:
> It is a garish, broad and peering day;
> Loud, light, suspicious, full of eyes and ears,
> And every little corner, nook, and hole
> Is penetrated with the insolent light.
> Come darkness!...
>
> (II. i, 174-181)

Ironically, the Count is becoming increasingly helpless in facing the reality that he yearns to dominate completely. The essentially paranoid tendency towards isolation may be seen as compensating for his actual helplessness by enabling him to maintain omnipotence only in the inner world of fantasy. Count Cenci's totally selfish concept of his individual integrity causes him to confuse independence with isolation. Shelley illustrates this in his drama by depicting the Count's regression from the light of the world into the dark vortex of his own being: a withdrawal through contracting stages of alienation, each one a form of imprisonment, until, at Petrella, the narrowing circle reaches the point of extinction.

Isolation, which Count Cenci believes necessary to preserve, or even more fully to realise, his free and independent personality, leads ultimately to the disintegration of his individuality not its intensification. The Count becomes locked in his private world of delusion having achieved nothing else but the perversion of his integrity, not its fulfilment. Just as Shelley employed the dark confining structures of the Cenci

palace and the fortress to emphasize the psychological process of self-alienation, so does he reveal, in Count Cenci's physical destruction by his children, the outward expression of the final state of his mind or, in the more metaphysical sense, his soul. Earlier, Count Cenci unwittingly described his loss of individuality in isolation whilst believing that he was affirming it. In actuality he is merging helplessly into the chaos of nothingness: the words bear repeating at this point.

> I bear a darker deadlier gloom
> Than the earth's shade, or interlunar air,
> Or constellations quenched in murkiest cloud,
> In which I walk secure and unbeheld...
> (II. i, 189-192)

By destroying his "rival" Beatrice's ideal integrity through the perverse union of premeditated incest, Cenci himself closes the last narrowing circle of his independent existence:[24] that "part" of himself, destroys him. The act of parricide parallels suicide. The act of incest calculated to obtain for himself absolute self-sufficiency, brings only self-annihilation. The ironic truth underlying the Count's destructive intention for Beatrice, voiced early in the drama, now becomes chillingly apparent.

> ...If there be a sun in heaven
> She shall not dare to look upon its beams
> Nor feel its warmth. Let her then wish for night;
> The act I think shall soon extinguish all
> For me:
> (II. i, 185-189)

In a rare combination of artistic skill and shrewd psychological insight, Shelley reveals the moral deformity of the Count Cenci to be, in essence, the primitive morality of fear: its perverse end result, the self-extinction of the unity of personality in the isolation of insanity.

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24 See: A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII p.128 also, for comparison, "The Essay on Christianity" (on the "Equality of Mankind") in Complete Works VI p.249.

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. -

(Shelley: Adonais LII. 460-4)

CHAPTER II

THE INTEGRITY OF BEATRICE

Quite clearly, the anguish of Beatrice's situation, her helplessness and courage in the face of her father's repeated depredations upon her own person and the members of the family, provoke intense sympathy in the audience. The character of Count Cenci is villainous enough to arouse instant condemnation, however much one may secretly admire his ruthless drive for power. Naturally Beatrice, as his innocent victim, will be commended not only for her saintly powers of endurance but for her family loyalty and valour in upholding her ideal of justice, in the midst of a callous and corrupt society.

White has no meaning without black: the saintly purity of Beatrice is never more intensely projected upon the audience's consciousness than when in contact with the diabolical villainy of her father, the Count. This "black and white" conflict between father and daughter is fully exploited by Shelley for its dramatic potential just as the two sides of Beatrice's character, the weak, terrified and bewildered girl, with the courageous, purposeful "avenging angel", are ostensibly planned to induce both the audience's sympathy and admiration.

Immediately before her violation by the Count, Beatrice is presented as a proud, defiant girl whose desperate plea for help to escape her father's tyrannous onslaughts, are rejected by a cowardly, self-seeking society. The anguish of her situation is compounded, for the audience, by her presentation as a cowering, bewildered creature, not so much a character but more as a naked suffering animal, the helpless "prey" to her father's rapacious designs.

One look, one smile. (Wildly) Oh! He has trampled me
Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all
Ditch-water, and the fever-stricken flesh
Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,
And we have eaten. - He has made me look
On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust
Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,
And I have never yet despaired - but now!
(II. i, 64-72)

If she speaks wildly, it is because the horror of the immediate situation is beyond her, and her concept of reality becomes distorted into a nightmare blend of fact and fantasy. This is evident in the post-rape episode in which Beatrice's wild outburst brings the anguish of her situation to its climax, and with it, the audience's capacity for sympathetic response.

Beatrice. (She enters staggering, and speaks wildly.)

Reach me that handkerchief! - My brain is hurt;
My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me...
I see but indistinctly...
.....
The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls
Spin round! I see a woman weeping there,
And standing calm and motionless, whilst I
Slide giddily as the world reels. ... My God!
The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
(III. i, 1-3; 9-13)

Within the passage of only a few lines the transition from a "suffering animal" to a character determined to act from the integrity of her being and purpose is accomplished with dramatic expediency. The audience's sympathetic interest in Beatrice is not allowed to wane. Even in the judgment scene when her otherwise admirable strength of purpose has made her indifferent to the plight of her loyal servant Marzio, the audience would hardly censure her. After all that Beatrice has suffered surely it were only justice that she should, at last, prevail. However compassionless she may seem about her colleagues, however specious her arguments, one can not help but believe, with Beatrice, that surely it must be her turn to win, by confronting adversity with whatever means are available to her to claim an eleventh hour victory. Thus Beatrice remains firmly established, in the audience's mind, as the tragic heroine par

excellence, an impression dramatically fortified at the denouement by the tenderness with which Beatrice comforts her family in her final defeat, and the calm dignity with which she meets her fate.

Is this all that Beatrice consists of: the helpless, persecuted girl whose one desperate bid for freedom brings with it such tragic consequences for her and her loved ones? Certainly, it is enough from the point of view of dramatic presentation. However, in The Cenci, "nothing is as it seems" (IV. iv, 114-116). It is not Beatrice's saintliness which is emphasized in the drama but rather, her humanity. The "black and white" contrast which seems so distinctly drawn between the characters of Count Cenci and Beatrice is no longer clear-cut on a closer scrutiny. Shelley does not deny to his heroine the same subtlety and penetration with which he conceived the character of his villain. Beatrice's character, if it bears traces of saintliness, also betrays some shadows.

These shadows are barely perceptible when, at the beginning of the play, her spiritual and moral integrity is briefly but clearly stated by the Cardinal.

> ... Where is your gentle daughter?
> Methinks her sweet looks, which make all
> things else
> Beauteous and glad, might kill the fiend within you.
> Why is she barred from all society
> But her own strange and uncomplaining wrongs?
> (I. i, 43-47)

Beatrice's own statement of her "uncomplaining wrongs" appears as an extension of the Cardinal's, for the purpose of giving her saintly forbearance dramatic emphasis. The fact that the forces of disintegration surround her in the form of her betrayal by Orsino, who prefers a lucrative priestly office to a materially less advantageous marriage (I. ii, 64-71); of her father's enmity; of the deaths of her brothers Rocco and Cristofero; further illuminate this salient aspect of her character.

I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand
Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke
Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!
Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt
Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears
To soften him, and when this could not be
I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights
And lifted up to God, the Father of all,
Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard
I have still borne, - until I meet you here,
Princes and kinsmen, ...
(I. iii, 111-122)

The indirectness of both statements, the Cardinal's and Beatrice's, of her saintly integrity suggest that as an ideal it has no real place in the present "sad reality" of The Cenci. The first direct presentation of Beatrice in conversation with Orsino subtly reveals the saintliness in growing conflict with her essential humanity. Together with a genuine desire to be the family's protective shield and a loyal determination to share in their suffering, is a growing despair with regard to her personal plight.

Beatrice. As I have said, speak not to me of love.
Had you a dispensation I have not;
Nor will I leave this home of misery
Whilst my poor Bernard, and that gentle lady
To whom I owe life, and these virtuous thoughts,
Must suffer what I still have strength to share.
.....
... Alas!
Weak and deserted creature that I am,
(I. ii, 14-19, 44-5)

The element of self-pity in her speech is surely justified, but considering Shelley's own hatred of "that burr, self"[1] as the main stumbling block towards the perfecting of his own humanity and altruistic aims, this self-pity may be regarded in a more sinister light, perhaps even as the germ of the perversion of Beatrice's moral and spiritual unity.

There is a third aspect to Beatrice's character which comes midway between the two extremes of her dramatic presentation: the saintly and the diabolical (I. iii, 111-120; IV. ii, 39-43; iii, 31-35), neither of which represents the reality of her being. The reality of the third aspect stems from its evidence of human frailty: despairing, afraid,

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[1] Letters X p.69

bewildered:"...Ah, wretched that I am!/ Where shall I turn?..." (I. ii, 29-30),but courageous still. This human aspect reveals the inner process of the perversion of Beatrice's integrity, which parallels the corruption imposed upon her by the Count.

A dominant will intensifies individuality because it imparts a keen sense of the reality of self to the point where, perhaps inevitably, it becomes egoism. Both the Count and Beatrice share such a will (II. ii, 108-111; IV. i, 10). With Beatrice, however, her "Cenci will" is a source of positive strength rather than negative power as long as it is directed towards altruistic instead of egoistic ends. Beatrice's will is as firmly grounded upon her intense idealism as the Count's is upon his materialism. As such, her will is an effective counter-force to that of her father's. In its passive, submissive and enduring aspect, it has for long kept the Count's actively hostile will at bay, yet, at the same time, has aggravated his will to dominate until it becomes an obsession (II. i, 115-120).

Such a passive "uncomplaining" will as Beatrice's is made to seem,certainly belongs to saints. However, Beatrice's bitter rejoinder to Orsino's belated offer to obtain a dispensation from the Pope to marry, underscores not her saintliness but her humanity.

> "As I have said, speak to me not of love.
> Had you a dispensation I have not;"
>
> (I. i, 14-15)

Beatrice's curt reply shows them to be at opposite poles of principles: her words subtly expose the priest's immorality and at the same time underscore the pathos of her situation.

Beatrice has not endured her father's cruelty solely out of a desire for saintly immolation. She has been, and still is a prisoner with no choice but to endure, by clinging onto her ideal concepts for support in an intolerable reality. Beatrice is human enough to have hoped, as her conversation with Orsino reveals, for deliverance from her

plight through marriage: a means of escape already successfully achieved by her sister. The positive direction of her will actually depended upon this very slender, very human hope for personal escape which would necessarily have involved her desertion of the two she feels morally obligated to protect, her stepmother and brother. Orsino's betrayal has prevented Beatrice's loyalty from being put to the test, however.

The error in Beatrice's idealism is much the same as the perverse element in the Count's materialism which has come to exert a monopoly upon his concept of reality and human relationships. Up until the play's present (I. ii, i ff.), Beatrice's concept of reality has been little other than a fantasy of her idealism. Her "uncomplaining" devotion to her father has been based upon her determination to see him only according to her Christian ideal of a father; and her own submissive attitude is in keeping with her ideal of a Christian daughter (I. iii, 111-113). If doubts arise, they are soon dismissed; Beatrice guards her ideal world as jealously as Cenci holds on to his dark realm (I. iii, 114-119).

Nevertheless, two years have lapsed since her hope for escape was betrayed, and the effect this disappointment has had upon her is quite noticeable in her conversation with Orsino. Bitter disillusionment has undermined and gradually replaced the idealistic hope and faith she had fixed upon her father and his youthful counterpart, Orsino. Her altruism is now self-consciously maintained.

> Alas, Orsino! All the love that once
> I felt for you, is turned to bitter pain.
> Ours was a youthful contract, which you first
> Broke, by assuming vows no Pope will loose.
> .....
> ... Ah, wretched that I am!
> Where shall I turn? Even now you look on me
> As you were not my friend, and as if you
> Discovered that I thought so, with false smiles
> Making my true suspicion seem your wrong.
>
> (I. ii, 20-23; 29-33)

Her father's grim reality can no longer be ignored and Beatrice's cynical acknowledgment of his perversity bears little resemblance to her former pious belief in his paternal Christianity.

> This night my father gives a sumptuous feast,
> Orsino; he has heard some happy news
> From Salamanca, from my brothers there,
> And with this outward show of love he mocks
> His inward hate. 'Tis bold hypocrisy,
> For he would gladlier celebrate their deaths,
> Which I have heard him pray for on his knees:
> Great God! that such a father should be mine!
>
> And he has bidden me and my pale mother
> Attire ourselves in festival array.
> Poor lady! She expects some happy change
> In his dark spirit from this act; I none.
>
> (I. ii, 47-54; 56-61)

Beatrice's disillusionment, even if it has brought with it the first sinister prickings of self-preoccupation, has cleared her judgement concerning Orsino, her father, and their selfish or perverse motives. This clearing of judgement is limited, however, only to these two men, and has not affected her faith in the validity of her Christian idealism. Beatrice's ideal world and her integral relationship with it has become, as a consequence, even more exclusively centred around the prime father-figures of God and, as we later see, the Pope.

The quality of Beatrice's idealism, as represented by Shelley, is intriguing. Obviously, from the point of view of dramatic presentation, her idealistic world view could not seem more alien to the Count's grossly materialistic concept. Implicitly, there is a subtle correlation between the two concepts.

The idealism which made Beatrice believe the best of her father and dismiss all doubts to the contrary is little other than immature "wishful-thinking" (I. iii, 111-120). As with her father, the child is evident behind Beatrice's adult exterior. The idealism upon which her integrity depends is, in reality, no more than the perverse persistence of childhood fantasy in an adult. It is this fundamental immaturity which places Beatrice tragically closer to Count Cenci than to a saint. Certainly, Cenci denies the independence of adulthood to his child; inevitable in this historical period as Shelley well knew. In the

relationship between Cenci and his daughter, Shelley exposed the chauvinistic attitude of parent to child which he had condemned in the earlier work of The Revolt of Islam.

> But children near their parents tremble now,
> Because they must obey - one rules another
> .....
> ..Woman as the bond-slave dwells
> Of man, a slave; and life is poisoned in its wells.
>
> Woman! - she is his slave, she has become
> A thing I weep to speak - the child of scorn,
> The outcast of a desolated home;
>
> (8, XIII, 1-2, 8-9; XV, 1-3)

Beatrice is not merely a tragic victim of circumstances like "woman" in The Revolt of Islam. The source of tragedy lies deeper, within the individual soul, as human "will". The female "will" exercised against her oppressors in the earlier poem is anticipated as a meritorious and victorious act (9, XVI, 9.) By the time he wrote The Cenci, however, Shelley had altered his opinion. Beatrice's act of will towards achieving freedom brings only disastrous consequences upon them all. Shelley confirms "the mistake" in his Preface (p.276); the error being in the essential immaturity of retaliatory action.

The touchstone of maturity in human idealism and relationships would seem to be the quality of disinterestedness:

> All the theories which have refined and exalted humanity, or those which have been devised as alleviations of its mistakes and evils, have been based upon [the elementary emotions of] disinterestedness, which we feel to constitute the majesty of our nature.[2]

This is the quality which makes individual integrity an invulnerable reality. It is the mark of a saint, but not of Beatrice as Shelley surely understood when he wrote in his Preface that

> ...no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes.[3]

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2 "Speculations on Morals" (upon "Benevolence") in Complete Works VI p.76. (The square brackets are the editor's, not mine.)

3 Poetical Works, Preface, p.276.

The subjective quality of Beatrice's idealism which underlies and perverts her otherwise "fit return" to her "most enormous injuries" has the tragic effect of not converting her injurer but of intensifying his enmity towards her. If she possessed the saintly quality of disinterestedness in her thought, Beatrice's Christian kindness and forbearance would never, under pressure, have been perverted to ruthless vengeance.

> If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character;... [4]

Without that crucial disinterestedness there can be no true relationship. Beatrice's immaturity prevents her from distinguishing people as separate objects. They exist only as parts of her own being. Thus it is with the same measure of regret evinced by Shelley in his consideration of his heroine's character, that we realize the slight but significant element of self-interest in Beatrice's relationships.

