A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE GENCI

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CHAPTER I

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS

Consciously or unconsciously an author's literary work reflects his experiences and his reaction to these experiences. Because the personal history of the author is inseparable from his works, a study of *The Cenci* would be incomplete without a review of the background of Shelley's life, some of the philosophies which interested him, and the political and social movements with which he concerned himself.

Shelley's misfortune began with his birth. His parents knew not how to deal with this frail, sensitive boy in a way that would have strengthened his character and removed the defects from his mental and physical body. With the proper parental guidance he, no doubt, could have got rid of his oppression complex; and by having his near-sightedness corrected, he probably would have walked completely upright, not with a stoop.

Sir Timothy was characterized by a hard heart and a vindictive disposition. He was a member of Parliament, and he and Lady Shelley led the life of the typical rich country gentry, eating, drinking, dressing, and moving in
fashionable circles.\textsuperscript{1}

If Shelley's family environment was unsuited to his nature, the period in which he was born was equally so. The French Revolution was greatly affecting the political and social structure of England. William Godwin, later Shelley's father-in-law, was finishing his Political Justice, "the strongest, most lucid, most highly priced of all books which sought to remodel the whole structure of society in the spirit of Revolutionary Reason."\textsuperscript{2} Burke had turned his persuasive speech against the Revolution, and Thomas Paine had published The Rights of Man.\textsuperscript{3}

During the first ten years of his life, Shelley remained at Horsham with his parents, his four younger sisters, and a baby brother, all of whom considered him a leader. He enjoyed his position among them, and as a school boy, when the children came in to tea, would take them on his knee and tell them romantic stories he had read; sometimes he led them on tramps through the fields, or ran and played with them in the garden. To the children the regions of imaginary enchantment were St. Leonard's Wood, inhabited by an old dragon and a headless monster, and the Warnham Pond, in

\textsuperscript{1}Charles S. Middleton, Shelley and His Writings, Vol. I, p. 7.


\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., pp. 421-422.
which was a fabulous tortoise. Nearer home, in the garden, was the old snake that had been unfortunately killed by the gardener's scythe; and added to these was an old grey alchemist who lived in the garret. Shelley once dressed his sisters to impersonate fiends, and ran in front of them with a fire-stove flameng with magical liquids, a sport that developed into amateur experiments with chemicals and electricity.\textsuperscript{4} Shelley's boyhood games and pranks show his fondness for mystery, magic, and sensational ideas.

When Shelley was ten years old, he was sent to the boarding school of Syon House Academy, Isleworth, a school presided over by the Rev. Dr. Greenlaw.\textsuperscript{5} Having been brought up exclusively with his sisters and baby brother, Shelley found life in a boarding school extremely unpleasant. Middleton in his \textit{Shelley and His Writings} says that Dr. Greenlaw "looked upon Shelley, with his shrinking figure, and wild eyes, as a sort of fish that had turned up accidentally out of the Thames, and not to be disciplined into humanity by the usual method."\textsuperscript{6} Dr. Greenlaw's method of teaching was by whipping knowledge into his students, a method that tends to lower the normal functioning of the

\textsuperscript{5}Roger Ingpen, \textit{Shelley in England}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{6}Middleton, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. I, p. 11.
mind and to destroy self-respect. Hence, Shelley was not very studious at Byon House. His desk faced the window of the schoolroom, and he spent much time looking outdoors and daydreaming, often unconsciously drawing objects he saw or imagined. Disregarding all principles of child psychology, Dr. Greenlaw would come up unexpectedly behind Shelley and slap him on the ears. His unhappy relationship with the instructor was no less painful to him than the fact that, because of his frail and delicate body, he was despised and buffeted about by the boys of the school.\(^7\)

Shelley's native ability and retentive memory compensated for his not being able to outstrip his companions physically. Reading was his favorite pursuit. Among the types of books Shelley read was the Gothic novel, characterized by mystery, terror, violent action, and uninteresting description. The romances of Anne Radcliffe, M. G. Lewis, and Charlotte Dacre delighted him.\(^8\) Peacock in his Memoirs of Shelley includes Die Räuber, Goethe's Faust, and four novels of Charles Brockden Brown as being "of all the works with which he was familiar, those which took the deepest root in [the poet's] mind, and had the strongest influence in the formation of his character."\(^9\) Shelley's love of the

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\(^7\)Ibid., pp. 10-18. \(^8\)Ingpen, op. cit., p. 47. \(^9\)Quoted by Montague Summers in The Gothic Quest, p. 121.
fantastic was satisfied by this type of fiction; and Medwin
says that Shelley in his boyhood, after reading a Gothic
horror story, would be the victim of "strange, and some-
times frightful dreams" and of "apparitions which bore all
the semblance of reality."10 Other types of books that Shel-
ley read were the publications of Lane's Minerva Press and
the sensational novels "bound in blue paper wrappers and
known to wondering boyhood as 'blue books.'"11 These books
were noted for their swift action and overdrawn characters.
As late as 1815, when he was twenty-three years old, Shelley
was planning in the manner of the sensational novel, to kid-
nap two girls from a boarding school.12

In 1807, Shelley went to Eton, where he led very much
the same life as he had at Isleworth. It was not surpris-
ing that his proud and sensitive spirit should rebel against
the detestable practice of fagging; and refusing to fag at
Eton, he was treated, according to Mrs. Shelley, with the
direst cruelty by both teachers and boys. At no time does
a child of superior mental ability find much sympathy among
his schoolmates; and in the case of Shelley, they took every
opportunity to annoy and torture him. Stung by their cruelty

11Walter Edwin Peck, Shelley: His Life and Work,
and taunting, Shelley's anger at times became boundless.
An old Etonian says, "I have seen him surrounded, hooted,
beited like a maddened bull; and at this distance of time
(forty years after) I seem to hear ringing in my ears the
cry which Shelley was wont to utter in his paroxysms of re-
vengeful anger."13

That he could have little reverence for his teachers,
who directly or indirectly encouraged such tyranny, is
readily understood; nor can one expect him to learn much
from those for whom he held no esteem; consequently, they
did very little for him except, perhaps, to make him more
conscious of the injustice and oppression all about him.

His Eton days were not without some forms of pleasant
amusements. Shelley and Amos, two of the three fags at
Eton, amused themselves with composing plays and acting
them out before Matthews, the third fag. Judging from the
enthusiasm with which Shelley entered into this kind of en-
tertainment, the old Etonian thinks that had Shelley been
given the slightest encouragement, "he would have devoted
himself to the studies of the place, and the irregularities
of his mind would have been repressed by habits of patient
study."14

Soon after his arrival at Eton, Shelley, through a

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14 Quoted, ibid., p. 29.
certain itinerant lecturer, became interested in astronomy and chemistry. In thinking about the superior endowments of one planet over the other, he is said to have enjoyed considering our existence as a state of transition from one star to the other until we reached the highest perfection. The chemical experiments likewise introduced him to the principle of life that is everywhere present, whether in the atoms of the earth or in the structure of the universe.

At Windsor, near Eton, Shelley met Dr. James Lind, a learned physician and chemist, who became a kind friend and counselor to him. Shelley bestowed on this kind old man all the tenderness and affection his father had failed to win from him as evidenced by what Shelley wrote of him:

This man is exactly what an old man ought to be, free, calm-spirited, full of benevolence, and even of youthful ardour; his eye seemed to burn with supernatural spirit beneath his brow, shaded by his venerable white locks; he was tall, vigorous, and healthy in his body; tempered as it had ever been, by his amiable mind. I owe to that man far, shi far more than I owe to my father; he loved me, and I shall never forget our long talks, where he breathed the spirit of the kindest tolerance and the purest wisdom.

Rebbe says that the most important result of Dr. Lind's influence over Shelley was his initiation into the love of

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16 Ibid., p. 33.
scientific research and the true appreciation of the fine
works of antiquity.18

There seem to be differences of opinion as to why
Shelley left Eton. According to Leigh Hunt, it was because
"his unconventional spirit, penetrating, sincere, and de-
manding the reason and justice of things was found to be
inconvenient." But, according to Medwin, "he was removed
because his school education was thought to be completed."19

After leaving Eton, Shelley went home, where he re-
mained until he entered Oxford. One of his greatest de-
lights at this time was roaming through St. Leonard's for-
est, studying and enjoying nature. Of the active workings
of his mind and its tendencies, we get some idea from what
Medwin says:

I have a vivid recollection of the walks we
took in the winter of 1809. There is something
in a frosty day, when the sun is bright, the sky
clear, the air rarified, which produces a kind of
intoxication. On such days Shelley's spirits used
to run riot, his sweet and subtle talk was to me
electric.20

Shelley's desire to write seems to have come at this
period. He and his cousin Medwin planned a wild and ex-
travagant romance, in which a frightful witch was to play
the leading part, but after a few chapters were written, the

romance was thrown away. Following this was his metrical
tale *The Wandering Jew*, one of the earliest of his poetical
productions. This legend presented an admirable framework
for the development of Shelley's favorite theme of the
struggle between good and evil in the world, and the suc-
cessive victories and defeats of the spirit of liberty and
love among mankind.

Shelley next began to work on the romance *Zastrozzi*, a
very crude piece of work. Middleton says that the religious
bias of the author's mind can be traced to the date of its
completion.\(^{21}\) The novel was followed by a second, *St. In-
vyn*, a production full of Shelley's metaphysical ideas.

When Shelley was eighteen, he entered Oxford, taking
with him a solar microscope, an electrical machine, a gal-
vanic trough, an air pump, and drugs innumerable. Here he
became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson Hogg, and it is
through their friendship that many particulars of the poet's
college life are available.\(^{22}\) After spending the morning
in private study, Hogg usually went to Shelley's room,
and they frequently remained together until late at night,
discussing all subjects of literary or scientific interest
to them. When the weather was fair, they took long walks,
getting acquainted with the beautiful country around Oxford,
Shotover Hill, Bagley Wood, the banks of the Thames, the

\(^{21}\) *Ibid.*  
\(^{22}\) *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
hills and the meadows. 23

Hogg tells some interesting anecdotes illustrating Shelley's attitude toward the poor and friendless. His love for children seemed to be deep and sincere. They were loved by him, perhaps, because of his strong faith in the Platonic philosophy, for he used to say that every true Platonist must be a lover of children because they are our masters and instructors in philosophy. In his walks he would often stop to admire the country people, deploring the sorrows and sufferings life held for them. Once when he found a little girl deserted by the roadside, Shelley persuaded the child to go with him to a nearby cottage, where he got some warm milk to give her.

It was a strange spectacle [remarks Hogg] to watch the young Poet, whilst with the enthusiastic, and earnest manner that characterizes the legitimate brethren of the celestial art, holding the wooden bowl in one hand and the wooden spoon in the other, and kneeling on his left knee, that he might more conveniently feed, and encourage the timid child to eat. 24

While Shelley was at home from Oxford for the Christmas holidays, he was severely reprimanded by his father and mother because of the infidel and impious tendencies in some of his writings and was forbidden to print anything more,


24 Quoted by Middleton, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 96. This sentence, which appears to be incorrect in structure, is quoted correctly from Middleton, who quotes Hogg.
with a threat of his being removed from Oxford. In addition, he was forbidden to write his cousin Harriet Grove, with whom he was now in love. These family wrangles and the loss of Harriet served to embitter his mind and to increase his hatred of religious intolerance.25

Ignoring his father's threat concerning other publications, Shelley, working with Hogg, brought out his pamphlet On the Necessity of Atheism. Rabbe says that this pamphlet was the outcome of Shelley's meditations and was his analysis of Hume's Essays; that he had tried, with deep religious enthusiasm, to discover for himself the one supreme God, firmly believing in the truth of his existence. He was not satisfied, however, to accept the current notions and principles as practiced by the world.26

As a result of this production Shelley and Hogg were expelled from Oxford.

I remember [says Medwin], as if it occurred yesterday, his knocking at my door, in the Temple, at four o'clock in the morning, the second day after his expulsion. I think I hear his cracked voice, with his well-known pipe -- "Medwin, let me in; I am expelled!" Here followed a sort of loud, half-hysterical laugh, and a repetition of the words, "I am expelled," with the addition of, "for atheism."27

Shelley and Hogg soon found rooms in Poland Street, where

26Ibid., p. 128.
the friends resumed their life of study and companionship. They would have been very happy here had Shelley been able to forget his love for Harriet Grove, and had his father not decided to interfere. Sir Timothy was horrified at his son's expulsion, stating that Shelley must return immediately to Field Place, must give up all association with Hogg, and must continue his studies under a tutor whom Sir Timothy would see fit to select. Shelley's reply to this ultimatum was that he would remain in Poland Street and he would not give up his friendship with Hogg. Consequently, Sir Timothy withdrew all financial aid and forbade his son to come home.28

Believing he had done nothing to justify the treatment he received, Shelley, Middleton says, felt he had sacrificed himself for the cause of truth. He sought relief for his sorrow by "looking upon the world with an enlarged philosophy."29 Middleton further analyses Shelley's reaction:

Dazzled by his own interpretation of the divine nature of God, making the universe a presence chamber for the great spirit of love, and burning under a keen sense of injustice, he began to form visions of happiness, and golden schemes for human perfectibility.30

30 Ibid., p. 150.
The consensus among Shelley's biographers is that the great object of his life was study, and at this time he had become acquainted with Godwin's *Political Justice*, the suggestions and theories of which fitted in very closely with his own thoughts. At this period also he read from the contemporary authors in various branches of literature. He was "a most laborious and unwearying student, to be found with book in hand at all hours, reading in season and out of season; at table, in bed, and especially during a walk."\(^{31}\)

While Shelley was living in London, he met Harriet Westbrook, the daughter of a retired innkeeper, and, therefore, far beneath him in birth and social status. The distance was spanned, however, when Harriet explained to him the unreasonable and tyrannical treatment she received from her parents, and her unhappiness at not having parental love. Having had similar experiences, Shelley felt that they could live in perfect harmony; and shortly after their meeting, they eloped. Sir Timothy, being very proud of the social dignity of his family, was furious because his son had married an innkeeper's daughter and refused the couple any financial aid,\(^{32}\) his favorite form of discipline.

Once after his marriage, Shelley was invited by his mother to visit Field Place while Sir Timothy was away on

\(^{31}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 165.\) \(^{32}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 196.\)
Parliamentary duties. He was affectionately received, but after two or three days, Lady Shelley asked her son to sign a parchment deed, which, Medwin says, "opened his eyes to the false varnish of hypocritical caresses, and led to his refusal." This is the only incident given that brings reproach upon Lady Shelley's character.

After Shelley and Harriet moved to Keswick, they met De Quincey, Southey, and Wordsworth. Southey and Shelley became close friends. In a letter which Southey addresses to a friend, dated January 14, 1812, there is a brief summary of Shelley's life up to this point, as well as other interesting information. Southey writes:

There is a man at Keswick who acts upon me as my own ghost would do. He is just what I was in 1784 [sic]. His name is Shelley, son to the member for Shoreham; with £6000 a-year entailed upon him, and as much more in his father's power to cut off. Beginning with romances of ghosts and murder, and with poetry at Eton, he passed at Oxford into metaphysics; printed half-a-dozen pages, which he entitled The Necessity of Atheism; sent one anonymously to Coplestone, in expectation, I suppose, of converting him; was expelled in consequence; married a girl of seventeen, after being turned out of doors by his father, and here they both are in lodgings, living upon £200 a year, which her father allows them.

He has come to the fittest physician in the world. At present he has got to the Pantheistical stags of philosophy; and in the course of a week, I expect he will be a Berkleyan, for I have put him on a course of Berkeley.

It has surprised him a good deal to meet for the first time in his life with a man who perfectly

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understands him, and does him full justice. I tell him all the difference between us is, that he is nineteen, and I am thirty-seven; and I daresay it will not be long before I shall succeed in convincing him that he may be a true philosopher, and do a great deal of good with £6000 a year; the thought of which troubles him a great deal more at present than ever the want of sixpence (for I have known that want) did me.

... God help us! the world wants mending, though he did not set about it exactly in the right way. 34

Needless to say, Shelley was not convinced by Southey's arguments.