The first direct presentation of Beatrice focuses upon her relationship with Orsino whom, two years before, she had sworn to love but to whom she now can only swear "a cold fidelity" (I. ii. 1-8, 20-26). Certainly Orsino's preference of priestly riches to a romantic marriage is reason enough for Beatrice's disillusionment, but one may argue that, if Beatrice had regarded Orsino as an objective reality and not as the romantic projection of her own desires, there would not have been disillusionment. Beatrice, in conversation with Orsino, connects their abortive marriage with the possibility of escape. Her final rejection of a love relationship between them coincides with the realization that marriage no longer provides a means to freedom "...speak to me not of love./ Had you a dispensation I have not;" (I, ii, 14-15).

The substitute "cold fidelity" is a barrier to any possibility of an equal, mature relationship. If Orsino will not properly represent

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[4] Idem.

the priestly figure he has chosen to be, then Beatrice will project it onto him according to her subjective idealism.

> And thus I love you still, but holily,
> Even as a sister or a spirit might;
> And so I swear a cold fidelity.
>
> (I. ii, 24-26)

It is interesting to note that Beatrice swears a similar "cold fidelity" to God following another grand disillusionment.

> I hope I do trust in Him. In whom else
> Can any trust? And yet my heart is cold.
>
> (V. iv, 87-89)

With this parallel Shelley reinforces his tragedy, making the Orsino episode foreshadow the end. Beatrice would rather be faithful to a fantasy of her imagination than to the reality which, in her present state of disillusionment with Orsino, she briefly recognizes and just as swiftly rejects.

> And it is well perhaps we shall not marry.
> You have a sly equivocating vein
> That suits me not. - Ah, wretched that I am!
>
> (I. ii, 27-29)

The mature independence and protective responsibility which Beatrice bears for the sake of the surviving members of her family are only a facade. Lucretia and Bernardo hardly establish themselves as individuals in the play because they are seen mainly from Beatrice's view-point. They exist as part of the subject, afraid, and helplessly dependent: it is only when Lucretia is apart from her step-daughter that she displays any positive qualities (IV. i, 15 ff.). The lack of disinterestedness Beatrice reveals in her relationships is integrally bound up with her childish dependence.

The attitudes of both Count Cenci and Beatrice to others are essentially negative in that they are based upon fear; but fear of different types. Count Cenci's aggressive independence stems from his fear of being dominated, whereas Beatrice's submissiveness, together with her over-valuing of her father, arises from her fear of being left completely alone.

Consequently she clings to people at all costs. Faced with the persistence of the hostile reality of her father, Beatrice transfers her dependence to Orsino. Betrayed by Orsino, she transfers her dependence to her benevolent, and intensely subjective, concept of God whilst clinging to Lucretia and Bernardo. Whatever the consequences, she cannot tolerate the reality of being isolated and one of the most noticeable aspects of Beatrice's personality, in the first part of the play, is her lack of aggressiveness.

In spite of extreme provocation by her father, Beatrice remains steadfastly compliant. Disillusionment with Orsino prompts Beatrice to reprove him but not to the extent that he be driven away. Fear of being abandoned leads her to placate him by following her reproof and refusal to resume a love-relationship, with a reaffirmation of their friendship:

> Your zeal for all I wish; - Ah me, you are cold!
> Your utmost skill...speak but one word...(aside) Alas!
> Weak and deserted creature that I am,
> Here I stand bickering with my only friend!
>
> (I. ii, 43-46)

As "sly and equivocal" as she knows him to be, the bond must not be broken. Even that cold fidelity which she swears to maintain is primarily a means of keeping Orsino tethered to her rather than an expression of saintly forgiveness. This, Orsino himself recognizes when he says,

> ...A friendless girl
> Who clings to me, as to her only hope: -
> I were a fool, not less than if a panther
> Were panic-stricken by the antelope's eye,
> If she escape me.
>
> (I. ii, 87-91)

A certain measure of aggressiveness in Beatrice would have maintained an individual unity in her personality. As it is, her "uncomplaining" dependence actually accelerates the process of personal isolation she fears so deeply. Physically and psychologically it makes her increasingly vulnerable to the selfish plans of both her father and Orsino. Her submissiveness, as I have mentioned earlier, aggravates, not

allays her father's tyranny; similarly, her dependence upon Orsino intensifies his desire to possess her completely. Both these male figures intend to enslave her to their will and thus threaten the existence of her separate identity altogether.

Beatrice's precarious dependence upon Count Cenci and Orsino is, from her viewpoint, amended by her dependence upon God. The unity she experiences with God is perverse in the sense that her concept of His reality and efficacy is no more than a fantasy of her idealism. Ironically, the dependence from which she gains the feeling of most security and freedom from the fear of isolation is due to her error in respect to God's reality, delusory. When her father, claiming God as his witness, boasts that his sons were killed by God's will in answer to his prayers, Beatrice feels, erroneously, that her Divine Ideal has been refuted, and her integrity crumbles. Trapped in her own partiality, Beatrice is unable to perceive that Cenci is equally deluded in regard to "his" God.

> Beatrice. It is not true!....
> Had it been true, there is a God in Heaven,
> He would not live to boast of such a boon.
> Unnatural man, thou knowest that it is false.
> Cenci. Ay, as the word of God; whom here I call
> To witness that I speak the sober truth; -
> And whose most favouring Providence was shown
> Even in the manner of their deaths....
> .....
> Which shows that Heaven has special care
> of me.
>
> (I. iii, 51-58, 65)

Beatrice is confronted with a situation in which it is Cenci's prayers which are apparently answered, not hers; Cenci who is "cared for" and not his victims; a God who would seem to operate according to principles of hatred, not loving-kindness. Her ensuing defiant stand against her father is not a display of stoic strength, but the desperate action of one who, like a rebellious child, already knows her defeat. Beatrice's defiance is motivated solely by desperate fear at having been rejected, as it seems to her, not only by God but by humanity, as represented

by the impotent society at the banquet. Nevertheless, Beatrice does shame Cenci with the truth of her impassioned outburst, to the extent that he quails before her and his guests. The following illustration is a dramatic example of double peripety upon Beatrice's appearance in Act II (i, 105-120);

> Beatrice ...Dare no one look on me?
> None answer? Can one tyrant overbear
> The sense of many best and wisest men?
> Or is it that I sue not in some form
> Of scrupulous law, that ye deny my suit?
> .....
> Retire thou, impious man! Ay, hide thyself
> Where never eye can look upon thee more!
> Wouldst thou have honour and obedience
> Who art a torturer? ....
>
> (I. iii, 132-136, 146-149)

There is no-one left to whom Beatrice can transfer her dependence and her fear of isolation never seems more justified. The facade of the responsible adult rapidly falls away to expose, not so much the naked suffering animal, but rather the helpless child, still attempting to cling onto the tattered remnants of her ideal integrity, and beseeching help from those she had formerly sworn to protect.

> Beatrice (in a hurried voice) Did he pass this way?
> Have you seen him,brother?
> Ah no! that is his step upon the stairs;
> 'Tis nearer now; his hand is on the door;
> Mother, if I to thee have ever been
> A duteous child, now save me! Thou, great God,
> Whose image upon earth a father is,
> Dost Thou indeed abandon me? He comes;
> The door is opening now; I see his face;
>
> (II. i, 12-19)

Lucretia and Bernardo reflect back to Beatrice her own fear and dependence. They serve only to intensify the feeling of aloneness (II. i, 46-52), which is brought to a climax by the betrayal of her last hope, the return of her unopened petition to the Pope (II. i, 22-28). The effect upon Beatrice is crucial: the extreme depression she suffers is the prelude to the inevitable overwhelming of her personality. Lucretia says to her:

... What can now
Have given you that cold melancholy look,
Succeeding to your unaccustomed fear?

Beatrice. What is it that you say? I was just thinking
'Twere better not to struggle any more.
(II. i, 50-54)

Up to this time Beatrice identified with her dual image of paternal benevolence, God and her father: the mainstay of her spiritual and moral unity. It is the persistence of this fantasy which urges her last positive utterance, "Thou, great God,/ Whose image upon earth a father is,/ Dost Thou indeed abandon me?" (II. i. 16-18) Deprived of this, Beatrice is also deprived of her integrity. Not only is she isolated but also lost as a personality and dangerously apt to re-identify with the one she was most dependent upon: her father as the image of God.

Shelley portrays this negative state of Beatrice's personality most cogently: with an eye to dramatic impact, certainly, but also with remarkable psychological insight into the depressive personality. In her ensuing confrontation with her father, Beatrice's reaction, in which she cowers, attempts to hide, staggers, expresses the final disintegration of her personality into chaos. In one sense her reaction testifies to a final and sudden regression into infantilism: the terrified child inarticulate and helpless before its tyrannical parent.

Cenci What, Beatrice here!
Come hither! [She shrinks back, and covers her face.]
Nay, hide not your face, 'tis fair;
Look up! Why yesternight you dared to look
With disobedient insolence upon me,
.....
Beatrice [wildly, staggering towards the door]. O
that the earth would gape! Hide me, O God!

Cenci Then it was I whose inarticulate words
Fell from my lips, and who with tottering steps
Fled from your presence, as you now from mine.
Stay, I command you - ...
(II. i, 105-7; 111-115)

In another sense Beatrice's behaviour is that of the lost personality in chaotic limbo between two identities. This aspect of her behaviour is

augmented in the post-rape episode in which the chaos of a lost identity is experienced as both madness and death and expressed in grotesque images of isolation and corruption. Beatrice's appearance and words immediately after her rape imply the experience of abreaction which is a release of repressed emotion by reliving, in imagination, the original experience. Such an experience is often the prelude to becoming another, opposite personality. Beatrice does become another personality after this experience.

> The sunshine on the floor is black! The air
> Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
> In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps
> A clinging, black, contaminating mist
> About me ... 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
> .....
> My God! I never knew what the mad felt
> Before; for I am mad beyond all doubt!
> (More wildly) No, I am dead! These putrefying
> limbs
> Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul
> Which would burst forth into the wandering air!
> (III. i, 14-18; 24-28)

Fear of isolation, in a depressed personality, is usually tantamount to the fear of insanity. Tragically for Beatrice these fears of her lifetime have now become an inescapable reality. Madness and death may be seen as the twin expressions of her feeling of worthlessness; a psychological concept which Shelley portrays with dramatic expertise.

> ...O, God! What thing am I?
> Lucretia. My dearest child, what has your father done?
> Beatrice. (doubtfully) Who art thou, questioner? I have no
> father.
> (Aside) She is the madhouse nurse who tends
> on me,
> It is a piteous office.
> .....
> ....Oh, what am I?
> What name, what place, what memory shall be
> mine?
> What retrospects, outliving even despair?
> (III. i, 38-41; 74-76)

At this nadir of her experience, re-identification is imminent. Shelley prepares us for the markedly sinister change in Beatrice's personality through Lucretia's apprehensive words:

Thou art unlike thyself; thine eyes shoot forth
A wandering and strange spirit. Speak to me,
Unlock those pallid hands whose fingers twine
With one another.

Beatrice. 'Tis the restless life
Tortured within them. If I try to speak
I shall go mad. Ay, something must be done;
(III. i, 81-85)

One might argue that from this moment Beatrice has made a heroic attempt to recover her Christian integrity after her outrage. Her ensuing acts, reprehensible perhaps, but dramatically justified, issue from her regained strength of purpose. Considering how subtly and precisely Shelley has explored the depressive personality however, this would seem a most unlikely interpretation.

Re-identification may be regarded as sealing the perversion of individual integrity because it involves Beatrice, in her extreme depression, taking upon herself the attributes of her master. Her father, whom she once over-valued by projecting upon him her benevolent ideal of the Divine Father is, once again, overvalued because of her feeling of utter worthlessness, and, consequently re-identified with. Certainly, Beatrice's own words testify to the fact that she has not lost her faith in God; but the concept of God is entirely different from her erstwhile benevolent ideal: the God with whom she re-identifies is the perverse ideal of her father's; not her own.

...Ay, something must be done;
What, yet I know not...something which shall make
The thing that I have suffered but a shadow
In the dread lightning which avenges it;
Brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying
The consequence of what it cannot cure.
.....
.... - O blood, which art my father's blood,
Circling through these contaminated veins,
If thou, poured forth on the polluted earth,
Could wash away the crime, and punishment
By which I suffer...no, that cannot be!
Many might doubt there were a God above
Who sees and permits evil, and so die:
That faith no agony shall obscure in me.
(III. i, 86-91; 95-102)

The truth is implicit in Beatrice's own words: a new, perverse unity has occurred in Beatrice's re-identification with her father (ll.95-98) and his punitive God. As Cenci's Deity operated unfailingly in accordance with his will, so now does Beatrice's Deity.

> Ay, death...
> The punishment of crime. I pray thee, God,
> Let me not be bewildered while I judge.
> .....
> ...put off, as garments overworn,
> Forbearance and respect, remorse and fear,
> And all the fit restraints of daily life,
> Which have been borne from childhood, but
> which now
> Would be a mockery to my holier plea.
> As I have said, I have endured a wrong,
> Which, though it be expressionless, is such
> As asks atonement;...
> .....
> ... I have prayed
> To God, and I have talked with my own heart,
> And have unravelled my entangled will;
> And have at length determined what is right.
> (III. i, 126-128; 208-15; 218-221)

The "I" which epitomizes Beatrice's integrity of thought and purpose is ambiguous. Obviously it represents her recovered identity; implicitly it is the ironic expression of her perverse identity. Beatrice is less "herself" now than she has ever been: consider her words to Lucretia.

> I, who can feign no image in my mind
> Of that which has transformed me: I, whose
> thought
> Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up
> In its own formless horror:...
> (III. i, 108-111)

The normal element of self-interest, so much a part of her humanity before her crisis, has now intensified to the extent that it resembles the neurotic determination of her father's to have his will, whatever the consequences. It is much easier and far more tempting to justify Beatrice's will to vengeance than her father's, yet to do so would not alter its essential, and for Beatrice, tragic, perverseness. Shelley himself expected that his treatment of Beatrice's character would urge a subjective response and understanding.

> It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; ...

and also an objective response which brings with it the realization of perversity.

> ...it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.[5]

The will, once directed towards altruistic ends, is now serving, like her father's, her egoistic desire to have revenge, whatever the consequences suffered by the loved members of her family. Undoubtedly Lucretia and Beatrice's brothers cannot see any other means of escape from their predicament than by achieving the Count's death, and this leads to their willing complicity in the crime. Nevertheless, their attitude is strongly influenced by Beatrice, whose desire for escape is now second in importance to personal revenge (III. i, 132-137; 215-218).

In the trial episode, the re-identification is made strikingly apparent. Here, she most vividly parallels her father in her ruthless disregard of Marzio, her specious arguments and arrogant defiance in the pursuit of her purpose (V. ii, 78-157). How tempting it is at this point to condone her behaviour by reminding ourselves of the actual anguish of her situation, and, through identifying with her own plight, reason that, after all, it is only justice that she should win - and never mind the rules. Nevertheless Shelley himself is adamant upon the fact we should not forget, that "Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes."[6]

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5 Ibid., pp.276-277.

6 Ibid., p.276.

It is after the ultimate defeat experienced in the judgment scene that Beatrice begins to emerge, as a personality in her own right. The terrible conflict and emotional isolation incurred by attempting to be what she was not, in its saintly and demonic aspects, begins to find resolution through the human mean between the opposites. This ideal state of psychic equilibrium is shown to be achieved automatically, without the deliberate direction of the conscious ego. This positive development in her personality begins to make itself evident in Beatrice's spontaneous and unwitting evaluation of her perverse integrity.

Beatrice (wildly)

My God! Can it be possible I have
To die so suddenly?
.....
To see no more sweet sunshine; hear no more
Blithe voice of living thing; muse not again
Upon familiar thoughts, sad, yet thus lost -
How fearful! to be nothing! Or to be...
What? Oh, where am I? Let me not go mad!
Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts! If there should be
No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world!
The wide, gray, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!
If all things then should be...my father's spirit,
His eye, his voice, his touch surrounding me;
The atmosphere and breath of my dead life!
.....
For was he not alone omnipotent
On Earth, and ever present? Even though dead
Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
Scorn, pain, despair?...