Because expenses at Keswick were too great and because he had heard that Ireland was a cheap country in which to live, Shelley and Harriet went to Dublin. Dr. Drummond tells us that "Shelley selected Ireland as a theatre the widest and fairest for the operations of the determined friends of political and religious freedom." 35 The terrible scenes of Irish misery and destitution aroused him to devote much time to the Irish cause. In addition to speaking before groups of people, he published the pamphlet An Address to the Irish People with an advertisement on the title-page stating:

The lowest possible price is set on the publication, because it is the intention of the Author to awaken in the minds of the Irish poor a knowledge of their real state, summarily pointing out the evils of that state, and suggesting rational means of remedy -- Catholic Emancipation, and a Repeal of the Union


Act, (the latter, the most successful engine that England ever wielded over the misery of fallen Ireland,) being treated of in the following address, as grievances which unanimity and resolution may remove; and associations conducted with peaceable firmness, being earnestly recommended, as means for embodying that unanimity and firmness, which must finally be successful.\textsuperscript{36}

It did not take Shelley long, however, to find that Ireland was not so favorable a place to promote his ideals. The people were somewhat lacking in his own enthusiasm, and his attempts to awaken them seem to have produced nothing except trouble for himself. Because of his revolutionary teachings, the government became suspicious of him, causing him to leave Ireland.\textsuperscript{37}

The many griefs and worries that Shelley and Harriet suffered during the three years they had lived together made them unhappy and dissatisfied, and as a result, they separated, avowing that they had never loved each other.\textsuperscript{38}

Then Shelley met Mary Godwin, who seemed to him the ideal partner for his life's work, for she was the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, in his opinion the two most lovable people and the greatest benefactors of their age. Added to this were the graces of her person, the fascination of her conversation, and her impassioned


\textsuperscript{38}White, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 426.
nature, which, like his own, looked for the good and the beautiful in everything. The elopement which followed was the result of an attraction too strong for either to resist. White says that he would not say that the sole reason for deserting Harriet and eloping with Mary was the unfitness of the one and the fitness of the other for Shelley's ruling purpose in life, but it was a very important reason.39

The journals kept by both Mary and Claire Clairmont give much information concerning the reading and studying Shelley and Mary did. One part of the Journal, written while they were living in London and dated 1814, has many accounts similar to the following:

Saturday, Oct. 8. -- [Mary] Read "Political Justice." We walk out; when we return Shelley talks with Jane, and I read [Mary Wollstonecraft's] "Wrongs of Woman." In the evening we talk and read.40

Wednesday, Nov. 16. -- Very ill all day. Shelley and Jane out all day shopping about the town. Shelley reads [C. B. Brown's] "Edgar Huntley" to us.

Tuesday, Nov. 29. -- Work all day. Shelley reads the "Fairy Queen" aloud. He goes to Parker's with Clera. In the evening Hogg comes. We have an argument upon the Love of Wisdom, and Free Will and Necessity; he quite wrong, but quite puzzled; his arguments are very weak.42

White says further that Shelley was reading and studying with extraordinary penetration and memory, the range of

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39Ibid.
40Mary Shelley's Journal, edited by Frederick L. Jones, p. 19.
41Ibid., p. 26.
42Ibid., p. 27.
which included English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Greek.\textsuperscript{43}

There were many times, however, when his reading had to be put aside for reasons of health, money, or personal and family difficulties. Added to the worries caused by the resentment of William Godwin, the alienation from his father's family, and the mismanagement of his finances was the suicide of his legal wife Harriet, followed by the Chancery suit, which deprived him of his children by his first wife.\textsuperscript{44} The object of the Chancery bill was to prove that Shelley, because of his attitude toward religion and morality, was incapable and unfit to rear his own children. It can be readily understood that such an attempt to deprive him of his own children roused all the poet's indignation, that he would "refuse to submit to anything like an inquisitorial examination into the nature of his belief, a process which he justly considered as worthy of the Star Chamber in the worst days of tyranny."\textsuperscript{45} The result of the suit was that Shelley or his agents were prohibited from taking possession of his children, that "£200 a-year was to be set aside for their support and education, such sum being deducted by Shelley's father from his annuity."\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43}White, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. I, p. 427. \textsuperscript{44}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 428.

\textsuperscript{45}Middleton, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. II, p. 78.

\textsuperscript{46}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 83.
This separation from his children, Middleton says, affected him deeply, and he could never discuss the situation, even with friends.\textsuperscript{47}

Soon after the Chancery suit, Shelley married Mary Godwin, stating that however he might differ in the abstract from established opinions, he was always willing to conform to the conventions of society.\textsuperscript{48}

Taken as a whole, the year in Italy, 1821, had been a very pleasant period of Shelley's life. The poetry, although the productions were fewer in number, compared to those of former years, shows the "increasing splendor of his conceptions and the maturity of his judgment";\textsuperscript{49} and he met many literary people, the associations with whom were, no doubt, a great inspiration to him.

The joys of the sojourn in Italy were short-lived, for Shelley was drowned off the coast of Italy in July, 1822. Thus came to an end the tragic life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, author of The Cenci, the greatest poetic drama of the Romantic period.

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid.\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., pp. 87-88.\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p. 299.
CHAPTER II

SOURCES

All the different and unrelated events which come together to influence the motives of a human being changed Shelley from a sensitive small boy to a young man with "a conviction of oppression and a feverishly intense mission for quelling tyrannies and establishing freedom." The feeling of oppression that came as a result of his father's authority, of the schoolmasters' forms of discipline, and of the decision by the agents of the state in the Chancery suit form the basis of Shelley's exaggerated picture of parental cruelty in *Count Cenci* in his most complete dramatic production, *The Cenci*.

Shelley's highly impressionable mind had absorbed the literature of the French Revolution, the Gothic romance, and the earlier classics, but all that he got from his reading was colored by his unhappy personal experiences.

Thus to point out all the sources of *The Cenci* would be impossible. There are, however, certain areas of influence concerning which fairly definite inferences may be made.

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In the first place, the Romantic period, in which *The Cenci* was written, shows its influence. By the term "Romantic period" is meant the period in which writers tended to escape from the world of reality, the result being that the selection of themes was far removed from common sympathy and interest. During this period there was social and economic unrest; the demand for liberty was sweeping over Europe. Thus interest in the struggle of the people for freedom and social betterment made for a choice of historical subjects.²

The foundation for *The Cenci* was laid when in May, 1818, at Leghorn, Shelley read from a manuscript volume the story of Count Cenci and his family. No criminal or degenerate of Shelley's extensive youthful reading in the school of horror could have equalled the historical truth of the Cenci story, the full enormity of which is suppressed in Shelley's manuscript source and was further suppressed in his drama.³ Moreover, it was a story well suited to a theme that he especially liked, a theme that had previously inspired his writing *Prometheus Unbound*. Here was an historical example of wickedness in alliance with the church

against virtue. Shelley was from the first enthusiastic about its dramatic possibilities, but he considered that he was "too metaphysical and abstract -- too fond of the theoretical and the ideal to succeed as a tragedian." He did not begin his work on this drama until after his visit, a year later, to Rome, where he saw the picture of Beatrice Cenci. To this inspiration was added the fact that in Rome he found universal acquaintance with the story and everywhere interest and sympathy with the unfortunate heroine. Thus to history was Shelley indebted for the first source of The Cenci.

*The Cenci*, a romantic tragedy of crime and revenge, deals with an abnormal situation, not with life. Count Cenci is impossibly wicked; he is one of those "outrageous ranting villains" whom Lord Byron disliked very much. Shelley's treatment of the subject of incest, however, does not follow the romantic form of substituting incest for love in an effort to escape from the world of conventions and social control. Instead, Shelley is by implication dramatizing his own lifelong conflict with the forces of tradition, with the harsh laws of church and state, and with domestic tyranny as he had himself experienced it in

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6Chew, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
the stubbornness and injustice of his own father. 7

To the Gothic novel, also, the drama is indebted, for many elements of The Cenci will fit into the stereotyped Gothic pattern. In the first place, the setting is an old castle, containing numerous corridors and subterranean passages. Although there is very little given in the drama about the castle, Shelley describes in his preface the original Cenci Palace:

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, near the quarter of the Jews, and from the upper windows you see the immense ruins of Mount Palatine half-hidden under their profuse overgrowth of trees. There is a court in one part of the Palace (perhaps that 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 openwork. 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. 8

Following the Gothic plan, the characters divide themselves into two rival divisions, the good and the bad. Beatrice with her faithful helpers fights an uneven battle


8Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Preface" to The Cenci in The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, edited by Thomas Hutchinson, p. 275. All subsequent references to Shelley's drama are to this edition unless otherwise stated.
with Count Cenci, supported by representatives of the church and state. In the Gothic novel one or several of the characters are often monks or else have some kind of tie with religion. The Cenci includes three churchmen, Cardinal Camillo, the Prelate Orsino, and the Pope's Isgate Sevella. Shelley in his Preface explains the part played by the officials of the church.

The old man bad during his life repeatedly bought his pardon from the Pope for capital crimes of the most enormous and unspeakable kind at the price of a hundred thousand crowns; the death therefore of his victims can scarcely be accounted for by the love of justice. The Pope, among other motives for severity, probably felt that whoever killed the Count Cenci deprived his treasury of a certain and copious source of revenue.

Orsino, who helps plan the murder, is in the original story a priest, a sympathetic friend of Beatrice, but Shelley converts him into a sly, false friend influenced by a desire for money and lust. The villain of the Gothic novel is generally an Italian, as in The Cenci the Count definitely was. This follows an old tradition, going back to the influence of the Catholic excommunication of Macchiavelli.

The principal theme of the Gothic romance consists of

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9Jane Lundblad, Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Tradition of Gothic Romance, p. 18.
12Lundblad, op. cit., p. 18.
an atmosphere of oppression and innocence in danger. The Cenci is the story of an old man who hates his children, reducing one son and his family to utterly humiliating poverty, praying for the destruction of two other sons and celebrating their deaths by a banquet, and developing toward his daughter an incestuous passion. Shelley sought thus to evoke terror by depicting realistically with horrors, the worst of which is definitely abnormal.

In the Gothic romance there is always complete poetic justice, which principle Shelley skilfully uses in the death of Beatrice. Kurtz says:

In the death of Beatrice Cenci, Shelley achieves his most powerful handling of tragic death. Death in his early romances was mere play with fright. . . . The many references in many poems to the cruel death, or dysiagnasia, inflicted by tyrants, are sermons, polemics, denunciations, lyrics of suffering, as the case may be. The going down of all beauty into the grave, and the summons of everyman by death, has been treated elegiacally, with more or less of hope and courage. But the death of Beatrice is truly tragic. It is inevitable, because legal justice can maintain its precarious balance only by remaining blind to that perfect justice which depends not from law but from wisdom. Once Beatrice were pardoned and her case become a precedent, where would be the end of such cases?¹⁴

Next, Shelley was indebted to the Greeks and to the Elizabethans for the pattern of tragic drama into which he so easily fitted his historical material. Mainly by its

¹³ Ibid., p. 17.
¹⁴ Kurtz, op. cit., p. 199.
Renaissance theme and characters, *The Cenci* suggests Shakespeare and other great Elizabethan dramatists, such as Marlowe and Webster. Although the characters and emotions are true to the sixteenth-century story upon which Shelley based his play, his style and management of the theme are more suggestive of the Greek dramas, which Shelley so greatly admired, than of the Elizabethan plays characterized by their heightened and melodramatic vein and their lack of restraint. Thus Shelley is in many respects a classical writer. *The Cenci* shows his wide acquaintance with Greek poetry and drama and his ability to write with the same classical restraint and reserve. In his avoidance of fine and poetic writing, in his sense for structure and totality of effect, Shelley conforms further to classical ideals.\(^{15}\)

Such of the romantic elements as are universal, Shelley seems to derive principally from the Elizabethans, especially Shakespeare, though he admits no definite borrowing from these sources. Verbal resemblances to several Shakespearean tragedies are many, and several scenes are, without doubt, imitations. The poetic medium of *The Cenci* is blank verse as employed by Marlowe and Shakespeare.\(^{16}\)

A more detailed explanation of Shelley's indebtedness to the Greeks and the Elizabethans follows. According to

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\(^{15}\)Grebo and Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 532.

\(^{16}\)Robert Metcalf Smith, *Types of World Tragedy*, p. 303.
the Greeks, "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgations of these emotions."17 The Cenci fits beautifully into this pattern, for it is an imitation of an action made serious by the position, attitude, and helplessness of the protagonist Beatrice. Beatrice, a noble human being, is offered a choice of actions, either of which means disaster. If she obeys her father, the church, and the state, she will be debased beyond human endurance; if she resists, as she can do only by murdering her father, she must pay the penalty which the law exacts. Certainly this drama excites pity and terror through its two-fold phase, for it is a study of hate using atrocious means and of innocence driven to desperate crime.18 The protagonist, in the person of Beatrice, is neither too good nor too bad. She showed courage, independence, and gentleness even in the face of her persecutions, insults, and torturing. Yet she showed signs of human weaknesses when she denied she had killed Count Cenci,

I pray thee, Cardinal, that thou assert
My innocenсе.19

At the same time, she denied Marzio, one of the assassins.

18 Grabo and Freeman, op. cit., p. 532.
19 V, 11, 58-59.
Beatrice. We never saw him.

Marzio. You know me too well, Lady Beatrice.


Again she showed signs of weakness when she heard the news of her condemnation. For a moment she rebelled against all in which she had trusted.

No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world,
The wide, grey, lampless deep, unpeopled world. 21

To fit the Greek pattern for drama, which included the tragic error, Shelley pointed out in the preface that it was Beatrice's natural, but nevertheless blameworthy, desire for revenge which made her a tragic character. "Revenge, retaliation, atonement," Shelley asserted in his preface, "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." 22 Revenge was indeed to Shelley the great tragic flaw in human society, but it was not necessarily so in the conventions of drama. It is possible that to emphasize the fallacy of revenge Shelley departed from his manuscript source by having Cenci's murder followed immediately by the arrival of envoys to arrest him. Yet in writing the drama Shelley is so sympathetic with his heroine that he can scarcely tolerate his

20 V, ii, 21-23.

21 V, iv, 57-58.

own notion of revenge as a part of her character. Her real motive for the murder is self-protection and an almost religious mission to rid her family and the world of so cruel a man. It is only by a narrow margin that she escapes the dramatic fault of being a flawless character.\textsuperscript{23}

In The Cenci there are frequent passages of declamation similar to those in classic tragedy. This tendency toward long individual speeches was due chiefly to Shelley's constant literary study of the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Shelley was following the plan of these Greek writers in being much more interested in what his characters feel and say than in what they do.\textsuperscript{24} In Act IV, Scenes ii, iii, and iv, only, there is a noticeable shortening of speeches, but short speeches here are needed to emphasize and carry on the action, during which the suspense is at its highest.

The structure of Shelley's scenes is distinctly Greek. His usual scene consists of a dialogue between two persons, and it is a rare thing for more than two people to be upon the stage at once. A comparison of some of the scenes in Shelley's The Cenci and in Aeschylus's Agamemnon will show a marked similarity. The entire first scene of Act I in The Cenci is a dialogue between Cenci and Camillo, except for two brief entrances of Andres, the servant. In the

\textsuperscript{23}White, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. II, p. 139.

\textsuperscript{24}Bates, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 56.
first part of Act II, Scene i, the dialogue is between Lucretia and Beatrice; the second part of the same scene is between Lucretia and Count Cenci. In the opening scene of Aeschylus's Agamemnon the dialogue, at first, is between Clytemnestra and the Chorus, shifting to the Herald and Chorus. The action progresses with the coming of Agamemnon, and then the stage dialogue is between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. Because such scenes of dialogue between two persons are characteristic of the Greek drama, it is not unmeet to believe that Shelley's structure of scenes came from Greek sources.

In the placing of his scenes, Shelley was greatly influenced by Shakespeare. Shelley, together with other romanticists, tended to pile up scene upon scene without sufficiently taking into account the fact that the introduction of the front curtain and set pieces of scenery had interfered with the uninterrupted shifting of scenes possible on the open Shakespearean stage. Shelley, in The Cenci, had fifteen scenes. Several of the scenes could have been easily combined, particularly the first and second scenes of the first act, and the second, third, and fourth scenes of the fourth act.\textsuperscript{25} The first scene is an apartment in the Cenci Palace, in which Count Cenci talks with Camillo. The second scene is a garden of the Cenci Palace in which

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 57.
Beatrice and Orsino are the only occupants of the stage. Important as is their conversation for the development of the plot, there is nothing in it that is dependent upon garden scenery. It might as well have been identical with the first scene, or vice versa. Likewise in the second, third, and fourth scenes of Act IV, nothing in the development of the plot is dependent upon the scene. In the first of these scenes the two assassins arrive and confer with Lucretia and Beatrice; in the next scene the assassins return to report; and in the last scene the Legate Savello arrives. Thus all three of these scenes could have been combined into one.

Another imprint of Shakespearean influence upon Shelley's The Cenci is that of the frequent use of the soliloquy. All of the romanticists used the soliloquy to express subjective feeling. Following Shakespeare's example in Othello, Shelley used it to divulge to the audience the hidden plots and dark emotions of the characters. In The Cenci there are twelve soliloquies, six of which belong to Count Cenci and four to Orsino.\textsuperscript{26}

A few lines taken from some of the soliloquies of Count Cenci reveal the hidden plots and the dark emotions. After the exit of Camillo in Act I, Scene 1, Cenci speaks thus of his sons:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 53.
\end{flushright}
But yesterday
There came an order from the Pope to make
Fourfold provision for my cursed sons;
Whom I had sent from Rome to Salamanca,
Hoping some accident might cut them off;
And meaning if I could to starve them there.
I pray thee, God, send some quick death upon them!27

How intensely Count Cenci hated Beatrice is expressed in
these lines:

*Might I not drag her by the golden hair?
Stamp on her? Keep her sleepless till her brain
Be overworn? Tame her with chains and famine?
Less would suffice.*28

Another example of the Count's plots and dark emotions is
given in the soliloquy after he has rudely dismissed Lu-
cretia from the room.