(V. iv, 48-9; 52-62; 68-72)

The most significant aspect of this monologue is that it shows Beatrice facing, for the first time, her fear of isolation and its concomitant fear of insanity in relation to perverse identification. To face her fear is to overcome it and her need for dependence

'Tis past!
Whatever comes my heart shall sink no more.
.....
I am cut off from the only world I know,
From light, and life, and love, in youth's sweet prime.
You do well telling me to trust in God,
I hope I do trust in Him. In whom else
Can any trust? And yet my heart is cold.

(V. iv, 78-9; 85-9)

These words do not suggest that Beatrice is lapsing into a cynical loss of faith in God but rather is relinquishing her dependence upon God in the image of man, whether as the projected ideal of Christian orthodoxy or as the projection of Cenci's mortal will. Beatrice is showing signs of adapting to, rather than attempting to direct the course of her development. There is a marked maturity in her last conversation with Lucretia who now is regarded as an equal: two women, sharing each other's misery, sharing each other's fate, taking strength in each other's courage.

> .... No, Mother, we must die:
> Since such is the reward of innocent lives;
> Such the alleviation of worst wrongs.
> And whilst our murderers live, and hard, cold men,
> Smiling and slow, walk through a world of tears
> To death as to life's sleep; 'twere just the grave
> Were some strange joy for us....
>
> (V. iv, 109-115)

This attitude of resignation is the expression of the essentially religious progress toward self-realization. Beatrice in her last speech still acknowledges dependence, but it is upon an unnamed force, both within and without her being, but not of her, or any man's making.

> Farewell, my tender brother. Think
> Of our sad fate with gentleness, as now:
> And let mild, pitying thoughts lighten for thee
> Thy sorrow's load. Err not in harsh despair,
> But tears and patience. One thing more, my child:
> For thine own sake be constant to the love
> Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
> Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and
> shame,
> Lived ever holy and unstained.
> .....
> Forbear, and never think a thought unkind
> Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves.
> So mayest thou die as I do; fear and pain
> Being subdued....
>
> (V. iv, 141-9; 153-6)

The implication is that love is the Divinity, as Beatrice speaks of it in connection with her faith. Be that as it may, the speech reveals Beatrice as most completely herself, stable, free from anxieties, and loving. Perhaps the latter is the most important aspect of her new and

positive integrity, for Shelley ends his play with an affirmation of the validity of human relationships and the realization of individual unity conditional upon the attainment of a disinterested love. Tragically, for Beatrice, self-realization coincides with loss of self in death.

> Camillo Oh, Lady Beatrice!
> Beatrice. Give yourself no unnecessary pain,
> My dear Lord Cardinal. Here, Mother, tie
> My girdle for me, and bind up this hair
> In any simple knot; ay, that does well.
> And yours I see is coming down. How often
> Have we done this for one another; now
> We shall not do it any more. My Lord,
> We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well.
> (V. iv, 157-65)

Shelley's Beatrice and Count Cenci constitute a remarkably convincing tour de force of abnormal psychology. The terrible aspect of the perverse personality is represented by the Count, the tragic aspect by Beatrice in whom undue submissiveness is shown to be as culpable as undue assertiveness. As culpable as Beatrice may be, Shelley does not condemn her. A life fraught with anxiety and fear has largely contributed to the perversion of a normal degree of self-interest in an idealistic nature into morbid self-preoccupation. But Beatrice is not entirely a victim of circumstances. "No person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another"[7] the seed of perversion is sadly and ironically shown to be present deep within one's own self as is one's own irrevocable humanity.

> A swift & [sin] hidden spirit of decay
> Which made its victim, as declining day
> Grows beautiful ere darkness.[8]

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7 Ibid., p.276.

8 Notebooks II p.106.

...- this Whole
Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers,
With all the silent or tempestuous workings
By which they have been, are, or cease to be,
Is but a vision; all that it inherits
Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles and dreams;
Thought is its cradle and its grave, nor less
The Future, and the Past are idle shadows
Of thought's eternal flight - they have no being:
Nought is but that which feels itself to be.

(Shelley: Hellas 776-785)

CHAPTER III

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Shelley firmly states in his Preface to The Cenci that,

> ...The Highest Moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of drama, is the teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion to the possession of which knowledge, every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant and kind.[1]

The attainment of self-knowledge is one and the same with the attainment of truth; but "the truth" firmly grounded in the sad reality of The Cenci seems to bear little resemblance to the truth borne upon the wings of Shelley's youthful idealism. Ideally truth was conceived as the object of "Love", imagined as universally valid, and believed to be capable of uniting in the presence of one and the same intellect, the whole diversity of human intellect, thus creating a harmony of minds and hearts.

Fine sentiments indeed! But entirely ineffectual when actually applied to reality, as Shelley himself realized and recorded dismally in the sonnet "Lift not the painted veil", written the year before The Cenci.[2] The sonnet is worth quoting in its entirety because it contains, in embryo, the imagery associated with the human tragedy of his forthcoming drama.

> Lift not the painted veil which those who live
> Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,
> And it but mimic all we would believe
> With colours idly spread, - behind, lurk Fear
> And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave
> Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.
> I knew one who had lifted it - he sought,
> For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
> But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
> The world contains, the which he could approve.
> Through the unheeding many he did move,
> A splendour among shadows, a bright blot
> Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
> For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.

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1 Poetical Works, Preface, p.276. See also, A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII p.121.

2 This sonnet was written in 1818 but not published until 1824.

This disappointment did not deny for Shelley the validity of his ideal of perfect unity in truth, but rather did enable him to consider that he had gone about his quest the wrong way. A "disembodied" search for truth could hardly bring positive results: a "Spirit" striving for truth will project too much of his subjective idealism upon reality. Beatrice, as Shelley shows us, is a case in point, not to mention the Count himself. The fundamental error committed by Shelley's tender-hearted "Spirit" was that he projected too much and related, as a human being, too little.

> I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeliness of what is perhaps, eternal.[3]

This is an interesting statement, involving as it does a criticism of his youthful celebration of the ideal of Love.

> ...this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules. Hence in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters, and the sky.[4]

Within the space of three years Shelley was to realize the "self-important childishness"[5] which constituted his earlier idealism and led to the primal human error of taking the illusion to be the reality. Truth was not to be found upon "the gloomy scene" of the world, that "two-edged lie/ Which seems, but is not." (IV. iv. 115-116), but within one's own self. This is "the world within" which Shelley discovered in Sophocles' poetry and gave dramatic expression to, in The Cenci where the ideal unity of truth is, in reality, perverted.

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3 Letters To John Gisborne (June 18, 1822) X p.401.

4 "On Love" in Complete Works VI p.202.

5 Queen Mab III 212.

The family: in appearance so fine, in actuality so perverse, whether the family of the Cenci or "the family" of the Pope in the society of Rome, is the focus for Shelley's exposition of reality in the minds of his protagonists and the ironic interplay of appearance and reality. The audience, having witnessed Beatrice's foreboding concerning her father's family feast (I. ii, 50-53), is better prepared than his guests for the shocking outcome of the celebration. From the point of view of the guests, the appearance of the Cenci family at the banquet could not be more reassuring. A father, proud and loving, celebrating with those members of his family present, some "happy news" concerning his absent sons. What a sense of solidarity, what an affirmation of mutual grandeur is to be found at this family banquet! Everything conspires to make the guests feel at one with good fellowship.

> Cenci. Welcome, my friends and kinsmen; welcome ye,
> Princes and Cardinals, pillars of the church,
> .....
> But I do hope that you, my noble friends,
> When you have shared the entertainment here,
> And heard the pious cause for which 'tis given,
> And we have pledged a health or two together,
> Will think me flesh and blood as well as you;
> Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so,
> But tender-hearted, meek and pitiful.
> First Guest. In truth, my Lord, you seem too light
> of heart,
> Too sprightly and companionable a man,
> To act the deeds that rumour pins on you.
> (To his Companion) I never saw such blithe and
> open cheer
> In any eye!
> Second Guest. Some most desired event,
> In which we all demand a common joy,
> Has brought us hither; let us hear it, Count.
> (I. iii, 1-2, 7-20).

In Cenci's own words Shelley images "the family" par excellence, united in love and Christian fellowship, at least from the point of view of his guests. The Count is "everybody's father", and the sense of mutual support which the guests share from this reassurance is matched by their simplicity: they identify with "the family" and eagerly accept the father's benign image as true, dismissing all ugly doubts.

Cenci. It is indeed a most desired event.
If, when a parent from a parent's heart
Lifts from this earth to the great Father of all
A prayer, ...
.....
That he would grant a wish for his two sons,
Even all that he demands in their regard -
And suddenly beyond his dearest hope
It is accomplished, he should then rejoice,
And call his friends and kinsmen to a feast,
And task their love to grace his merriment, -
Then honour me thus far - for I am he.
(I. iii, 21-24, 27-33)

The image of family unity is as ephemeral as the alcoholic haze in which it is presented and accepted by the "friends and kinsmen". Such unity is rapidly dispersed when Cenci, with wilful pleasure, states its perverse actuality.[6]

... God!
I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform,
By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought.
My disobedient and rebellious sons
Are dead! - Why, dead! - What means this
change of cheer?
You hear me not, I tell you they are dead;
(I. iii, 40-45)

The actuality is of a family, united together not in love but in hatred, to celebrate the power of vengeance and the death of the father's children. From the point of view of the Count, this is "good news" indeed; from the viewpoint of his friends and kinsmen, his wife and surviving children, it is a hideous perversion of the Christian ideal of "the family". The effect upon his guests is instantaneous: confusion, alienation, and, separated from the benign image of the family, exposure as self-seeking individuals. Instead of acting together, out of family feeling and Christian compassion to answer Beatrice's plea for help, "the kinsmen" desert their own. Self-preservation, in actuality, takes precedence over family unity. Except for a few isolated protests, not

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6 Compare the feast episodes in The Agamemnon by Aeschylus, ll. 728-737, 1075-1089, 1577-1600.

one among the "noble company" will "second the other" for the sake of justice or mercy.

> Camillo. ... Can we do nothing?
> Colonna. Nothing that I see.
> Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy:
> Yet I would second anyone.
> A Cardinal. And I.
>
> (I. iii, 141-145)

The perversion of unity is not simply in Count Cenci's self-exposure of his hypocrisy but is in the individuals who comprise "the family", that "noble company". Count Cenci reflects back to his kinsmen the falsity of their own image of unity with which each member chose to identify. Such identification is negative as the image of family unity is no more than an ideal projection of self. When given the opportunity to act positively as a family pledged to help one another in need, none will act: the image has been shattered and "self" is the only reality.

Ironically, the only member of the family "true to himself" is Count Cenci: perverse self-knowledge indeed! Beatrice aptly calls it "bold hypocrisy" (I. ii, 51). The Count toys with his guests by presenting the benevolent father-image he knows they expect to see. The invitation to the banquet may indeed be deceptive but Cenci has no intention of keeping up the pretence. The banquet is not to be, as Beatrice expects, a masque of hypocrisy but an open display of stark truth. There is subtle irony in the fact that the Count's perverse actuality can make even the truth appear to be a lie: no one at first believes him, not even Beatrice. Although she judges him correctly when she speaks to Orsino of his hypocrisy and hatred of his family,

> ...with this outward show of love he mocks
> His inward hate. 'Tis bold hypocrisy,
> For he would gladlier celebrate their deaths,
> Which I have heard him pray for on his knees:
>
> (I. ii, 50-53)

she is hardly prepared for the ironic reversal of hypocrisy into a truth so utterly alien to her own ideal.

It is not true! - Dear lady, pray look up.
Had it been true, there is a God in Heaven,
He would not live to boast of such a boon.
Unnatural man, thou knowest that it is false.
(I. iii, 51-54)

The Cenci family, according to Orsino, have the capacity for forming acute judgements by seeing clearly into the minds of others.

...'tis a trick of this same family
To analyse their own and other minds.
(II. ii, 108-9)

Shelley suggests that Count Cenci knows his "noble kinsmen" very well indeed by presenting to them the benevolent, jovial image they want to see. Neither is their cowardice and selfishness unknown to him, for he fears no reprisal when he makes his bold disclosure of his hatred of his sons. With exceptional acumen the Count analyses, calculates and manipulates people and situations to his advantage. Like her father, Beatrice is to be feared for

Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring game,
Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve
And lay me bare, and make me blush to see
My hidden thoughts....
(I. ii, 84-87)

However personally advantageous this Cenci acumen may be, it has its sinister aspect. Within a family, small or large, it tends to make social solitaries of its members and pervert true relationship. This is certainly evident in the climax of the banquet scene in which the perverse actuality of the Cenci family may be seen as the microcosm of the corrupt Christian community in Rome at that time. Clear and acute their judgement of one another may be, but there is always a dimension to truth which they are fatally incapable of perceiving.

Such self-anatomy shall teach the will
Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,
Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,
Into the depth of darkest purposes:
So Cenci fell into the pit; even I,
Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself,
And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,
(II. ii, 110-116)

The key word in this rather obscure monologue of Orsino's is "pit" in relation to the Cenci acumen.

"Pit" like the "chasm" in "Lift not the painted veil", images a narrow, restrictive space: the dark, sub-reality of isolation. The Cenci acumen operates exclusively, rather than inclusively. It "anatomizes", as Shelley clearly points out, thus indicating the negative process of dissecting, separating and limiting knowledge, ultimately taking "the part" to be the whole and forming from this a false reality, augmented by that dual error of immaturity: self-projection and identification.

In the sonnet, Shelley personifies this error as the "twin Destinies", "Fear and Hope" who, like hunters, preparing to ensnare their prey, weave their net of shadows "sightless and drear" over a chasm. Ironically this is the snare of unwitting self-deception into which each member of the Cenci family blindly stumbles.[7] Beatrice may be right, in part, when she ascertains her father's true feelings towards his sons, but wrong when she is convinced that her God of Love would intervene to prevent her father's destructive will. (I. iii, 51-54). Cenci is clear and discerning in his knowledge of others and his perverted self, but wrong when he believes that God has directly answered his prayers for his sons' deaths.

> Ay, as the word of God; whom here I call
> To witness that I speak the sober truth; -
> And whose most favouring Providence
> was shown
> Even in the manner of their deaths. ...
> (I. iii, 55-58)

The dispute between father and daughter is concerned not with the fact of the sons' deaths but with the actuality of their divergent points of view concerning a personally "favouring Providence". Actuality is distorted by Beatrice's and her father's projection upon it of their idealism, whether in its beatific or horrific aspect, as a personally favouring God. If Beatrice had not believed that her God would eventually answer her prayers for a benign transformation of her father, she would not have accepted so quickly "the truth" of her father's punitive God, affirmed, as it would seem, by her brothers' deaths. The acumen with which she discerns, so clearly, her father's perversity also leads her to presume, with the fact of her

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7 The imagery of self-entrapment is further examined in Chapter IV pp.102-106.

brothers' deaths to support it, that his power, divinely sanctioned, is the only reality: her violation by Cenci seals this truth for her.

> For then if this be truth, that other too
> Must be a truth, a firm enduring truth,
> Linked with each lasting circumstance of life,
> Never to change, never to pass away.
> Why so it is....
>
> (III. i, 60-64)

Truth has many aspects; an anatomizing will allows for only one, distorted by illusion, and liable to change. This is evidenced above in Beatrice's acceptance of her father's perverted actuality as an "enduring truth". Count Cenci's conviction that God is "on his side" guarding and implementing his absolute power and authority, leads ultimately to his destruction; a fact which hardly supports the "sober truth" of his personal"favouring Providence".

The imagery surrounding the Count and Beatrice adds that greater dimension of truth to their being. Self-knowledge and truth are allied with perception, and Shelley takes advantage of this traditional association by contrasting "bright" images of clear-sightedness with "dark" images of blindness, most of which centre upon Beatrice. Like the all-beholding eye of the sun which penetrates the truth-concealing caverns of darkness (II. i, 176-180; IV. i, 134-136), Beatrice's eyes emit "anatomizing beams" (I. ii, 84-87). Beatrice, as the "light of life", as "universal as light", of the "life-darting eyes" whose "bright loveliness/ Was kindled to illumine this dark world"[8] is herself an ideal who exists only in the fallible minds of her fellowmen. In the sad reality of the drama, Beatrice's image as the light of Truth is counterpointed by the image of her reality as diminishing radiance in the midst of "devouring darkness". The Cenci acumen may well have universal origins but in ordinary reality its truth-revealing properties are particularized and limited.