*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! Yet, what is the day to me?
And wherefore should I wish for night, who do
A deed which I shall confound both night and day?29*

Lines from Orsino's soliloquy in like manner reveal his in-
ner nature:

*Now what harm
If Cenci should be murdered? Yet, if murdered
Wherefore by me? And what if I could take
The profit, yet omit the sin and peril
In such an action?30*

The influence of Shakespeare's dramas was dominant in
Shelley's stage effects. To recognize the likeness of some

27I, 1, 128-135. 28IV, 1, 5-9.
29II, 1, 175-182. 30II, 11, 120-124.
of the situations in *The Genci* to some of the situations in Shakespeare's plays is no difficult task. The most striking instance of similarity is that of the murder scene in *Macbeth* to that of *The Genci*.\(^{31}\)

In the first place, the murder in both plays is not presented on the stage. It is suggested with all the coloring of horror in Act II, Scene ii, in *Macbeth* by Lady Macbeth's soliloquy and her comments to Macbeth when he returns; similarly in Act IV, Scene iii, in *The Genci*, by Beatrice's and Lucretia's conversations with the two assassins.

In the second place, there are parallel incidents in the murder scenes which give credit to the statement that Shelley got much of his material from Shakespeare. The third act moves swiftly through three scenes in which the murderers approach Genci's couch, recoil, and are induced by Beatrice's reproaches and determination to complete the deed. When Olimpico comes back to the stage and makes this report --

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We dare not kill an old and sleeping man;  
His thin grey hair, his stern and reverend brow,  
His veined hands crossed on his heaving breast,  
And the calm innocent sleep in which he lay  
Quelled me. Indeed, indeed, I cannot do it --
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the speech of Lady Macbeth is instantly recalled:

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Had he not resembled  
My father as he slept,  
I had done it.\(^{33}\)
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\(^{31}\)Bates, *op. cit.*, p. 54.  
\(^{32}\)IV, iii, 9-13.  
\(^{33}\)Wm. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Cambridge Edition. (All references to Shakespeare's dramas are to this edition.)
Following the action in Macbeth, Shelley lets the murder be done at night after Count Cenci has retired. In both tragedies the guilty ones use the same means and instruments in accomplishing the murders.

Lucretia, in removing all hindrances to carrying out the murder of Count Cenci, says,

I mixed an opiate with his drink;  
He sleeps so soundly.  

At once the words of Lady Macbeth are recalled in the murder scene of Duncan:

... and the surfeited grooms  
Do mock their charges with snores:  I have  
drugged their possets.

Before the scene closes in each of the two plays, the guilty pair in Macbeth and the guilty four in The Cenci are startled, in each instance by a knocking at the gate. The situations continue the same in the following scenes of each play, for through the knockers are the murders discovered. The knocker in The Cenci is an Italian official who has come to arrest Count Cenci; the knockers in Macbeth are Macduff and Lennox, who have been commanded to call by for Duncan. One of the murderers in The Cenci is soon arrested with an incriminating note, and the arrest of Beatrice and Lucretia follows. These scenes, so like Macbeth in structure and occasionally in diction, have an animation

34 IV, 11, 30-31.  
35 II, 11, 4-6.
of their own which places them among the best English tragic scenes.36

The actions of the characters in Shelley's The Cenci are readily recognized to be patterned after those of Shakespeare's characters. Count Cenci, in his invocation to the air, recalls Macbeth's invocation to the earth.

O, thou most silent air, thou shalt hear
What now I think!37

Thou sure and firmset earth,
Hear not my steps.38

Because of his ignoble deeds, Count Cenci prefers the darkness to light,

And every little corner, nook, and hole
Is penetrated with the insolent light.
Come darkness!39

A parallel preference is expressed by Macbeth:

Come, seeling night
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day.40

The early part of The Cenci conforms to the type of Othello, the heroes in both cases remaining passive while the action is developed through the work of the villains; the latter part conforms to the type of Macbeth, the hero in each case coming to the front in the murder scene, and

37 Shelley, The Cenci, I, i, 140-141.
38 Shakespeare, Macbeth, II, i, 56.
39 II, i, 179-181.
40 III, ii, 46-47.
thenceforward struggling against the increasing reaction of society. All of the action in the first part of The Cenci centers around Count Cenci, but the center shift is made to Beatrice after the murder scene.

In his unusually cheerful mood at the feast, Count Cenci resembles very much the Duke of Gloucester in Shakespeare’s Richard the Third; and both betray a sense of impending horror lying underneath their gleefulness. A guest at the feast describes Cenci:

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. I never saw such blithe and open cheer In any eye. Likewise a guest describes the Duke:

His Grace looks cheerfully and smooth this morning.

The curse scene in The Cenci is very similar to the curse scene in King Lear. In both dramas the fathers invoke a curse upon their own daughters. The themes of the curses contain very much the same idea, the themes being that, if each should have children, the children be deformed and forever be heartaches to their mothers. Count Cenci’s curse came as a result of Beatrice’s not obeying him in an

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41 Bates, op. cit., p. 56.  
42 I, iii, 14-18.  
43 Shakespeare, Richard the Third, III, iv, 50.  
unreasonable demand:

And that the child may from its infancy
Grow, day by day, more wicked and deformed,
Turning her mother's love to misery. 45

King Lear's curse came as the result of Goneril's unfilial treatment of him.

Create her child of spleen, that it may live
And be a thwart dismatur'd torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth. 46

From Othello Shelley seems to have borrowed the idea of Giacomo's long comparison of the dying lamp to his father's life. 47 The scene in The Cenci is that of Giacomo's sitting in a room, the only light in which was an "unreplenished lamp." 48 The flame flickered up and down, and Giacomo realized that, if he did not refill the lamp, soon the flame would go out. Comparing the lamp to his father's life, which is soon to end by murder, Giacomo says,

So wastes and sinks
Even now, perhaps, the life that kindled mine:
But that no power can fill with vital oil
That broken lamp of flesh. 49

The situation and comparison in Othello are very much the same. Othello lights his way into Desdemona's room with a lamp. He plans to put out the light and then murder Desdemona. In his soliloquy he says that if he puts out the

45 IV, i, 150-152. 46 I, iv, 304-306.
47 Nates, op. cit., pp. 54-55. 48 III, ii, 8.
49 III, ii, 15-18.
light of the lamp, he can again restore the light, but

once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'est pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Prometheus heat
That can thy light resume. 50

Beatrice's mind wanderings in the mad scene of The Cenci
are very similar to those of Clarence's dream in Richard the
Third, Act II, Scene 11, 11, 16-30. Beatrice thought that
she was being pulled from hall to hall by her hair, that
she was shut up naked in damp cells where there were rep-
tiles and no food except strange fish to eat. Clarence
dreamed he was pushed into the ocean; and at the bottom of
the sea, he saw fishes gnawing upon men; and in the eye-
sockets of skulls he saw gems that reflected scorn and that
mocked dead men's bones.

Likewise in Shakespeare's King John, Beatrice is very
much like Constance in her mad talking. Beatrice, talking
to Lucretia in a slow, subdued voice says:

Do you know
I thought I was that wretched Beatrice
Men speak of, who her father sometimes banes
From hall to hall by the entangled hair. 51

Constance's speech has the same thought:

I am not mad. This hair I tear is mine;
My name is Constance. 52

After the deed has been done, Giscomo, in his reaction,
wishes to shift part of the blame:

50Shakespeare, Othello, V, 11, 10-13. 51III, 1, 43-46.
52Shakespeare, King Lear, III, iv, 45-46.
0, had I never
Found in thy smooth and ready countenance
The mirror of my darkest thoughts; hadst thou
Never with hints and questions made me look
Upon the monster of my thought, until
It grew familiar to desire.

just as King John does:

Hadst not thou been by,
A fellow by the hand of nature mark'd
Quoted, and sign'd to do a deed of shame,
This murder had not come into my mind.

Through intense grief brought on by the cruelties of
a father and a daughter, respectively, Beatrice and King
Lear both fight against a likelihood of insanity.

Let me not go mad!
Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts!

Let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!

In the last scene of The Cenci Beatrice shows no more
faith in being set free than does Antonio in The Merchant of
Venice show in Shylock's relenting.Beatrice's attitude
toward her situation is expressed in these words:

Oh, plead
With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,
Blind lightning, or the deaf sea, not with man!
Cruel, cold, formal men, righteous in words,
In deeds a Cain.

53v, 1, 18-24. 54King John, IV, 11, 220-224.
57Shakespeare, King Lear, I, v, 50.
58Bates, op. cit., p. 55. 59v, iv, 105-108.
Likewise Antonio expresses the same thought:

I pray you, think, you question with the Jew.
You may as well go stand upon the beach
And bid the main flood be the same height. 60

Beatrice takes the same attitude as that of Iago in

Othello; in the trials in both plays each of these charac-
ters has answered as many questions as he sees fit and re-
fuses to say more. 61

Now do your will;
Nor other pains shall force another word. 62

Demand me nothing; what you know, you know;
From this time forth I never will speak word. 63

Count Cenci's attitude toward youth, young manhood, and
old age is very much like that of the Duchess of York in

Richard the Third. 64

Be thou the resolution of quick youth
Within my veins, and manhood's purpose stern
And age's firm, cold, subtle villainy; 65

Thy school-days frightful, desperate, wild, and
furious,
Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, venturous,
Thy age confirm'd, proud, subtle, sly, and bloody. 66

Not only has Shelley in his drama The Cenci borrowed

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60 Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, IV, i, 70-72.
61 Bates, op. cit., p. 66.
63 Shakespeare, Othello, V, ii, 303-304.
64 Bates, op. cit., p. 63. 65 The Cenci, I, iii, 173-5.
66 Richard the Third, IV, iv, 168-171.
from Shakespeare the dramatic handling of scenes and characters, but also in several instances he has borrowed Shakespeare's choice and use of words. 67 Orsino's saying, "I see, as from a tower, the end of all," 68 is about the same thing that Queen Elizabeth says in Richard the Third, "I see as in a map, the end of all." 69

The words of Henry IV in Shakespeare's Henry the Fourth, "How ill white hairs become a fool and jester," 70 appear in Camillo's speech in The Cenci. 71

How hideously look deeds of lust and blood Through these snow white and venerable hairs! 72

The sentence, "How tedious, false, and cold seem all things," 73 that appears in Shelley's The Cenci is found in Shakespeare's Hamlet in these words:

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world. 74

Furthermore, Orsino's speech to Beatrice, "Utterly lost, subdued, even to the hue," 75 is an echo of a similar one in Shakespeare's "Sonnet CXL." 76

68The Cenci, II, 11, 147.
69Richard the Third, II, iv, 54.
70Henry the Fourth, V, v, 49.
72The Cenci, I, i, 38-39. 73V, iv, 80.
74I, ii, 133. 75III, i, 176.
My nature is subdu'd
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.77

Thus through a manuscript giving a detailed account of the horrors which ended one of the noblest and richest families of Rome, during the Pontificate of Clement VIII, in the year 1599, Shelley found a traditional story that had enough tragic element in it to awaken his dramatic talent. Then, from the plan and structure of the Greek dramas, especially those of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and from Shakespeare's scenic treatments, characters, and lines, all of which he had read and studied assiduously, and from personal experiences which had caused him to hate oppression and tyranny, Shelley wrote, according to Byron, "perhaps the best tragedy modern times have produced."78

77Shakespeare, "Sonnet CXI," ll. 4-6.
78Quoted by Chew, op. cit., p. 16.
CHAPTER III

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

The contemporary English stage exerted a great negative influence over Shelley. In fact, he found the theatre distasteful, although, as already mentioned, he enjoyed reading the Attic tragedies and English dramas, particularly those of Shakespeare. In his visits to London during his residence at Marlow, Shelley occasionally attended the Italian opera. Once in the old Italian Theatre, with its quiet attentive audience, he remarked to Peacock that it was "delightful to see human beings so civilized." ¹ Mademoiselle Melanie, the principal dancer there in 1817, fascinated him, and he especially enjoyed the music of Mozart in Nozze di Figaro. He regarded the regular stage, according to White, "as a corruptor of principles that were much dearer to him than the entertainment of an hour." ² Miss O'Neill in Milman's Fazio, however, impressed him so much that two years later he tried to get her as Beatrice in The Cenci, but Fazio was the only play Shelley ever seemed to enjoy. ³

Not often in its history, says Ernest Sutherland Bates,

²Ibid.
³Ibid.
had the stage had "better actors or poorer playwrights," than in the first part of the nineteenth century. If Shelley and Byron had studied the skills of the art of drama, Bates says that the English romantic drama might have been, at least, as successful as the French drama. He goes further in saying that fundamentally the French were as interested in the lyric type of poetry as the English, but the French realized that the drama could not be successfully written in the form of lyric poetry, that the drama had laws of its own which must be studied and understood. The English, on the other hand, depended upon their "poetic inspiration and never perceived that a knowledge of stage craftsmanship was necessary."

Shelley wished The Cenci to be acted. Judging from the letter he wrote Peacock in July, 1819, we find that he intended the dramatic structure of the play to be such that it would meet the stage requirements. He wrote:

It is written without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions which characterize my other compositions; I have 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. I send you a translation of the Italian MS., on which my play is founded; the chief circumstances of which I have touched very delicately; for my principal doubt as to

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4 Bates, op. cit., p. 35.

5 Ibid., p. 38.
whether it would succeed as an acting play hangs entirely on the question as to whether any 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.

I am exceedingly interested in the question of whether this attempt of mine will succeed or not. I am strongly inclined to the affirmative at present; founding my hopes on this -- that, as a composition, it is certainly not inferior to any of the modern plays that have been acted, with the exception of Remorse; that the interest of the plot is incredibly greater and more real; and that there is nothing beyond what the multitude are contented to believe that they can understand, either in imagery, opinion, or sentiment.6

Shelley hoped to have the play produced in London, but it was rejected because of its theme of incest and was not produced until 1886 by the Shelley Society. On the afternoon of May 7, at the Grand Theatre in Islington, The Cenci was performed before an audience of invited guests, estimated at the time as from 2,300 to 3,000. Several distinguished men of letters were present, among whom were George Meredith, Bernard Shaw, James Russell Lowell, and Robert Browning.7

Except for a division into six acts instead of five, the play was the same as the original copy. Describing the success of the play, Hicks and Clarke say that for over three hours the audience sat listening attentively and


applauding enthusiastically every scene. These men further add that even "the unfriendly critics could not deny that for once, at least, The Genci had triumphed on the stage before an audience." 8

Although The Genci does not have a stage history, there have been other productions since 1886. In addition to the performances in England, the play has been staged in Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and the United States. 9

Studying The Genci in the light of whether it is suitable for the stage through reviewing the criticisms given by those who have seen the play acted and those who have not is an effective way of finding the strength and weaknesses of the dramatic structure.

Ernest Sutherland Bates, who has, perhaps, devoted more consideration to the stage effectiveness of The Genci than any other student of Shelley, summarizes his views as follows:

From all these facts it should be sufficiently clear what answer must be given to the question, how far is "The Genci" an acting drama? As a whole it is not an acting drama at all. A play, one of whose acts fails to advance the plot in the least, ten of whose scenes are purely conversational and without action, and four-fifths of whose speeches are of impossible length, is surely not to be called an acting drama.10

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8Ibid., p. 19.  
9Ibid., p. 57.  
10Bates, op. cit., p. 60.
The same view is expressed by Newman Ivey White, Shelley's most recent biographer:

So much has been loosely written about The Cenci as one of the great English tragedies and about Shelley as potentially a great writer of stage plays that it has seemed well to set the matter straight. The Cenci can hardly be called a tragedy at all, in anything like the traditional meaning of the word. In spite of an intelligent and clever use of the materials, it is obviously defective in structure, when considered as a play for the stage.\textsuperscript{11}

Standing in sharp contrast to these opinions is the statement by W. J. Turner in his criticism of Sybil Thorndike's first production of The Cenci in 1922:

Turning to The Cenci, I find an absence of comprehension on the part of many critics, who will insist on going to an author's work with their own idea of what he should have done and measuring it as it approaches or departs from that idea. To call a play undramatic which deals with the single unattractive theme of incest and has no relief whatever from the profoundest gloom or misery -- no subordinate episodes, no humour, no sentiment, no fiery Marlowesque hyperbole; to call such a play undramatic which, lasting three hours with only one interval yet holds the audience spellbound, as if enchanted; this is, I maintain, simply to make a mockery of language. A play is undramatic when it fails to hold the attention of an audience in a theatre. That is the sole criterion of what is or what is not dramatic.\textsuperscript{12}

Kenneth N. Cameron and Horst Frenz, criticizing the first performance, say that the production of 1886 is important because it was the first actual staging of Shelley's play as a whole and because it was the reception of this production by the critics that established, more than any

\textsuperscript{11}White, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{12}Quoted by Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., pp. 13-14.
other single factor, the general opinion that The Cenci is a closet drama. In granting that the audience was enthusiastic about the play, they add that "such reaction must be accepted with some reserve as the audience was a select one."¹³

The Saturday Review of London commented:

Was the result then proportionate to the exertions and hopes of the experimenters? To judge from the conduct of the audience there can be no doubt on the subject. The applause was loud and continuous. In the lobbies the comments were enthusiastic.¹⁴

The Hornsey and Finsbury Park Journal gave a similar criticism:

The building was packed from floor to ceiling, every eye was riveted upon the actors, and the audience was spellbound by the powerful performance.¹⁵

The critics were all agreed upon the dramatic effectiveness of the curse scene, in which Count Cenci kneels and prays:

God!