The universal "eye" is as a double-sided mirror, revealing the truth within and without, summoning everything into immediate, all-inclusive focus. Human perception, in comparison, is only a one-sided mirror projecting or reflecting the outward appearance of truth only, whilst within, all is in obscure darkness"...for the eye sees not

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[8] The Cenci, I.ii,84-86; II.i,32; IV.i,121-2, 134-6; iv,48-50, 84-5; V,ii, 26-7, 30-3, 81-90, iv,133-5.

itself/ But by some other thing".[9] This is the "pit" of self-ignorance which divides a person not only against himself but also sets him apart from the "family" of mankind.

> Look on your mind - it is the book of fate -
> Ah! it is dark with many a blazoned name
> Of misery - all are mirrors of the same;[10]

Of the family of Cenci, Giacomo is "as one lost in a midnight wood" (II. ii. 94), who also finds in the "smooth and ready countenance" of Orsino, "the lie", "The mirror of my darkest thoughts" (V. i, 20-1, 52-3). Count Cenci "bears a "darker, deadlier gloom/ Than the earth's shade" (II. i , 189-190) and Beatrice says: "There creeps/ A clinging black, contaminating mist/ About me... (III. i, 16-18). Giacomo, contemplating the imminence of his father's death, compares the Count's life to the "small flame" of his lamp "on whose edge/ Devouring darkness hovers!" (III.ii,50) "Light" is never used as a symbol for the Count. However it may "seem" for Giacomo, he unwittingly has analogized his own predicament, prophesied his own doom, not his father's, for Count Cenci escapes this first attempt upon his life. Shelley has used another ironic peripety of truth to show that Giacomo, like his sister, can see clearly and accurately in part only, whilst the greater dimension to truth remains hidden. His father's "life" is the "devouring darkness", his own is the "small flame". The extinction of the flame should symbolize the death of the Count; as it happens, the flame's extinction follows the news of Cenci's escape from the assassination attempt. Giacomo, true to the Cenci weakness, makes the error of taking the self-styled image to be the sole reality:

> ...wind and thunder,
> Which seemed to howl his knell, is the
> loud laughter
> With which Heaven mocks our weakness!...
> (III. ii, 37-39)

This inner darkness within which truth, only partly perceived,

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9 Julius Caesar I. ii, 51-52.

10 The Revolt of Islam 8. XX, 3-5.

suffers perversion, approximates to blindness. Count Cenci boasts of creating an ambiguous situation within which appearance and reality will be indistinguishable and Beatrice will grope like a person stricken with blindness.

> Come darkness! Yet, what is the day to me?
> And wherefore should I wish for night, who do
> A deed which shall confound both night and day
> 'Tis she shall grope through a bewildering mist
> Of horror:...
> (II. i, 181-185)

True to the prophesy Beatrice, after the "deed is done",

> (...enters staggering, and speaks wildly.) Reach
> me that handkerchief! - My brain is hurt;
> My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me...
> I see but indistinctly...
> (III. i, 1-3)

This "blindness" affects other members of "the family", imaging a perverse unity of "self-misunderstood" individuals at odds with one another and with "truth":

> ... her stepmother and I,
> Bewildered in our horror, talked together
> With obscure hints; both self-misunderstood
> And darkly guessing, stumbling in our talk,
> Over the truth, and yet to its revenge,
> She interrupted us, and with a look
> Which told before she spoke it, he must die:...
> (III. i, 355-361)

Beatrice, unlike Orsino and Lucretia, extricates herself from this confusion and sets a clear course ahead of her. This initiates yet another ironic peripety. The decision and ability to act decisively does not mean that Beatrice has escaped that "bewildering mist of horror" but rather that she, like her father and brother, is more immersed in darkness than ever, "...pursuing -/ O, blind and willing wretch! - his own obscure undoing."[11] Decisive action and darkness are closely associated in the drama (II. i, 182-185). Cenci's power of destructive or oppressive action

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[11] Ibid. S. XIV, 8-9.

is confined to night or darkness. Within the dungeons of his palace he tortures his victims. The banquet, that celebration of his destructive power, takes place in the evening, and his violation of Beatrice at midnight. The fateful journey to Petrella takes place in the pitch dark before dawn and the act of parricide at night.

To perceive the whole truth, Shelley implies in the Preface, is to realize the wisdom of passive "self-less" forbearance. Beatrice's clear and decisive act stems from a perversion of truth, self-made and partial. All that seems "real" to her is hatred: of her father, because of his crime, of herself because of her involvement with it and her subsequent corruption, and the exercise of that hatred through revenge. Like her father, Beatrice falls prey to "visions of successful hate/ Too like the truth of day". (III. ii, 88-89).

> Yes, it is Hate - that shapeless fiendly thing
> Of many names, ...
> .....
> Reproach not thine own soul, but know thyself,
> Nor hate another's crime, nor loathe thine own.
> It is the dark idolatry of self,
> Which, when our thoughts and actions
> once are gone,
> Demands that man should weep, and bleed,
> and groan;[12]

Once Beatrice has decided clearly, she no longer stumbles amongst the ambiguities of truth, but, like her father, walks securely in "the darker deadlier gloom" of truth's perversion. To emphasize this ironic peripety, Shelley counterpoints Beatrice's decisiveness with images of darkness which echo those associated with the Count:

> Ay,
> All must be suddenly resolved and done.
> What is this undistinguishable mist
> Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow,
> Darkening each other?
> (III. i, 169-172)

Whilst describing the "perfect place" for the murder of her father, Beatrice unwittingly describes the deepening tragedy of her own predicament:

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12 Ibid. 8, XXI, 1-2, XXII, 1-5.

...the road
Crosses a deep ravine; 'tis rough and narrow,
And winds with short turns down the precipice;
And in its depth there is a mighty rock,
Which has, from unimaginable years,
Sustained itself with terror and with toil
Over a gulf, and with the agony
With which it clings seems slowly coming down,
Even as a wretched soul hour after hour,
Clings to the mass of life; yet clinging, leans;
And leaning makes more dark the dread abyss
In which it fears to fall:...
(III. i, 245-255)

The rising mist of shadows implies descent into the darkness of a pit just as the rock seems to be "slowly coming down" into the "dread abyss". The imagery parallels that of the chasm with its net of shadows in the sonnet "Lift not the painted veil". Count Cenci's curse upon Beatrice "...All beholding sun/Strike in thine envy those light darting eyes/ With thine own blinding beams!" (IV.i,135-6) emphasizes the ironic peripety which now concentrates upon the essentially self-destructive acts of the Count's incest and Beatrice's parricide. Immediately after her father's murder has been accomplished Beatrice says

...My breath
Comes, methinks, lighter, and the jellied blood
Runs freely through my veins...
(IV. iii, 42-44)

Immediately before the parricide the Count completes his curse with strikingly similar words

My blood is running up and down my veins;
A fearful pleasure makes it prick and tingle;
My heart is beating with an expectation
Of horrid joy.
(IV. i, 163-164; 166-167)

The Count's speech expresses pre-orgasmic tension (II. i, 124-128). His curse is aimed to accomplish his absolute possession of Beatrice, body and soul, "at one" in corruption; but he "overplays his hand" and his curse is fulfilled by his own murder. Beatrice is most like her father in her determination to act adamantly when most severely provoked. They are "at one" in their dark purpose and her words which echo her father's also imply this ironic truth. Beatrice's speech, differently from her father's, expresses relief but the spuriousness of her relief is exposed by its echo of her father's "horrid

joy". The Count's act of incest and its extension in the curse is motivated by those "twin destinies", of fear and hope. Fear of his daughter's "will" initiates a rapacious act aimed to realize his hope for unchallenged supremacy. Fear of her father's will and hope for personal freedom initiate Beatrice's action. "Self" is the basis of their fear and makes the expectation of the daughter, like her father's, rather "horrid". Both Beatrice and the Count expect to achieve victory but, instead, fall into the pit of self-destruction, "Like self-destroying poisons in one cup".[13] This is the perverse actuality of "the family" in the drama.

The judgement scene, like the earlier banquet scene, exposes the perversity of the Christian family of which the Pope is the supreme "father". The judging of Beatrice is not tempered with the mercy one would expect from a representative of the Pope who swears to protect benevolently his "children". Yet again Beatrice confronts another tyrant-figure, the judge, "who makes Truth weep at his decree", (II. ii, 77) and is determined to torture his victims until truth becomes as white as "snow thrice sifted by the frozen wind" (V. ii, 169-170). The "father-figure" of the judge in the sad reality of the drama is, like Count Cenci and the Pope, no more than "a murderous persecutor" ruthlessly determined to defend himself against the world's "disobedient children" in "the great war between the old and young..." (II. ii, 38). The "family", whether that of the Cenci or of the Pope, becomes a battleground in which the contesting members "strike" themselves "to death". (II. ii, 32-33; 70-73).

> But children near their parents tremble now,
> Because they must obey - one rules another,
> And as one Power rules both high and low,
> So man is made the captive of his brother,
> And Hate is throned on high with Fear her mother,
> Above the Highest - and those fountain cells,
> Whence love yet flowed when faith had choked all other,

---

13 Julian and Maddalo 436.

Are darkened - ...
...and life is poisoned in its wells.[14]

The object of this last contest between "old and young" is to reveal the truth. Ironically, in "the two-edged lie" of temporal reality, truth can only exist as a perversion. Beatrice turns "black parricide to piety"; her father's murder to a "high and holy deed", justified by her unique conception of a "higher truth"(IV.ii,36; V.ii,164). The golden mantle which Beatrice bestows upon her servant Marzio, as a reward for being "a weapon in the hand of God/ To just use" (IV.iii.54) leads to his detection as the murderer:

...this fellow wore
A gold-inwoven robe, which shining bright
Under the dark rocks to the glimmering moon
Betrayed them to our notice: ...
(IV. iv, 83-86)

What "seems" an honourable deed, bound to bring prosperity to its perpetrator, is revealed, in moonlight, to be a base act bringing only dishonour and destruction to those involved, the moon serving as "the orb of truth".[15] In the trial, Beatrice erroneously attempts to manipulate truth no less determinedly than her father and the judge. Marzio, caught in a web of ambiguity, bewildered by the perpetual shifts between appearance and reality in which the truth becomes a lie, and a lie the truth, sacrifices himself for an illusion (V. ii. 147-165). What Beatrice says about confessions under torture is true enough (V. ii, 37-57).

When some obscure and trembling slave is dragged
From sufferings which might shake the sternest heart
And bade to answer, not as he believes,
But as those may suspect or do desire
Whose questions thence suggest their own reply:

But is her own "grilling" of Marzio much different? It is no less a tormenting experience for him than his physical torture by the Papal officials and in spite of his pleas for mercy, Beatrice intensifies her interrogation until she gains the confession she wants.

... Oh, dart
The terrible resentment of those eyes
On the dead earth! Turn them away from me!

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[14] The Revolt of Islam 8. xiii, 1-9.

[15] Ibid. 8. IX, 4.

.....
Oh, spare me! Speak to me no more!
That stern yet piteous look, those solemn tones,
Wound worse than torture.
(To the JUDGES) I have told it all;
For pity's sake lead me away to death.

(V. ii, 30-32; 107-111)

It is true for Beatrice, no less than for the papal judge, that "...justice is the light/ Of love, and not revenge and terror and despite".[16]

The trial ends, as far as obtaining the "whole truth" is concerned, in ambiguity. "She is convicted, but has not confessed./ Be it enough." (V. iii, 90-91). The truth can neither be properly confessed nor recognized, because it is seen only in part, from individual, and inevitably conflicting viewpoints. In the "family" context of The Cenci this blind contention of wills leads ultimately to the anguish of isolation:

My God! Can it be possible I have
To die so suddenly? ...
.....
How fearful! to be nothing! ...

(V. iv, 48-9, 55)

In words which echo those of Beatrice, Shelley wrote to his friend, Horace Smith,

Let us see the truth, whatever that may be.
The destiny of man can scarcely be so degraded
that he was borne [sic] only to die -[17]

To die in isolation is a perversion of truth but Beatrice dies "in unity" with her family. There is a slight but unmistakeable upturn at the drama's darkest conclusion expressed in the changed mood of Beatrice. The sense of community with her family overcomes her preoccupation with the terror of personal annihilation. "I" in contrast to the earlier speech of Beatrice (V. iv, 48 ff) hardly intrudes at all in her final words in which "you", "we" and "our" predominate. Truth has many aspects in

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[16] Ibid. 5. XXXIV, 8-9.

[17] Letters. To Horace Smith, (June 29, 1822) X. p.410.

> ...this life
> Of error, ignorance and strife
> Where nothing is, but all things seem,
> And we the shadows of the dream,[18]

The limitations imposed by inheritance in "the family" of mankind preclude each member from seeing more than a small part of it. The most that anyone can do is to be true to that aspect which he or she is able to see. At the end of the drama Beatrice, faced with the inevitability of her destruction, fixes upon what must seem, in The Cenci, to be the most transient and hopeless of human experiences: love and forbearance. Only within the context of unselfish family feeling do these qualities allow for the reconciliation of all differences and the tranquility of wisdom,

> ... - but he misdeems
> That he is wise, whose wounds do only bleed
> Inly for self - ...[19]

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18 The Sensitive Plant 122-125.

19 The Revolt of Islam 12, X, 7-9.

"*It excites my wonder to consider the perverted energies of the human mind...Yet who is there that will not pursue phantoms, spend his choicest hours in hunting after dreams and wake only to perceive his error and regret that Death is so near?*"

(To Thomas Jefferson Hogg, August, 1815)

"*-<u>self</u>, that burr that will stick to one. I can't get it off yet.*"

(To Leigh Hunt, August, 1819)

CHAPTER IV

DARK IDOLATRY: THE IMAGERY OF EVIL IN THE CENCI.

Shelley, in The Cenci, focuses upon "the great war between the old and young" (II. ii, 38), as the pivotal centre from which to extend the whole plexus of worldly evil. Age, in the play, represents established evil, a negative, worldly permanence, ruthlessly self-maintained in the face of rebellious youth, struggling for personal freedom. Age is the past, predatory upon the present, bent upon corruption and destruction in a world bound by tradition and its institutions, "...Priests and Kings,/ Custom, domestic sway, ay, all that brings/ Man's freeborn soul beneath the oppressor's heel".[1] Age is also "hoary-headed Selfishness",[2] a grim figure of paternal tyranny and moral deformity through which the active force of evil manifests itself in repeated acts of degradation, treachery and violence.

> ... Oh, plead
> With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,
> Blind lightning, or the deaf sea, not with man!
> Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,
> In deed a Cain....
>
> (V. iv. 104-108)

The paternal tyrant-figure is portrayed in The Cenci as either the shadowy abstraction of evil, the Pope, "A rite, a law, a custom: not a man" (V. iv, 5), or as the substantial grisly personification of evil, Count Cenci.

> How hideously look deeds of lust and blood
> Through those snow white and venerable hairs!—
>
> (I. i, 38-39)

Ideally, humanity is a brotherhood based upon mutual dependence and unselfish love. This brotherhood finds its most complete expression in the

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1 The Revolt of Islam S. VII, 6.

2 Queen Mab V. 249.

teachings of Jesus which stress the essential community between humanity and divinity: the love of God for God, the love of God for man, the love of man for God, and the love of man for man: the four-fold aspect of the one and same reality, Perfect Identity. Individually, the Pope and Count Cenci represent the perversion of humanity; socially, the perversion of the Christian life. The only brotherhood their "unnatural" humanity can lay claim to is the perverse brotherhood of Cain, the ruthless self-seekers.

"Unnatural" seems to have meant, for Shelley, anything out of that ideal harmony with all forms of life and therefore a monstrous manifestation of corruption and falsity. As such, "unnatural" becomes a synonym for perversity wherever it occurs in Shelley's works. In his early work, Queen Mab, "unnatural" occurs in the midst of lines which anticipate the theme of the rape and perversion of Beatrice.

> Nature! - no!
> Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast
> the human flower
> Even in its tender bud; their influence
> darts
> Like subtle poison through the bloodless
> veins
> Of desolate society. The child.....
> Swells with the unnatural pride of
> crime, and lifts
> His baby-sword even in a hero's
> mood.
> This infant-arm becomes the bloodiest
> scourge...[3]
>
> (IV. 103-111)

Count Cenci embodies this perversion of humanity vividly enough, if in language rather too closely reminiscent of Macbeth:

> O, multitudinous Hell, the fiends will shake
> Thine arches with the laughter of their joy!
> . . . . . .
> All good shall droop and sicken, and ill things
> Shall with a spirit of unnatural life
> Stir and be quickened...even as I am now.
>
> (IV. i, 183-184, 187-189)

Beatrice denounces her father as an "unnatural man" (I.iii, 54), as does

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[3] See also Queen Mab V. 20, VI. 128, VII. 227. The Revolt of Islam I. XXXV, 9; 10: XV, 9; 12: iv, 9. Prometheus Unbound I. 349.

Giacomo, in relation to that "war between the old and young":

> ... We
> Are now no more, as once, parent and child,
> But man to man; the oppressor to the oppressed;
> The slanderer to the slandered; foe to foe:
> He has cast Nature off, which was his shield,
> And Nature casts him off, who is her shame;
> (III. i, 282-287)

Beatrice's act of parricide is an "unnatural work" (V. i. 42). Lucretia refers to "our wrongs...unnatural, strange, and monstrous," (III. i, 188).[4] The Pope's "unnatural" humanity is presented in images of lifelessness; not only is he"a rite, a law, a custom: not a man" but a "mechanical man", cold and inflexible.

> The Pope is stern; not to be moved or bent.
> He looked as calm and keen as is the engine
> Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself
> From aught that it inflicts; a marble form.
> .....
> He frowned, as if to frown had been the trick
> Of his machinery, on the advocates
> Presenting the defences, which he tore
> And threw behind, muttering with a hoarse, harsh
> voice:
> 'Which among ye defended their old father
> Killed in his sleep?'
> .....
> He turned to me then, looking deprecation,
> And said these three words, coldly: 'They must die'.
> (V. iv, 1-14)

This mechanical aspect of evil harks back to a similar idea in Queen Mab:

> Nature rejects the monarch, not the
> man;
> .....
> Power, like a desolating pestilence,
> Pollutes whate'er it touches; and
> obedience,
> Bane of all genius, virtus, freedom,
> truth,
> Makes slaves of men, and, of the human
> frame,
> A mechanized automaton.
> (III. 170, 176-179)

These "unnatural" qualities, as well as age, hypocrisy and corruption, form a perverse unity of evil. The common denominator of these elements is "self" "...frozen, unimpassioned, spiritless,/Shunning the light, and owning

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[4] See also II. i, 44; IV. i, 155; V. iv, 17.

not its name," (V. 25-26). One of the embodiments of evil in Shelley's drama, Count Cenci,is also the embodiment of selfishness. This is made apparent by comparing firstly, the personification of selfishness as it appears in his youthful work, Queen Mab, with Lucretia's description of the count, in his drama.

> But hoary-headed Selfishness has felt
> Its death-blow, and is tottering to the
> grave:
> (V. 250)

> ...A man who walks like thee
> Through crimes, and through the danger of his crimes,
> Each hour may stumble o'er a sudden grave.
> And thou art old; thy hairs are hoary gray;
> (IV. i, 16-19)

Shelley stresses the materiality of evil in The Cenci as forcefully as in his Queen Mab and The Revolt of Islam. Life is not perverse, but "the world we make" is. Beatrice laments:

> ... what a tyrant thou art,
> And what slaves these; and what a world
> we make,
> The oppressor and the oppressed...
> (V. iii, 73-75)

In The Cenci evil thoughts and acts are committed within the cold rigid structures of man. Torture and incest occur within the Cenci palace, hypocrisy and betrayal in the palace of Orsino, imprisonment and death in the castle of Petrella, and in the pontifical palace and its Hall of Justice, rites and laws are conceived which deprive individuals of freedom and are ruthlessly enforced. Words of triumph or despair, whether uttered by Count Cenci or Beatrice, are persistently couched in physical terms. Beatrice expresses her maltreatment by her father through vivid food imagery, characteristic of the play.

> ...Oh! He has trampled me
> Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
> My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all
> Ditch-water, and the fever-stricken flesh
> Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,
> And we have eaten.
> (II. i, 64-69)

Count Cenci's perversion of the sacrament in the banquet scene affords an interesting comparison (I. iii, 77-89). His curse, directed at Beatrice, reinforces, with its food imagery, her earlier description of eating "fever-stricken flesh".

> Earth, in the name of God, let her food be
> Poison, until she be encrusted round
> With leprous stains! Heaven, rain
> upon her head
> The blistering drops of the Maremma's dew,
> Till she be speckled like a toad; ...
> (IV. i, 128-132)

It is not surprising to find that Shelley persistently identifies evil and its materiality with "gross and sensual self".[5] In Queen Mab he denounces "self" or "selfishness" as the "twin-sister of religion"

> Rival in crime and falsehood, aping
> all
> The wanton horrors of her bloody
> play;
> .....
> The cause and effect of tyranny;
> Unblushing, hardened, sensual and
> vile;
> (V. 22-24, 31-32)

In The Cenci, "self" represents the perversion not only of the Christian religion but of all its spiritual values. The "spiritual" and "ideal" is shown to be preyed upon and inevitably "taken over" by the "material". After her violation, Beatrice's "beautiful blue heaven" is "flecked with blood" (III. i, 13), and her father "Stabbed with one blow my everlasting soul" (V. ii,123). Beatrice erroneously comes to believe in the supreme power of the material over the spiritual, of man's selfish will over God's grace: an error she has in common with her father. Consequently she sees and describes spiritual corruption in terms which strongly suggest venereal infection.

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5 Queen Mab, VII, 95.

... There creeps
A clinging, black, contaminating mist
About me... 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another
And eats into my sinews and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!
(III. i, 16-23)

Count Cenci's perverted view of spiritual being causes him to endow God with the selfish, contentious characteristics of material evil, in other words, his own "self". He demands that God, symbolized by the sun, destroy His child of light and love, Beatrice.

If nursed by Thy selectest dew of love
Such virtues blossom in her as should make
The peace of life, I pray Thee for my sake,
As Thou the common God and Father art
Of her, and me, and all; reverse that doom!
.....
... All-beholding sun,
Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes
With thine own blinding beams!
(IV. i, 121-127, 134-136)

The Count little realizes that such a demand is ultimately suicidal.[6] If "God" strikes against His own child then He must strike against himself; God would be self-destroyed and life perverted into the darkness of annihilation: within the two brief scenes following his curse Cenci is dead (IV. iii, 45).

"Gross, sensual self" makes the error of "seeking in mortal image the likeness of what is, perhaps, eternal."[7] The result of man's sensual pursuit is "the dark idolatry of self".[8]

He builds the altar, that its idols' fee
May be his very blood; he is pursuing -
O, blind and willing wretch! - his own obscure undoing.[9]

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6 Ibid. V, 16.

7 Letters X, p.401. See also p.69.

8 The Revolt of Islam 8. XXII, 3.

9 Ibid. 8. XIV, 7-9.

The service paid to this idol in The Cenci is the habitual pursuit and gratification of egoistic desires, ultimately self-enslaving and suicidal. Count Cenci's perverse manipulation of his faith to suit his sensual desires illustrates this "dark idolatry" vividly enough, but it is Orsino whom Shelley focuses upon to emphasize not just evil's self-idolatry and self-destructiveness, but its "sordid lust"[10]

> Some unbeheld divinity doth ever,
> When dread events are near, stir up men's minds
> To black suggestions; he prospers best,
> Not who becomes the instrument of ill,
> But who can flatter the dark spirit, that makes
> Its empire and its prey of other hearts
> Till it become his slave...as I will do.
>
> (II. ii, 155-161)

Orsino has been judged as the most evil of the protagonists[11] and there may be justification for this opinion when one realises that Shelley has made his erring priest the recipient of the most sacred and revered of romantic passions: love. The Count's motivation for raping his own daughter in order to possess her completely was paranoid, rather than lustful; Orsino's desire to possess Beatrice is a "pretty piece of paganism".

> Her bright form kneels beside me at the altar,
> And follows me to the resort of men,
> And fills my slumber with tumultuous dreams,
> So when I wake my blood seems liquid fire;
> And if I strike my damp and dizzy head
> My hot palm scorches it: her very name,
> But spoken by a stranger, makes my heart
> Sicken and pant; and thus unprofitably
> I clasp the phantom of unfelt delights
> Till weak imagination half possesses
> The self-created shadow.
>
> (II. ii, 133-143)

The undiluted sensualism of Orsino's "love" for Beatrice is devoid of all the spiritual, ideal qualities with which Shelley endowed love. Its

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10 Queen Mab V. 90.

11 Joan Rees, "Shelley's Orsino: Evil in "The Cenci'" Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin XII 1961, 3-6.

perversion is made even more apparent by the fact that Orsino cannot separate his passion for Beatrice from his greed for gold.

> ... while Cenci lives
> His daughter's dowry were a secret grave
> If a priest wins her. - Oh, fair Beatrice!
> Would that I loved thee not, or loving thee
> Could but despise danger and gold and all
> That frowns between my wish and its effect,
> Or smiles beyond it!
>
> (II. ii, 126-132)

Orsino's love for Beatrice is indistinguishable from his love of self. Instead of seeking love for its own sake, Orsino pursues it for his own sake. Beatrice becomes the embodiment of his own sensuous desires, the burning-bright idolum projected from the dark idolatry of the material self with its obsessive delight "in sensual luxury" (I. i, 77). There is no element of self-sacrifice in Orsino's love for Beatrice; as a perversion of the ideal, his love is actually the lust of sensual desire which always seeks its climax in total possession of its object. The alluring idolum of his desire is very much his own creation: a false image of the true reality. Not once does Orsino "see" Beatrice as she really is, but only as he wants to see her, as the object of his lust. This explains Orsino's extraordinary lack of sensitivity, for such an astute man, to the real gravity of her situation (I. ii, 72-79) and his indifference to her changed attitude towards him as her one-time beloved (I. ii, 20-29). From the feverish self-delusion of his idolatry of Beatrice as "an enchanted phantom, A lifeless idol",[12] Orsino spins his web of villainy and thereby causes the "little kingdom" of the Cenci family to "suffer an insurrection"[13] which drags all into its destructive contention.

The idolater, "profane, popish superstitious"[14] is also a hunter bent upon the pursuit, entrapment, even destruction of that which

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12 Scenes from the Faust of Goethe II. 385-389; see also Charles The First I. 86. The Revolt of Islam 2. XIII. 9.

13 Julius Caesar II. i.63-69.

14 Charles the First III. 13.

he yearns to possess. Count Cenci, referring to himself and Beatrice, warns Lucretia that "It were safer/ To come between the tiger and his prey" (IV. i, 173-174). The Count is a hunter, more ruthless than artful, in the pursuit of his prey: "Of all earthly things,"says Orsino, "I fear a man whose blows outspeed his words;/ And such is Cenci" (II. ii, 124-126). The subtle manoeuvres of the game are not for Cenci: the overwhelming of his quarry is all that matters and he strikes swiftly and savagely to attain that end in the violation of his daughter. Before he strikes he marks his prey with

> ... one little word;
> One look, one smile. (Wildly) Oh! He has
> trampled me
> Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
> My pallid cheeks.
>
> (II. i, 63-66)

Beatrice's words anticipate the running of her father's quarry to earth: her imminent violation. Cenci's words betray the hunter's lustful excitement in the pursuit of his prey, an excitement which is little different from the savage eagerness of the hounds:

> My blood is running up and down my veins;
> A fearful pleasure makes it prick and tingle:
> I feel a giddy sickness of strange awe;
> My heart is beating with an expectation
> Of horrid joy.
>
> (IV. i, 163-166)

Like a hunter celebrating his success with a feast, Cenci rejoices in the death of his sons at the banquet and toasts his success with such "jolly jesting" as to remind one of the sinister huntsman, Sir Bertilak, in the mediaeval poem of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In an image which implies the fate of Jezebel in the Bible as strongly as the hunt, Cenci pronounces that Beatrice's "corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds" (IV. i. 91). Orsino speaks of love as a "net" within which to entrap Beatrice, whilst he is both hunter and predatory beast in pursuit of his fleeing prey.

> ...the devices of my love - a net
> From which she shall escape not. Yet I fear
> Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze,
> Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve.
> .....
> I were a fool, not less than if a panther
> Were panic-stricken by the antelope's eye,
> If she escape me.
> (I. ii, 82-90)

In "the great war between old and young" each plays the part of hunter and prey alike. The internecine nature of the conflict is intensified by the fact that youth also wars against youth. Orsino speaks of himself as the panther and Beatrice as the antelope, yet, in an earlier statement, describes himself as the helpless prey:

> Because I am a Priest do you believe
> Your image, as the hunter some struck deer,
> Follows me not whether I wake or sleep?
> (I. ii, 11-13)

Later in the play, he laments his sensual obsession for Beatrice and his other idol, gold, from which "There is no escape..." (II. ii, 128-132). Ironically the hunter is also the hunted in the world of The Cenci. The "impious trust"[15] which the idolater places in his idol is betrayed and Orsino, no less than Count Cenci, is caught in his own trap. Beatrice marks her prey and experiences the same "horrid joy" as her father (IV. iii, 42-44). So Cenci is hunted and destroyed by that "particle" of his own "divided being" (IV. i, 117) as surely as Orsino is brought to ruin by the phantasmal creation of his own self.

Orsino boasts that he will "flatter the dark spirit" and make it slave to his will

> ...he prospers best,
> Not who becomes the instrument of ill,
> But who can flatter the dark spirit, that makes
> Its empire and its prey of other hearts
> Till it become his slave...as I will do.
> (II. ii, 157-161)

Ostensibly "as I will do" refers back to his intention to make the dark spirit his slave; more subtly this phrase refers to the words which immediately

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[15] The Revolt of Islam 2. XIII, 9.

precede it: Orsino unwittingly utters a true prophecy. His image of Beatrice as his huntress is given an added dimension through his own words; she is a "self-created shadow" and Orsino, in actuality, the hunter self-hunted, slave of his own error. As a hunting, or rather, entrapment image, the dark pit into which the members of the Cenci family and Orsino fall serves also as an image of the "dark idolatry" of self.

Giacomo, no less a slave to his material desires than the rest of his family, (II. ii, 10-16) speaks of himself as being "lost in a midnight wood", isolated, and a prey of the forces of evil.

> I am as one lost in a midnight wood,
> Who dares not ask some harmless passenger
> The path across the wilderness, lest he,
> As my thoughts are, should be-a murderer.
>
> (II. ii, 94-97)

"The midnight wood" is obviously a variation of the pit image. From within the dark pit, the prey might well look upwards at twigs and leafy branches with which the hunter cunningly covered its opening. More subtly, the "midnight wood" images the net as seen from the inside of a net, its interlacing cords resembling the thickly entwining branches of a forest. The net which the hunter uses to entrap his quarry, corresponds to the mantle which he may wear to conceal his intent whilst he stalks his unsuspecting prey. For Shelley, it is always "the mantle of some selfish guile" (II. ii, 79) which ultimately entraps the hunter himself. The mantle with which Beatrice clothes Marzio as reward for the "holy deed" of killing her father, betrays the assassination to the Pope's agents and leads directly to Beatrice's arrest. (IV. iii, 50-56; iv, 83-86; V. ii, 5-7). Orsino realizes to his dismay that he, too, has been caught in his own snare:

> I thought to act a solemn comedy
> Upon the painted scene of this new world,
> And to attain my own peculiar ends
> By some such plot of mingled good and ill
> As others weave; but there arose a Power
> Which grasped and snapped the threads of my device
> And turned it to a net of ruin...
>
> (V. i, 77-83)

Evil is the inner deformity which the "mantle of some selfish guile" is supposed to conceal whilst its bearer stalks "smiling and slow" amongst "the misdeeming crowd" (V. i, 86). In Queen Mab, selfishness is "Compelled, by its deformity, to screen/ With flimsy veil of justice and of right,/ Its unattractive lineaments", (V. 27-29). Orsino embodies this idea in The Cenci, like "selfishness", "owning not its name". (Mab. V. 26).