Hear me! If this most specious mass of flesh, Which Thou hast made my daughter; 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, was meant To aught good use; if her bright loveliness


¹⁴Quoted, ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.
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, I pray Thee for my sake,
As Thou the common God and Father art
Of her, and me, and all; reverse that doom!
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 Maresmas's dew,
Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up
Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs
To loathed leanness! All-beholding sun,
Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes
With thine own blinding beams;\textsuperscript{16}

The Times praised this scene and the final scene, but added:
"Its place in English literature remains what it was; but
the Shelley Society may, if they are so disposed, claim to
have effectually demolished its pretensions as a play."\textsuperscript{17}
The Daily Telegraph was just as severe in its criticism:
"Four long hours of a lovely May afternoon were yesterday
occupied by the Shelley Society in laboriously proving the
worthlessness of The Cenci for all practical purposes."\textsuperscript{18}

Thus The Cenci, the critics of the drama agreed, had
better remain a closet drama. One reason that it should re-
main so is that the theme is too "revolting, horrible, and
immoral," that "no flash of genial humour, no gleam of inno-
cent gaiety relieves its Stygian darkness."\textsuperscript{19} Another reason
why the critics think this play could not be staged is that

\textsuperscript{16}IV, i, 115-135.
\textsuperscript{17}Quoted by Cameron and Frenz, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 1082.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 1080.
it has too many structural defects; namely, the speeches are too long; the action lacks variety and movement; the play declines after the murder of Cenci; the scenes which give the threats and the action of Beatrice's father are confused; Beatrice's denial of her guilt withdraws audience sympathy from her.\textsuperscript{20}

Hicks and Clarke defend Shelley's lengthy expository material in the first part of his tragedy by saying that in the first scene the character and antecedents of Count Cenci are set forth. Here Shelley shows much skill by putting his explanations into the dialogue between the Count and Cardinal Camillo. In the first speech of Camillo there is an implication of the injustice of a society which grants pardon to Cenci's wickedness because of his wealth. Furthermore, there is a dramatic quality in the hostility between the two that "is built up to a climax in the Cardinal's last indignant speech."\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{quote}
Hell's most abandoned fiend  
Did never, in the drunkenness of guilt,  
Speak to his heart as now you speak to me;  
I thank my God that I believe you not.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The first two scenes, furthermore, give to the reader, or audience, as the case may be, a clear insight into Cenci's

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 1084.
\item \textsuperscript{21}Hicks and Clarke, \op. cit., pp. 48-49.
\item \textsuperscript{22}I, i, 117-120.
\end{itemize}
evil nature and begin the main action with the arrival of the letters from Salamanca, followed by the Count's soliloquy and order to Andrea, both of which allude to his plot against Beatrice. The second scene, through Beatrice's conversation with the cunning Orsino, indicates the character and plight of Beatrice. Orsino's soliloquy shows more clearly the goodness and strength of her character; at the same time it brings in the plot of his amorous scheming.

By the end of Act I, Scene ii, the characters of the protagonist and the antagonist are definitely revealed, and their first open clash occurs in Scene iii when Count Cenci celebrates at a banquet the deaths of his sons Rocco and Cristofano. At first he incites the emotion of anticipation in his introductory speech:

Welcome, my friends and kinsmen; welcome ye, Princes and Cardinals, pillars of the church, Whose presence honors our festivity.

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.23

Then Count Cenci incites surprise by these words:

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, both when he lays him down to sleep,
And when he rises up from dreaming it;
One supplication, one desire, one hope,
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.24

And finally in this sequence of emotions comes horror:

... 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;
And they will need no food or raiment more;
The taper's 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.25

The tension rises as Beatrice appeals to the guests, disregarding her father, and incites them to action, which Count Cenci has to use very harsh threats to check. The fact, however, that he does check them shows Beatrice that she will get very little help from them in the struggle with her father. While Beatrice and Count Cenci are left alone at the close of the scene, the unequal battle between father and daughter is further shown when he drives her away with horrible threats. The scene closes with Count Cenci's soliloquy, in which he again implies his evil plan.26

Bates says that the only criticism to be made of the

24I, iii, 21-33.
25I, iii, 40-50.
26I, iii, 1-178.
first act from the structural point of view is that the characters are revealed too completely. He continues:

This is an important criticism, however, in one particular respect. In the very first scene Cenci's criminal determination is revealed as already fully matured. Shelley thus cuts himself off at the outset from the possibility of showing any great development in the character of the Cenci or in the main situation. Instead of making the first part of the play lead up to Cenci's purpose as to the final result of his exasperated and accumulating hate, Shelley allows all the early scenes to circle feebly about the subject of the unaccomplished but already planned act of incest.27

The opening of Act II reveals Count Cenci's cruel treatment of Lucretia and Bernardo, Cenci's wife and youngest son. They are soon joined by Beatrice, who is almost overcome with abhorrence at the suggestion made by her father in her room the night before. Cenci enters, and in the remaining part of the scene he exerts his insolent authority over Beatrice, Bernardo, and Lucretia in turn, finally commanding Lucretia to make ready to go the Castle of Petrella. His description of the Castle seems to suggest that there he would be able to carry out his abominable plan without any interference:

On Wednesday next I shall set out; you know
That savage rock, the Castle of Petrella;
'Tis safely walled, and moated round about;
Its dungeons underground, and its thick towers
Never told tales; though they have heard and seen
What might make dumb things speak.28

The scene closes with another of Cenci's soliloquies, in

27 Bates, op. cit., p. 58.  
28 II, 1, 166-171.
which he continues to outline his incestuous plot.  

In the second act, the nature of the subject of incest, according to Bates, causes great difficulty in the matter of structure. He says:

The Elizabethans, sure of the frank sympathy of their audience, were able to trace the development of incestuous deeds with an openness impossible for Shelley, whose desire not to emphasize the repulsive details of his plot leads to an obscurity which really emphasizes them all the more.  

Shelley himself said that, in the course of the play, he had never mentioned expressly Cenci's worst crime. Everyone knew what it must be, but he never put it into words.  

The nearest allusion to it was in his curse beginning, "That if she ever have a child . . ." After the speech of Cenci in the first scene --

Bid Beatrice attend me in her chamber
This evening: no, at midnight and alone --

we expect the incest to occur between the first and second acts, but in the second act we learn that the revolting deed has not yet been done. Bates thinks the uncertainty tends to make the idea of the incest all the more conspicuous. He adds further that the end of this scene leaves

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29II, i, 1-193.  


31Quoted by Mary Shelley, "Notes on The Cenci," op. cit., p. 333.  

32IV, i, 141.  

33I, i, 145-146.
the relation between Beatrice and her father about what it was at the beginning, and that the entire scene might have been omitted, without the slightest loss to the action of the drama. 34 Hicks and Clarke, on the other hand, express the opinion that each succeeding scene in which Cenci appears marks an intensification of his will to evil, while the delay indicated in Act II arises from the equally strong opposing will of his daughter. Actually the delay increases the dramatic tension and prepares for Beatrice’s emotional crisis in Act III. 35

The second scene of Act II introduces Giacomo, another of Cenci’s sons. In the history of this son, we get more about the cruelty of Cenci toward his children. The scene also shows definitely that the Pope is going to support Cenci’s tyranny by remaining neutral. Camillo says to Giacomo:

Though your peculiar case is hard, I know The Pope will not divert the course of law, After that impious feast the other night I spoke with him, and urged him then to check Your father’s cruel hand; he frowned and said, "Children are disobedient, and they sting Their fathers’ hearts to madness and despair, Requiring years of care with contumely. I pity the Count Cenci from my heart; His outraged love perhaps awakened hate, And thus he is exasperated to ill.