> Is that my name I hear proclaimed abroad?
> But I will pass, wrapped in a vile disguise;
> Rags on my back, and a false innocence
> Upon my face, ...
> .....
> And these must be the masks of that within,
> Which must remain unaltered.
> .....'
> ... where shall I
> Find the disguise to hide me from myself,
> As now I skulk from every other eye?
> (V. i, 84-87, 92-95, 102-104)

In The Revolt of Islam, the "Iberian Priest" seems to anticipate the corruptness of Orsino which might be extended to include the evil of Count Cenci also.

> ... for in his breast
> Did hate and guile lie watchful, intertwined,
> Twin serpents in one deep and winding nest;[16]
> He loathed all faith beside his own, and pined
> To wreak his fear of Heaven in vengeance on mankind.
> (10. XXXII, 5-9)

These lines suggest the predatory images of the "watchful" hunter and the "deep" pit of self-concealment or self-entrapment. The serpent image suggests the intimate connection, in Shelley's mind, between selfishness and evil: Giacomo's words to Orsino reinforce this association within the context of the hunt.

> Do evil deeds thus quickly come to end?
> .....
> O, that the hour when present had cast off
> The mantle of its mystery, and shown
> The ghastly form with which it now returns
> When its scared game is roused, cheering the hounds
> Of conscience to their prey! ...
> (V. i, 5-9)

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16 Compare this stanza in The Revolt of Islam with the "Song" in The Cenci (V. iii.).

"Blood" is a word which occurs frequently throughout the drama and evokes the savage lust and contention of the hunt. Marzio's words, in the trial scene, suggest that "the quarry" has finally been cornered and must face its pursuers, the judges.

> Bloodhounds, not men, glut yourselves well with me;
> I will not give you that fine piece of nature
> To rend and ruin.[17]
>
> [Exit MARZIO, guarded.]
> Camillo. What say ye now, my Lords?
> Judge. Let tortures strain the truth till it be white
> As snow thrice sifted by the frozen wind.
> Camillo. Yet stained with blood.
>
> (V. ii, 166-171)

The blood and snow association immediately brings to mind the predatory image of age and custom in the play embodied individually, as "hoary-headed" Count Cenci: "How hideously look deeds of lust and blood/ Through those snow white and venerable hairs!" (I. i, 38-39). Bernardo's description of the Pope's officers as blood splattered "ministers of death", which includes the Pope, finds its cosmic parallel in the "Furies" of Prometheus Unbound. These "Furies" are "ministers of fear and hate" whose master is the tyrannous Jupiter (I. 448, 452-457).

> ... The ministers of death
> Are waiting round the doors. I thought I saw
> Blood on the face of one... What if 'twere fancy?
> Soon the heart's blood of all I love on earth
> Will sprinkle him, and he will wipe it off
> As if 'twere only rain....
>
> (V. iv, 123-128)

These words of Bernardo, the child, emphasizing as they do the inhumanity and inaccessibility to appeal of the Pope, "the father" of Christian society, demonstrate the greater horror and perversity attaining to the cold-blooded and distant, than to "hot-blooded" villains such as the Count. In sharp contrast with Jesus who loved children, the Pope prefers to "trample them underfoot" until they submit to his will, or die (V. iv,1-27).

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[17] See also, Beatrice: V. iii, 62-65.

What think you if I seek him out, and bathe
His feet and robe with hot and bitter tears?
Importune him with prayers, vexing his brain
With my perpetual cries, until in rage
He strike me with his pastoral cross, and trample
Upon my prostrate head, so that my blood
May stain the senseless dust on which he treads,
And remorse waken mercy?
(V. iv, 33-40)

The "cold-blooded" evil of the Pope is stressed by the fact that he never takes an active part in the "war between old and young" but, rather, initiates action through his ministers. Although he professes a "blameless neutrality" in the conflict, his influence is seen to operate inexorably through the Count, the shadow of his own power (II. ii, 55-56) and the judge at the trial of "his children" (V. ii, 70-76). As the holy representative of the Father and Son in the world, the Pope, in actuality, is a satanic perversion. "Proud, sensual, unimpassioned, unimbued/ With pure desire and universal love," (Queen Mab V. 152-153).

The blood-stained villains of The Cenci have also in common their love of gold. From "gross and sensual self" grows the predatory, enslaving evil of avarice, "aged, sullen avarice" (II. ii, 6). Shelley persistently uses "blood" as an image of murderous intent or deed to emphasize the materiality of evil in The Cenci. "Blood" and "gold" together reinforce this concept of gross, predatory evil. "Blood is the seed of gold" in Hellas (248) and in Charles The First, the Pope

...walks
As if he trod upon the heads of men:
He looks elate, drunken with blood and gold;[18]
(I. 60)

In his ruthless determination to preserve his worldly power the Pope, no less than Count Cenci, serves the "god" of the material world "one God would not suffice/ For senile puerility;" (Queen Mab VI. 123-124). In the dark realm of self, from which the light of God's love is excluded, the

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[18] See also: The Revolt of Islam 5. xiv, 7; Queen Mab IV. 195; The Masque of Anarchy LXXII.4. The Ode to Liberty III. 13; Letters IX p.181.

counterfeit glitter of gold can be the only power upon which the paternal tyrants depend for survival.

> My friend, that palace-walking devil Gold
> Has whispered silence to his Holiness:
> And we are left, as scorpions ringed with fire.
> What should we do but strike ourselves to death?
> For he who is our murderous persecutor
> Is shielded by a father's holy name.
>
> (II. ii, 68-73)

Count Cenci and the Pope, in their common determination to achieve exclusive worldly omnipotence, are natural rivals, and each wields "gold, the old man's sword" (I. i, 127) against one another as well as "parricidal youth". The contention between these aged rivals takes the form of a bizarre "trade-agreement". Immunity from papal displeasure at Count Cenci's crimes must be bought.

> Camillo. That matter of the murder is hushed up
> If you consent to yield his Holiness
> Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate. -
> ... he said that you
> Bought perilous impunity with your gold;
> That crimes like yours if once or twice compounded
> Enriched the Church, ...
>
> (I. i, 1-3, 5-8)

Continual payments of gold and property have allowed the Count to persist in his perverse pleasures. The Pope is quite happy "to milk" his rival, whose power is thereby kept subservient to his own. Ironically and most conveniently for the Pope, the continual drain upon Cenci's wealth forces him, in turn, to persist in crimes of extortion and murder in order to replenish his ever-diminishing coffers: crimes which continue to provide the Pope with legitimate cause to impose his fines.

> ...No doubt Pope Clement,
> And his most charitable nephews, pray
> That the Apostle Peter and the Saints
> Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy
> Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and
> length of days
> Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards
> Of their revenue. - But much yet remains
> To which they show no title.
>
> (I. i, 27-34)

Everything in The Cenci seems to have its price. It is true

that the "glory and interest" of the Pope's holy office, as Camillo reports to Cenci

> ... little consist
> With making it a daily mart of guilt
> As manifold and hideous as the deeds
> Which you scarce hide from men's revolted eyes.
> (I. i, 10-14)

But that is precisely the state of affairs. The Pope's hypocritical condemnation, in Cenci, of the crimes of extortion, torture and murder which he, through the cold-blooded manipulation of his "subjects", practises himself, makes him the very distillation of evil.

> Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,
> The signet of its all-enslaving power
> Upon a shining ore, and called it gold:
> Before whose image bow the vulgar great.
> . . . . . .
> Gold is a living god, and rules in scorn
> All earthly things but virtue.[19]

Beatrice's "high and holy deed" of parricide has its price: "A thousand crowns excellent market price/ For an old murderer's life" (IV. ii, 19) and a "gold-inwoven" robe for the assassin's shoulders (IV. iii, 49-59). Even love has its price for Orsino

> ... I know the Pope
> Will ne'er absolve me from my priestly vow
> But by absolving me from the revenue
> Of many a wealthy see; and, Beatrice,
> I think to win thee at an easier rate.
> (I. ii, 64-67)

Evil, in The Cenci, can be summed up in the predatory image which occurs in The Ode to Liberty written the year after his drama: "Anarchs and priests, who feed on gold and blood" (III. 13). The ultimate irony of evil's apparent victory in The Cenci stems from Shelley's conception of its origin in the idolatry of self, often objectified as "gold". The worship of this idol, Shelley warns, in The Revolt of Islam, may be the sacrifice of its votary's "very blood" (8. xiv, 1-9). In evil's jealous compulsion

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19 Queen Mab V. 53-56, 62.

to survive, it must forever suffer the torment of being divided against itself, which also involves its own destruction: hence, "suicidal selfishness". In Prometheus Unbound, the tormented Titan is confronted with the error of his own "self" objectified as the evil Furies (I. 480).

> Methinks I grow like what I contemplate,
> And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy.
> First Fury. We are the ministers of pain, and fear,
> And disappoint, and mistrust, and hate,
> And clinging crime; and as lean dogs pursue
> Through wood and lake some struck and sobbing fawn,
> We track all things that weep, and bleed, and live,
> When the great King betrays them to our will.
> Prometheus. Oh! many fearful natures in one name,
> I know ye;
>
> (I. 450-459)

Prometheus, like Orsino, recognizes the irony of the evil which enslaves him: evil the hunter, self-hunted, self-enslaved, self-destroyed. Material evil is as closely united as spiritual good: one part always implies the other. However, a perverse unity which rests upon fear and hatred is necessarily a paradox. Evil is disunity in unity, evident in the conflict between parent and child in The Cenci and particularly so in the aftermath of Beatrice's violation.

After the rape, Beatrice is "at one" with Cenci's evil, the link between them, symbolized by "blood", not as an expression of the family tie, but, perversely, as equivalent to seminal fluid. Once this unity has been imposed and one "part" necessarily implies the other in corruption, the suicidal conflict within evil is made apparent. The act of incest which Cenci calculates to make Beatrice completely subject to his power, actually makes her his equal. Within their unity of evil, that dark "gulf" of self (III. i, 250-265) Beatrice manifests the same qualities as her father, self-confinement and hostile self-alienation which breed immediate contention.

> Go tell my father that I see the gulf
> Of Hell between us two, which he may pass,
> I will not.
>
> (IV. i, 98-99)

Blood, that symbol of their perverse unity is also the symbol of their hostile disunity, as Lucretia says to Cenci

> ...She said, 'I cannot come;
> Go tell my father that I see a torrent
> Of his own blood raging between us.'[20] (IV. i, 113-114)

The internecine conflict of The Cenci is also that of evil itself which, like "scorpion falsehood"[21] forever stings itself to death. As such it is a living death which regenerates itself from fear and hatred only to resume the torment of its own mortality.

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20 Compare Prometheus Unbound I 483-490.

21 Queen Mab VI. 36-38.

"Why," I asked, "do you call yourself an atheist? It annihilates you in this world."

"It is a word of abuse to stop discussion, a painted devil to frighten the foolish, a threat to intimidate the wise and good. I used it to express my abhorrence of superstition; I took up the word, as a knight took up the gauntlet, in defiance of injustice. The delusions of Christianity are fatal to genius and originality: they limit thought."

(Trelawny and Shelley,
Records I. 92-93)

CHAPTER V

GOD AND MAMMON:

THE THEOLOGY BEHIND THE CENCI.

Religion in Italy, Shelley explains in the Preface, "is interwoven with the whole fabric of life. It is an adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct."[1] Shelley's comparison of Italian Catholicism with English Protestantism is intended to stress the difference between the two attitudes to Christian faith and worship. This prepares his audience not for atheism in the Count, but his perverse Christianity as well as the impassioned nature of Beatrice's endurance and retaliation.

> The most atrocious villain may be rigidly devout, and without any shock to established faith, confess himself to be so. Religion pervades intensely the whole frame of society, and is according to the temper of the mind which it inhabits, a passion, a persuasion, an excuse, a refuge; never a check.[2]

Shelley, as the Preface indicates and the drama clearly reveals, is undoubtedly critical of Italian Catholicism. This, however, does not mean that the radical author of The Necessity for Atheism was returning to the Conservative Protestantism of his childhood upbringing. There is a subtle criticism of the Protestant faith, detectable in Shelley's comparison when he speaks, with veiled contempt, of religion in "Protestant countries" as,

> ...a cloak to be worn on particular days; or a passport which those who do not wish to be railed at carry with them to exhibit; or a gloomy passion for penetrating the impenetrable mysteries of our being, which terrifies its possessor at the darkness of the abyss to the brink of which it has conducted him.[3]

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1 Poetical Works, Preface, p.277.

2 Idem.

3 Idem.

It is institutionalized Christianity which Shelley anathematizes in The Cenci, no less sternly than in his youthful composition of Queen Mab.

> Religion! thou wert then in manhood's
> prime:
> But age crept on: one God would not
> suffice
> For senile puerility; thou framedst
> A tale to suit thy dotage, and to glut
> Thy misery-thirsting soul, that the
> mad fiend
> Thy wickedness had pictured might
> afford
> A plea for sating the unnatural thirst
> For murder, rapine, violence, and
> crime,
>
> (VI. 122-129)

Beatrice's keen-judging world of professed Christianity is a "...two-edged lie,/ Which seems, but is not." (IV. iv, 115-6). The symbol of perverse reality of her "high and holy deed" is a "two-edged instrument" (IV. ii, 35, V. ii, 97). In the same year that Shelley wrote The Cenci, he also wrote "Sonnet: England In 1819." The perverse nature of institutionalized Christianity, this time, Protestantism, was symbolized as a "two-edged sword",

> A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field, -
> An army, which liberticide and prey
> Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield, -
> Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
> Religion Christless, Godless - a book sealed;

The word "God" and its variants occur seventy-nine times throughout The Cenci, yet the Christian God of love, mercy and justice is conspicuously absent. All that remains near the close of the play of Beatrice's impassioned belief in her God is an empty, "cold fidelity" (I. ii, 26; V.iv, 80-89).

Shelley's "atheism" consisted not of a rejection of the existence of God and the validity of Christ's teachings, but rather of a firm denial of current beliefs in divinity. His "atheism" was to be the means of vindicating the essential truths of Christ's words before they had suffered the perversion of becoming a "popular religion", the essence of which is contentious disunity,

> And Socrates, the Jesus Christ of Greece,
> And Jesus Christ Himself, did never cease
> To urge all living things to love each other,
> And to forgive their mutual faults, and
> smother
> The Devil of disunion in their souls.[4]

As a self-styled atheist, Shelley must have felt himself to be in honoured company. Had not Socrates been accused of atheism by his contemporaries and the early Christians by the supporters of Roman mythology? Even Christ Himself had been accused of blasphemy by the Jews.

Only a few months after the completion of The Cenci, Shelley began his "Essay on Christianity"[5] in which he celebrated Christ as the reformer of a perverted religion.

> He said - However new or strange my doctrines may appear to you, they are, in fact only the restoration and re-establishment of those original institutions and ancient customs of your own law and religion. The constitution of your faith and policy, altho[sic] perfect in their origin, have become corrupt and altered, and have fallen into decay. I profess to restore them to their pristine authority and splendour.. 'Think not that I am come to destroy but to fulfil'...[6]

From Shelley's point of view, his "atheism" expressed the rejection of a perverted, and consequently false image of the true faith. The Christian concept of God had become "personalized", imbued with man's image and party to his will, whether it be a will to good or evil.

> What is that Power? Ye mock yourselves, and give
> A human heart to what ye cannot know:
> As if the cause of life could think and live!
> 'Twere as if man's own works should feel, and show
> The hopes, and fears, and thoughts from which they flow,
> And he be like to them! ...[7]

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4 "Fragments Connected With Epipsychidion" 33-37.

5 According to Richard Holmes in Shelley: the pursuit this unfinished essay is likely to have been begun in January 1820: see p.571.

6 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI p.242.

7 The Revolt of Islam 8 v, 1-6.

The "pernicious mistake" within institutionalized Christianity was, for Shelley, "the idolatry of self", delusory and ultimately self-destructive.

> What is that Power? Some moon-struck sophist stood
> Watching the shade from his own soul upthrown
> Fill Heaven and darken Earth, and in such mood
> The Form he saw and worshipped was his own,
> His likeness in the world's vast mirror shown;
> And 'twere an innocent dream, but that a faith
> Nursed by fear's dew of poison, grows thereon,
> And that men say, that Power has chosen Death
> On all who scorn its laws, to wreak immortal wrath.[8]

Shelley's God was the "unknowable" Absolute, its harmonious unity epitomized as "Love"; a "Power" not personal but "universal".

Speaking of Jesus, with whom he seems to have felt a deep affinity as "a reformer", Shelley states,

> He tramples upon all received opinions, on all the cherished luxuries and superstitions of mankind. He bids them cast aside the chains of custom and blind faith by which they have been encompassed from the very cradle of their being, and become the imitators and ministers of the Universal God.[9]

The "Essay on Christianity" discusses the Christian faith as it ought to be from Shelley's, and, as he would have it, Christ's point of view.

> Jesus Christ represented God as the principle of all good, the source of all happiness, ...But the interpreters of his doctrine have confounded the good and evil principle. They observed the emanations of their universal natures to be inextricably intangled [sic] in the world, and trembling before the power of the cause of all things addressed to it such flattery as is acceptable to the ministers of human tyranny, attributing love and wisdom to those energies which they felt to be exerted indifferently for the purposes of benefit and calamity.[10]

These words recall Count Cenci who commits the deed which "confounds" night and day and creates instead, a "bewildering mist of horror" within which "black parricide is turned to piety". Lucretia observes of Count Cenci that

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8 Ibid. 8. vi. 1-9.

9 "Essay on Christianity", in Complete Works VI p.248. See also Hellas: Prologue, 153-155.

10 Ibid. pp.239-40.

'Tis true he spoke
Of death and judgment with strange confidence
For one so wicked; as a man believing
In God, yet recking not of good or ill.
(IV. ii, 9-11)

Shelley expounds more fully this perverse "confounding of good and evil" by Christian theologians in the essay "On the Devil, and Devils", written and completed one year after the unfinished "Essay on Christianity".[11]

> The wisest of the antient philosophers accounted for the existence of evil without introducing the Devil. The Devil was clearly a Chaldaean invention ...Like panic-stricken slaves in the presence of a jealous and suspicious despot ... - endeavouring to reconcile omnipotence, and benevolence, and equity, in the Author of an Universe where evil and good are inextricably intangled [sic] and where the most admirable tendencies to happiness and preservation are forever baffled by misery and decay. The Christians, therefore, invented or adopted the Devil to extricate them from this difficulty.[12]

The Devil, therefore, is no more than a falsehood devised by man. Shelley underscores both the confusion between good and evil and the perversion of God's truth by arguing that if, according to the Christian myth, "good" God created the Devil, then the origin of evil is in God Himself.

> ...God and the Devil, judging, damning, and then tormenting the soul of a miserable sinner. It is pretended that God dislikes it, but this is mere shamefacedness and coquetting, for he has everything his own way and he need not damn unless he likes. The Devil has a better excuse, for, as he was entirely made by God, he can have no tendency or disposition, the seeds of which were not originally planted by his creator;...[13]

These "Chaldean" concepts of God and the Devil are, according to Shelley, as contradictory and imperfect as man himself, being mere figments of man's imagination. Shelley conceives that Christ had an entirely different idea of God's reality:

> Every human being is indebted for a multitude of his sentiments to the religion of his early years. Jesus Christ probably studied the historians of his country with the ardour of a spirit seeking after truth.... He had contemplated this name as having been prophanely

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11 Richard Holmes, in Shelley: the pursuit, gives the date of the "Essay on Devils" as January 1821 (see p.621).

12 "On the Devil and Devils" in Complete Works VII, pp.87-89.

13 Ibid. 95.

> [sic] perverted to the sanctioning of the most enormous and abominable crimes. We can distinctly trace in the tissue of his doctrines the persuasion that God is some universal being, differing both from man and from the mind of man.[14]

Earlier, in his play, Shelley gave dramatic expression to a perverse concept of the"personal" God. Count Cenci boasts of "a partnership" with God, "the world's Father" united with the Parent against their parricidal children (IV. i, 106-7). Quite absurdly, Count Cenci believes that he can kill whomsoever he chooses simply by praying for their deaths, (IV. i, 104-111) and is quick to seize upon the coincidence of his sons' deaths as indisputable evidence of his personal "favouring Providence" (I.iii, 55-65).

> If the Devil takes but half the pleasure in tormenting a sinner which God does, who took the trouble to create him, and then invent a system of casuistry by which he might excuse himself for devoting him to external torment, this reward must be considerable.... - These two considerable personages are supposed to have entered into a sort of partnership, in which the weaker has consented to bear all the odium of their common actions, and to allow the stronger to talk of himself as a very honourable person, on condition of having a participation in what is the especial delight of both of them, burning men to all eternity. The dirty work is done by the Devil,...[15]

Even Beatrice, no longer able to believe in her own personal "favouring Providence" cannot conceive the reality of God apart from the man and his mind, determined upon the cruel oppression of her and her family, "Thou, great God,/ Whose image upon earth a father is," (II. i, 17).

The absurd confusion between good and evil, imaged perversely as God and the Devil, is made to centre in ambiguous alternation upon the character of Cenci. The father who prays so abjectly to God, the "Father of all" (I. iii, 22-30) pledges his soul with "the mighty Devil in Hell" (I. iii, 83). He regards himself as the scourge of God yet can also speak

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[14] "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI p. 229.

[15] "On the Devil and Devils" in Complete Works VII p.94.

of himself as a "fiend" appointed to be a tormentor in Hell (IV. i. 60-68; 160-62).[16] Cardinal Camillo compares him to "Hell's most abandoned fiend" (I. i. 117). Beatrice refers to his death as being a "dark continuance of the Hell within him," (IV. ii, 32-34). Cenci himself accuses Lucretia of being a "Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God,/ Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie!" and Beatrice he denounces as "a rebel to her father and her God." (IV. i, 74, 90). In Cenci's defiant gesture of throwing his hand towards Heaven, whilst proclaiming to God "He does His will, I mine!" (IV. i, 139), there is a suggestion of Satan's pride and ambition which caused him to rebel against God. Thus Shelley makes the Count's denunciation of Beatrice as a rebel recoil upon himself. These ambiguous alternations between God and the Devil accumulate towards the end of the drama until, in Beatrice's mind, they merge into the ultimate perversion of unity.

> If all things then should be...my father's spirit,
> .....
> If sometimes, as a shape more like himself,
> Even the form which tortured me on earth,
> Masked in gray hairs and wrinkles, he should come
> And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix
> His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down, down!
> For was he not alone omnipotent
> On Earth, and ever present? Even though dead,
> Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
> (V. iv, 60, 63-71)

The Count, to Beatrice, has become father, lover, torturer, Devil and God of this world, even perversely transfigured "as a shape more like himself" of deformity and error.[17] In being supposed to live, malignantly, in all that breathe after death, he is a supreme travesty of Christ Resurrected. Altogether, Beatrice's words express the perversion of Shelley's concept of the benevolent Deity of pristine Christianity.

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16 Although the Devil as God's Scourge is not an unknown apology, Shelley emphasizes the essential perverseness of the concept in the figure of his Count.

17 Compare John 1. 16.

> ...the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things...the overruling Spirit of the collective energy of the moral and material world.[18]

Beatrice, like her father, also has the conventional and contradictory images of God and the Devil superimposed ambiguously upon her. Count Cenci, in words which suggest "the historians' invention" of the Devil as God's creation, presents two contradictory images of Beatrice. One is a satanic image, the "particle of his divided being".

> Or rather, this my bane and my disease,
> Whose sight infects and poisons me; this devil
> Which sprung from me as from a hell,...
> (IV. i, 117-120)

and this is followed immediately by the saintly image of Beatrice as the love-child of the "good" God: the "light of the world"

> ...if her bright loveliness
> Was kindled to illumine this dark world;
> If nursed by Thy selectest dew of love
> Such virtues blossom in her as should make
> The peace of life ...
> (IV. i, 121-125)

Beatrice, too, regards herself as the scourge of God, "an avenging angel". Yet, in the trial scene, Beatrice defends "black parricide" as piety in order to "make evil her good". The ambiguities of good and evil with which Shelley surrounds Beatrice and Count Cenci, suggest that they are acting out a fantasy of their own creation in a world of that "two-edged lie,/ Which seems, but is not... (IV. iv, 115-116).

> ...this life
> Of error, ignorance, and strife,
> Where nothing is, but all things seem,
> And we the shadows of the dream,[19]

Count Cenci, Beatrice and Orsino act out their grotesque fantasy according to the perverse concepts of their religion, which has, according to Shelley,

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18 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works, VI. pp.230-231.

19 The Sensitive Plant: Conclusion, 22-25; cf "Letter to Maria Gisborne", 154-160.

erroneously created a God and Devil "analogous to the human mind"[20] and made a mockery not only of the true religion of Christ but of life itself.

> ...the religion so called is the strongest ally and bulwark of that system of successful force and fraud and of the selfish passions from which it has derived its origin and permanence...We are called upon to believe in the divinity of a doctrine the effect of which has been to establish more firmly than [that] which it was promulgated to destroy, and that they who invite us to...our reason with envious priests and tyrannical princes, whose [existence] is an everlasting answer to the pretensions of Christianity.[21]

The characters so "deeply tinged with religion" in The Cenci are also captive to the delusive power of their own minds. In the words of Orsino, the priest:

> ... 'tis a trick of this same family
> To analyse their own and other minds.
> Such self-anatomy shall teach the will
> Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,
> Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,
> Into the depth of darkest purposes:
> So Cenci fell into the pit; even I,
> (II. ii, 108-114)

Beatrice and Count Cenci both believe that God is "on their side". This erroneous belief, encouraged by their religion which refuses to "represent God as a limitless and inconceivable mystery; affirming at the same time his existence as a being subject to passion...",[22] arouses their contention and perpetuates their conflict to its destructive end. Both father and daughter, irrespective of the large measure of condemnation and sympathy which fall to one more than the other in spite of the ambiguities, are censurable in so far as they both represent, in thought and deed, a perverse doctrine of Christianity.

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20 "On the Devil and Devils" in Complete Works VII p.88.

21 "The Moral Teaching of Jesus Christ" in Complete Works VI p.255. (The square brackets are the editors, not mine).

22 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI p.230.

> The doctrine of what some fanatics have termed a peculiar Providence, that is of some power beyond and superior to that which ordinarily guides the operations of the Universe, interfering to punish the vicious and reward the virtuous - is explicitly denied by Jesus Christ. The absurd and execrable doctrine of vengeance seems to have been contemplated in all its shapes by this great moralist with the profoundest disapprobation. Nor would he permit the most venerable of names to be perverted into a sanction for the meanest and most contemptible propensities incident to the nature of man.[23]

The essential tragedy, for agents and victims alike in The Cenci, is that the religion which pervades intensely their lives, influences their thoughts and promotes their deeds, is fantasy. Count Cenci is murdered in the midst of a dream in which he laughs at the success of his partnership with God towards destroying his adversaries (IV. iii, 16-20) Beatrice, on the eve of her departure for Rome where she is to suffer torture and execution from Papal authorities, is convinced that God will interfere upon her behalf and vindicate her innocence.

> Beatrice. Why not to Rome, dear mother? There as here
> Our innocence is as an armèd heel
> To trample accusation. God is there
> As here, and with His shadow ever clothes
> The innocent, the injured and the weak;
> And such are we....
>
> (IV. iv, 159-163)

Shelley is quite adamant about the error of such ideas regarding an "interfering" Providence,

> These are the idle dreams of the visionary, or the pernicious representations of impostors, who have fabricated from the very materials of wisdom a cloak for their own dwarfish or imbecile conceptions.[24]

The most "imbecile" of these conceptions, from Shelley's viewpoint is that of the Devil, "The Devil is the outwork of the Christian faith - he is the weakest point."[25]

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23 Ibid. p.232.

24 Ibid. p.230.

25 "On the Devil and Devils" in Complete Works VII p.96.

In his essay "On the Devil...", Shelley cites Milton's great Christian epic of Paradise Lost as an example of the contradictory reality of the Devil. One is not meant to doubt that Milton's God is a most glorious expression of omnipresent "good", yet, in his recreation of the Christian myth, the Devil seems a tragic figure.

> Nothing can exceed the grandeur and the energy of the character of the Devil as expressed in Paradise Lost. Here is a Devil very different from the popular personification of evil malignity and it is a mistake to suppose that he was intended for an idealism of implacable hate, cunning and refinement of device to inflict the utmost anguish on an enemy... Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy...[26]

Regarding Milton from Shelley's standpoint, his Devil and Shelley's merge as one in the character of Beatrice who "acts against her better nature" by deciding to murder her father. Accordingly, Beatrice becomes the agent of these same cruel and destructive forces she most abhorred in the Count, forces which lead her, ultimately, to self-destruction. For Beatrice, like the Devil, there is no escape.

The act of parricide which Beatrice believed would bring freedom and peace to her family brings nothing but disaster to them all. Her attempt to justify her act in the trial in order to exonerate them all only seals their complicity and brings further torments upon them, ending in their

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26 Ibid. pp.90-91.

execution. The terrible, but tragic, Beatrice in the trial scene suggests Milton's Satan:

> Waiting revenge. Cruel his eye, but cast
> Signs of remorse and passion, to behold
> The fellows of his crime, the followers rather
> (Far other once beheld in bliss), condemned
> For ever now to have their lot in pain -
> (Bk. I. 604-608)

Shelley celebrates the romantic concept of the Devil not simply as the truth in opposition to the falsity of the Christian concept, but because it is evidence of the self-contradictory nature of the "Chaldean invention":

> The distorted notions of invisible things which Dante and his rival Milton have idealized, are merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised. It is a difficult question to determine how far they were conscious of the distinction which must have subsisted in their minds between their own creeds and that of the people. ...Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system, of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support.[27]

As an expression of the weakness in Christian theology, the Devil becomes the case for "atheism". The romantic aspect of the Devil is latent in the image of evil speciously contrived by the theologians to be synonymous with the flesh in their determination "to reduce him from his abstract to his concrete".[28] Any image of the Devil which is "analogous to the mind of man" is false to Shelley. Whether the Devil is conceived as a figure of sublime pathos or gross malignity, the concept is concrete and thereby unreal.

Suggestions of Christ and the romantic aspect of Satan shift ambiguously around the character of Beatrice.

> ...Thou, great God,
> Whose image upon earth a father is,
> Dost Thou indeed abandon me?
> (II. i, 16-18)

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[27] A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII p.129.

[28] "On the Devil and Devils" in Complete Works VII, p.92.

These words of Beatrice immediately suggest those of Christ in agony on the cross. The isolation, ignominy, spiritual and physical torment which she suffers suggest also that of the outcast Satan or Prometheus on the rock. This protean aspect of the character of Beatrice in a "world...full of strange delusion"[29] exposes the error in Christian doctrine, and the error of those who adhere to its tenets:

> Which made all seem as it was
> not;
> Fitting itself to all things well.[30]

Interweaving the Christian and romantic myths of good and evil as they are suggested in the drama, are suggestions of an older mythology which Shelley believed had been absorbed into Christian theology and subsequently perverted. Count Cenci's expression of his daughter, "...this devil/Which sprung from me as from a hell," (IV. i. 119-120) is certainly reminiscent of the Satan-Sin story as presented by Milton in Paradise Lost (Bk.II. 740-802). Sin bursts into being from Satan's head and their incestuous union produces a son called Death.

There are also subtle allusions to the tale of Hades and Proserpine. Count Cenci's numerous associations with subterranean darkness and "deadlier gloom" suggest the chthonic deity of the underworld. Beatrice in her youth and "sun-bright" beauty, as well as the occasional flower-associations, suggest Proserpine, ravaged by Hades and kept prisoner in his dark kingdom of shadows. After her violation by Cenci, Beatrice speaks of a "mist of shadows" which surrounds her being (III. i. 170-172). Later, faced with the reality of her execution,

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29 Peter Bell the Third pt. II. X. 126.

30 Ibid. Pt. II. VII. 109-110.

Beatrice gives vent to her feelings which merge in the imagination with the dismay of Hades "pallid bride"[31] contemplating her "dead life" in Hades' realm.

> My God! Can it be possible I have
> To die so suddenly? So young to go
> Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!
> .....
> To see no more sweet sunshine; hear no more
> Blithe voice of living thing; muse not again
> Upon familiar thoughts, sad, yet thus lost -
> .....
> His eye, his voice, his touch surrounding me;
> The atmosphere and breath of my dead life!
> If sometimes, as a shape more like himself,
> Even the form which tortured me on earth,
> Masked in gray hairs and wrinkles, he should come
> And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix
> His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down, down!
> (V. iv, 48-50, 52-54, 61-67)

Count Cenci's "hoary" hair and age, like Beatrice's youth, recall the winter and spring associations of Hades and Proserpine, whose union ends the eternal spring upon earth and begins the cycle of the seasons. Lucretia's reference to Beatrice as her "lost child" (III. i. 104) suggests Demeter's lament for her lost daughter, Proserpine. Cenci's words recall not only the angels' lament at the fall of Adam and his partner but also the lamentation on earth which followed Proserpine's abduction and the onset of decay and destruction:

> There shall be lamentation heard in Heaven
> As o'er an angel fallen; and upon Earth
> All good shall droop and sicken, and ill things
> Shall with a spirit of unnatural life
> Stir and be quickened...
> (IV. i, 185-189)

In the Greek myth the tragedy of the loss of Proserpine is balanced by her return to earth and new life perennially. Proserpine's bondage in the underworld and her union with Hades is

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[31] Julian and Maddalo 384.

"natural" in the sense that the creative and destructive forces in nature are harmonized through cyclic regeneration. The perverse element contained in Shelley's allusions to the theme is that the union between Beatrice and Cenci is "unnatural". Instead of returning to the sunlit earth to engender wholesome new life like Proserpine, Beatrice is to remain a prisoner of Cenci and give birth to life which will be entirely blighted (IV. i, 142-155). Proserpine retains her integrity as Hades' bride, Beatrice's is corrupted. Shelley's allusions to the Proserpine myth are not sharply pointed but "veiled", in keeping with his technique of super-imposing image upon image to impress a reality of "strange delusion" in The Cenci.

Shelley does not allude to these classical myths principally to stress the spurious nature of Christian doctrine, but rather to suggest the presence of a Truth of Being preserved in the ancient myths. This "Truth" was to suffer distortion in the assimilation of these myths into Christianity. Christ and Socrates, according to Shelley, perceived the essential unity of Being which Shelley describes in his "Essay on Christianity".

> According to Jesus Christ, God is neither the Jupiter who sends rain upon earth, nor the Venus thro [sic] whom all living things are produced... He is neither the Proteus or [sic] the Pan of the material world. But the word God, according to the acceptation of Jesus Christ unites all the attributes which these denominations contain, and is the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things.[32]

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32 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI pp.229-30 (See also "On the Devil and Devils" in Complete Works VII pp.97-98.)

The relationship between God and man is not, for Shelley, "personal" in the sense that He becomes analogous to human mind and presumed "knowable" as in The Cenci. The relationship is, however, intimate.

> Whosoever is no deceiver or destroyer of his fellow-men, no liar, no flatterer, no murderer, may walk among his species deriving from the communion with all which they contain of beautiful or of majestic some intercourse with the Universal God.[33]

Cenci claims that God sanctions and takes part in his violent acts. Beatrice is convinced that God is party to her plan for violent retaliation. Both believe themselves to be "the arbiters of every motion" of their nature in "the conflict between old and young". In his drama, Shelley focuses upon the action which stems from human will independent of God's will. Whether the action is condemnable tyranny or that of heroic self-defence or retaliation, it cannot be justified from Christ's, or Shelley's point of view. The tragic outcome for all those involved in the conflict of the Cenci family is in harmony with Shelley's pacifism. In the "Essay on Christianity" which follows so closely after the completion of The Cenci Shelley states his case for pacifism unequivocally. Regarding the rationale behind retaliation, Shelley writes,

> Pain has been inflicted, therefore pain should be inflicted in return. Retaliation is the only remedy which can be applied to violence, because it teaches the injurer the true nature of his own conduct, and operates as a warning against its repetition. ...Such reasonings and the impetuous feelings arising from them have armed nation against nation, family against family, man against man... Had revenge... any other effect than to increase instead of diminishing the mass of malice and evil already existing in the world?
>
> The emptiness and folly of retaliation is apparent from every example which can be brought forward. Not only Jesus Christ, but the most eminent professors of every sect of philosophy have reasoned against this futile superstition.[34]

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33 Ibid., p.231.

34 Ibid., pp.237-8.

The unity which Count Cenci and Beatrice claim to share with their God is perverse, and so are their punitive and retributive acts which arise from their delusion. Their acts are not, as they claim, in obedience to the Divine Principle, but rather, to the perverse "principle of Self". One is God, the other, the "Mammon of the world".[35] The acts which arise from a "self-less" will dependent upon God's will are the only counter force to the forces of contentious, "selfish" evil. This "dependency" imparts the true unity of being:

> There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords, at will. Our most imperial and stupendous qualities - those on which the majesty and the power of humanity is erected are, ... indeed active and imperial; but they are the passive slaves of some higher and more omnipresent Power. This Power is God.[36]

Shelley's pacifism, so intimately linked with his ideal of unity, arises from the extremely subtle distinction he draws between acts of will independent of God and those acts which are dependent upon His will. The latter can only be the "passive" acts of love, by reason of their "selflessness", harmonizing and never contentious in their effect. As such, his pacifism may be regarded as arising, essentially, from his character and is merely supported by his reasoning.

> And those who have seen God, have, in the period of their purer and more perfect nature, been harmonized by their own will to so exquisite [a] consentaneity of powers as to give forth divinest melody when the breath of universal being sweeps over their frame.[37]

The attainment of self-knowledge, the importance of which Shelley stresses in his Preface to The Cenci, inspires that "generous

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35 A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII p.134.

36 "Essay on Christianity" in Complete Works VI p.231.

37 Idem. (the square bracket is the editor's, not mine).

impulse to act that which we imagine" as Shelley writes in A Defence of Poetry.[38] "Imagination is as the immortal God"[39] and the paradoxically passive acts which ensue from the "generous impulse" are those of love, having nothing in common with those violent acts committed in the name of justice, liberty or religion.

> The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.[40]

The characters in The Cenci lack this vital quality of disinterestedness in their relationships amongst themselves and with God and consequently their thoughts and acts pervert the truth. God is the "unknowable" Absolute, whose spontaneous Presence can only be felt as love.

As The Cenci draws to a close, Shelley's belief in pacifism is as gently but positively affirmed as the presence of this "unknowable" God. When Beatrice is faced with the perverse consequences of all her acts, she loses her faith in her concept of God. (V. iv, 87-89). Paradoxically, however, it is when Beatrice loses her God, that she finds Him; when she feels most apart from God that she is closest to Him. The perverse unity with her Deity which she had unwittingly contrived is dispersed when she realizes its essential falsity (V. iv, 80-84) and in its place a spontaneous unity occurs. Beatrice experiences this unity as a renewal of loving-kindness towards her family. Fear and despair overcome, Beatrice asserts in the closing lines of the drama the sole reality of love and the passive endurance of hostility in a false world.

The redemption of a pristine unity from its worldly perversion in the closing scene of the drama is so subtly suggested as to be easily overlooked, "But mark how beautiful an order has sprung from the dust

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38 Complete Works, VII p.134.

39 Poetical Works, Preface, p.277.

40 A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII p.111, 118.

and blood of this fierce chaos!"[41] This order is conveyed in the simple image of Beatrice and Lucretia binding one another's dishevelled hair before their execution. Thus Beatrice "smiles in the lap of Chaos" inspired by the regenerative "flame of consentaneous love"[42] to face her fate with equanimity and say

> "We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well."
> (V. iv, 164).

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41 Ibid. p.126.

42 "The Daemon of the World", pt.II, pp.325-330; 341-344.

"You are like the shell of ocean
that fills with pearls the hand
that wounds you."

(Trelawny to Shelley,
Records I, 116.)

...all things are transfigured except Love;
For deaf as is a sea, which wrath makes hoary,

The world can hear not the sweet notes that move
The sphere whose light is melody to lovers -

("The Triumph of Life"
476-479.)

CONCLUSION

"I now understand why the Greeks were such great poets; and, above all, I can account, it seems to me, for the harmony, the unity, the perfection, the uniform excellence, of all their works of art."

(To Peacock, Jan.24, 1819)

Shelley's favourite composition, out of The Cenci and Prometheus Unbound, was the latter. Trelawny recalls him saying;

> My friends say my 'Prometheus' is too wild, ideal and perplexed with imagery. It may be so. It has no resemblance to the Greek drama. It is original; and cost me severe mental labour. Authors, like mothers, prefer the children who have given them most trouble. Milton preferred his 'Paradise Regained'...[1]

As far as The Cenci was concerned, Shelley did not "think much of it".

> The 'Cenci' is a work of art; it is not coloured by my feelings, nor obscured by my metaphysics. I don't think much of it. It gave me less trouble than anything I have written of the same length.[2]

This change of attitude from enthusiasm to veiled disappointment towards his "sad reality", in the last year of his life, must have been influenced considerably by the largely damning reviews of his play, as well as its rejection by the theatres. After all, The Cenci was to have marked a turning point in his professional life from the youthful visionary poet to mature dramatist.[3]

With an enthusiasm derived from necessity rather than idealism, Shelley modelled his "work of art" upon the masterpieces of the Greek

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1 Records I. p.118.

2 Ibid. p.117.

3 See the letter of dedication to Leigh Hunt, Letters X. p.51.

dramatists for whom he had a profound admiration.

> What the Greeks were, was a reality, not a promise. And what we are and hope to be, is derived, as it were, from the influence and inspiration of these glorious generations.[4]

The necessity for Shelley, at that crucial time in his life, seemed to be the achievement of a union between man and poet, in this world rather than in the "other" world of imagination. The Greeks were the sternest realists but also the greatest poets, according to Shelley.[5] In seeking fulfilment as man and artist, Shelley wrote The Cenci, which he conscientiously planned to follow the precepts of Greek tragedy, as an endeavour to achieve a union between factual story and the language of poetry.

> In writing the 'Cenci' my object was to see how I could succeed in describing passions I have never felt, and to tell the most dreadful story in pure and refined language....The story is well authenticated, and the details far more horrible than I have painted them.[6]

In writing The Cenci, Shelley was dealing objectively with facts in time rather than subjectively conceiving and expressing an idea of eternity. It was the reality in "the little world of self",[7] not the promise envisioned in the universe of "consentaneous Love". It was also "art" in the sense that a story of particular facts was told in the language of poetry to achieve the desired interpenetration between passion and imagery.[8]

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4 "A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancients, Relative to the Subject of Love", in Complete Works, VII, p.226.

5 See A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works, VII pp.118-119.

6 Records I. p.117.

7 A Defence of Poetry p.128.

8 Poetical Works, Preface, p.277.

> Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stript [sic] of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of Poetry, and forever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains... The story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful. Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.[9]

The artistic unity of conception and expression which Shelley strove to attain in The Cenci is clearly evident if one compares the enthusiastic explanation of his aims and method in the Preface to his drama with his discussion of the dramatic achievement of the Greek masters in A Defence...,

> The tragedies of the Athenian poets are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself, under a thin disguise of circumstance, stript [sic] of all but that ideal perfection and energy which every one feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become.... In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred; it teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles. The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is as a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects,...[10]

Within the "ebon mirror"[11] of The Cenci, that "perfect mirror of pure innocence", Beatrice, who "collects the brightest rays of human nature", is

> Shivered to dust! To see thee, Beatrice,
> Who made all lovely thou didst look upon...
> Thee, light of life...dead, dark!...
> (V. iv, 130-134)

The dark and obscure realities of his drama seem to reflect human degradation like "Dim mirrors of ruin"[12] within which the radiance of benevolent human nature is not "multiplied" but diminished.

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9 A Defence of Poetry p.115.

10 Ibid. p.121. Compare Preface, pp.276-278.

11 The Revolt of Islam l. xxx, 5.

12 "A Vision of the Sea" l.7.

> And Truth, who wanderest lone and
> unbefriended,
> If thou canst veil thy lie-consuming mirror
> Before the dazzled eyes of Error,
> Alas for thee! Image of the Above.[13]

So it would seem in The Cenci. Nevertheless, Shelley was decidedly satisfied with his "work of art" after its completion, and the ensuing calumny from the critics would not have been the sole reason for his later relative disregard of this work.

The prismatic brilliance of the Athenian tragedies, Shelley explains in A Defence..., "ever co-existed with the moral and intellectual greatness of the age". Further on, in his discussion, he expands this comment by adding

> But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathises with that decay. Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity ...[14]

The significance of this concept in relation to his own drama probably would not have occurred to Shelley until after the drama's hostile rejection by critics and theatre management. Shelley would not have desired to reform the world so passionately, if he had not been convinced that he, unlike the Greek master-poets, was living in a time of social decay. "A work of art" The Cenci may well be, but only "a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity": reason enough for Shelley "not to think much of it."

If The Cenci, according to Shelley's argument, sympathized with present social decay, then it would take form as a perversion of the "prismatic" unity of Greek tragedy.[15] Its "ebon mirror" would reflect only the shadows of a nightmare reality of false-seeming which dealt with the grief of love in the midst of corruption, not its triumph.

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13 Hellas 11.984-987.

14 A Defence of Poetry p.121.

15 Compare Stuart Curran's discussion of Count Cenci's evil as a work of art "reflecting...the disease of aspect of romanticism", in Shelley's Cenci pp.73-75.

> Alas! for Virtue, when
> Torments, or contumely, or the sneers
> Of erring judging men
> Can break the heart where it abides.
> Alas! if Love, whose smile makes this obscure world splendid,
> Can change with its false times and tides,
> Like hope and terror, -
> Alas for Love![16]

The dark sphere of Shelley's "sad reality" may have seemed to its author to epitomize the social decay of "modern history" in its concentration of images of falsity. "Epitomes", Shelley states harshly, "have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it".[17] Nevertheless, The Cenci was "reality" as Shelley objectively conceived it to be and "not a promise"; as such, it provided a stimulus to his artistic creativity.[18] To witness the error of a society so far "removed from that perfection to which human society is impelled by some active power within each bosom, to aspire, how great ought to be our hopes, how resolute our struggles."[19] Without the writing of his "sad reality" one wonders if that joyous hymn of hope and love, Prometheus Unbound, would ever have been completed.

It is a pity that Shelley found it necessary to compare so closely such dissimilar works as The Cenci and Prometheus Unbound instead of recognizing them as individual monuments to the range of his genius. Nevertheless, Shelley preferred "the child" who had given him the most trouble. To conceive, imaginatively, and then mould, out of the ephemeral elements of eternity a cosmic drama, must have seemed a greater achievement. Such a creation involved, from the poet's point of view, the agony of reaching beyond human limitations to grasp and then compress into time and "poesy" a portion of universal Truth "In hues outshining heaven".[20]

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16 Hellas ll. 976-983.

17 See "A Discourse on the Manners..." p.226.

18 A Defence of Poetry p.115.

19 "A Discourse on the Manners..." pp.226-227.

20 "The Witch of Atlas" XXVI. 7.

The Cenci , by contrast, took less time and mental labour because it was formed from "the repugnant mass"[21] of time itself, and from materials readily at hand. Perhaps it seemed, to Shelley, three years after its completion, to have been created during one of those "intervals of inspiration", when"a Poet becomes a man".[22]

Whatever Shelley's opinion of The Cenci, in the last year of his life, it is the most professional of his works, and no less characteristic of its author than the other visionary works. Shelley was never more completely himself, and master of his craft than when he wrote his "sad reality". This would account for the speed and facility of the drama's execution, a fact which Shelley misconstrued as evidence of the play's superficiality.

The dark sphere of The Cenci may well represent a perversion of unity as reflected in a distorting mirror but it is not a cold imitation of the Attic masterpieces. Like Milton, who "stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him",[23] Shelley imparted his individuality to his "epitome" of social decay. This individuality was manifested as his faith in the power of "consentaneous love" which, in The Cenci, does not change but abides,

> For thine own sake be constant to the love
> Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
> Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
> Lived ever holy and unstained....
> (V. iv, 146-149)

The intangible presence of love alone, subtly diffuses the "obscure world" of The Cenci making it splendid like the dawn which emanates from within the cold sphere of a black pearl.

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[21] Ibid. XXXV. 2.

[22] A Defence of Poetry in Complete Works VII p.139.

[23] Ibid. p.122.

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ABBREVIATIONS

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Antigone	Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments; Part III, The Antigone F.C. Jebb, trans. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1891).
Aristotle	Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry Ingram Bywater, trans. (Clarendon Press, London, 1920).
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