35 Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., pp. 50-51.
In the great war between the old and young
I, who have white hairs and a tottering body,
Will keep at least blameless neutrality.\(^{36}\)

A definite advance in the action is made as Giacomo is
hesitantly led by Orsino to the thought of murdering Cenci.
White points out that this scene, in which Giacomo and Orsino are both shown to be thinking of Cenci's murder, has
only the slightest bearing on the murder as later accomplished under the direction of Beatrice, and that Shelley consumes two entire acts with interesting characterization and background, but with practically no progress in the action.\(^{37}\)

There is a flaw in time, Bates points out, in the first two acts. It probably came as a result of the numerous changes Shelley made in the plot from the account given in his source. The changes consisted in bringing closely together events that in the original narrative are widely separated in time, making it possible for Shelley to condense the events of more than a year into a few days. As to the more detailed indications of these days, Bates thinks he seems to have been somewhat indifferent, making his references not altogether consistent. The reader can see clearly enough that the first two acts occur on successive days. At the end of the first scene of the first act, the

\(^{36}\)II, ii, 27-40.

messenger from Salamance arrives with the news of the death of Cenci's sons, and in the same scene Cenci gives the order for Beatrice to receive him at midnight. Before this midnight meeting there is the intervention of the scene of Beatrice's conversation with Orsino and the scene of the quarrel at the banquet. That the first scene of the second act occurs on the following day is made plain by Cenci's statement:

Why, yesternight you dared to look
With disobedient insolence upon me. 38

Further on in the same scene Cenci says, "On Wednesday next I shall set out," 39 these words seeming to imply that Wednesday is at least several days off, and not the next day. At the end of the same scene Count Cenci, in his soliloquy, speaks as if he were about to carry through his incestuous scheme:

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? 40

The first scene of the next act introduces Beatrice immediately after the violation has occurred, seemingly that same day. Yet in this scene Lucretia says:

Tomorrow before dawn,
Cenci will take us to that lonely rock,
Petrelle, in the Apulian Apennines. 41

40II, 1, 181-183. 41III, 1, 239-241.
This statement seems inconsistent with Cenci's statement earlier on the same day that they would set out on the next Wednesday. Furthermore, in an intervening scene Camillo speaks of that "impious feast the other night," whereas, the first scenes of the second and third acts both take place the very next day after the feast. Because of these inconsistencies it seems that Shelley never worked out in his own mind when the banquet and the outrage had actually happened.43

These incongruities in the details of time, although characteristic of Shelley, do not interfere with the progress of the drama, in the opinion of Bates, any more than similar incongruities found in Shakespeare's dramas; for example, the time sequence of Othello, the statements as to the age of the protagonist in Hamlet, and the duration of the sleeping dose of medicine in Romeo and Juliet.44 The more important fact is that Shelley, even though he did not observe unity of time in the exact sense, or with any such accuracy as Byron used in his classical plays, did combine the events of his plot into a very brief time.45

In the third act Count Cenci has accomplished his crime. The sequence of loathing, numbness, madness, and

42Ii, 11, 29.
44Ibid., p. 53. 45Ibid.
the vehement desire to do something about her situation is especially dramatic. Beatrice enters staggering and speaking wildly:

Reach me that handkerchief! -- My brain is hurt; My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me . . . I see but indistinctly . . .

Later in the scene Beatrice seems dazed and numb:

What hideous thought was that I had even now? 'Tis gone; and yet its burthen remains here O'er these dull eyes . . . upon this weary heart! O world! O, life! O, day! O, misery!

After Beatrice decides that the only thing to do is murder her father, she, in spite of her gentleness, becomes an "Antigone for resolution." "We must be brief and bold," Beatrice tells Orsino while they are planning Count Cenci's murder. Hicks and Clarke say that the bringing of the freshly embittered Giacomo into the plot completes the list of forces against Cenci. Bates, on the other hand, thinks that thirty-six lines are wasted to the

. . . thoroughly unconvincing and dramatically needless tale of Cenci's malicious endeavor to break up the domestic happiness of Giacomo and his family.

Had not Giacomo already been introduced earlier, the story would be of service to explain his hatred of his father, but after the second scene of the second act has just been devoted to this very purpose, further enforcement of the motivation in so minor a character is superfluous.

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46 III, 1, 1-3.  
47 III, 1, 30-32.  
48 Kurtz, op. cit., p. 194.  
49 III, 1, 228.  
50 Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., p. 51.  
In the second scene of the third act the characterizing motive is reintroduced, this time to show Giacomo's vacillating remorse over the supposed murder of his father on the road to Petrelle. Hicks and Clarke think the vacillation of Giacomo and the complication of the Count's escape heighten the mood of suspense in preparation for the fourth act. Bates says that this scene contains a number of fine passages, which make for effective reading, but not for effective acting. He further adds that Shelley, like the other romanticists, constructed situations to bring out the emotions of his characters, instead of developing situations and characters hand in hand.

The fourth act opens with Cenci's wife, Lucretia, vainly trying to change his course of persecutions, but his response is an intense prayer to God for the utter destruction of his daughter. White says: "This scene, evidently intended to create suspense by offering Cenci a chance of life, shows clearly enough that self-preservation, rather than revenge, is the principal motive for Count Cenci's murder." Because of this scene, Beatrice's plan to murder her father seems absolutely necessary. When the new
assassins become frightened at a noise they have heard, Beatrix dispels their fears and urges them on:

Ye conscience-stricken cravens, rock to rest
Your baby hearts. It is the iron gate,
Which ye left open, swinging to the wind,
That enters whistling as in scorn. Come, follow!
And be your steps like mine, light, quick and bold. 56

When the murderers go back into Genci's room, again they become afraid and return to Beatrice, pretending they heard her call. Showing a trace of her father's determination, she angrily exclaims:

Misereble slaves!
Where, if ye dare not kill a sleeping man,
Found ye the boldness to return to me
With such a deed undone? Base palterers!
Cowards and traitors! Why, the very conscience
Which ye would sell for gold and for revenge
Is an equivocation; it sleeps over
A thousand daily acts disgracing men;
And when a deed where mercy insults Heaven . . .
Why do I talk? 57

Snatching a dagger, she says that she will do the deed herself, but the murderers once more take over, murder Count Genci, and throw his body into the garden. 58

As the writer has pointed out in Chapter II, there are some resemblances in this murder scene to the murder scene in Macbeth. Hicks and Clarke defend The Genci by saying that there are some important differences. In the first place, Genci's murder is justified, but that of Duncan is

58 IV, 111, 32-56.
not. Second, there is "an effect of dramatic irony in Savella's arrival with a warrant for Cenci's arrest, which contrasts sharply with the comic relief afforded by the Porter's knocking at the gate." 59

A more serious criticism of the fourth act is that the play seems to fall apart with the death of Count Cenci. White says that his character had so dominated the first part of the play that the substitution of judges as Beatrice's antagonists seems almost to begin a new play. 60 Hicks and Clarke think otherwise. The despotic spirit of the Count survives in the ruthless workings of the law given in the last scene of the act. Beatrice's fight does not end with the death of her father, but continues with the same vigor and determination into the fifth act. They continue:

In that struggle she uses the only means that society with its crude measure of justice permits her, namely, the rules of evidence. Whatever ethical questions are raised by Beatrice's denial of complicity in the murder, that denial is essential to the dramatic interest of the ensuing action. 61

The weakness and meanness of Giacomo and Orsino as portrayed in the first scene of Act V stand in sharp contrast to the courage and poise shown by Beatrice in the following trial scene. In the trial scene she is involved in two

59Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., p. 52.
61Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., p. 52.
struggles: one with the judges, whose procedure she questions all through the trial, and the other with the assassin Marzio, whom she compels to retract his confession made under torture on the rack. Beatrice is successful to the extent of getting the decision postponed, but the postponement does not bring peace, for soon Giacomo and Lucretia, too, confess under torture. Giacomo, left alone with Beatrice and Lucretia, sadly speaks:

Have I confessed? Is it all over now?  
No hope! No refuge! O weak, wicked tongue  
Which hast destroyed me, would that thou hadst been  
Cut out and thrown to dogs first! To have killed  
My father first, and then betrayed my sister;  
Ay, thee! the one thing innocent and pure  
In this black guilty world, to that which I  
So well deserve! My wife! my little ones!  
Desolate, helpless, and I . . . Father! God!  
Canst Thou forgive even the unforgiving,  
When their full hearts break thus, thus!  

Giacomo covers his face and weeps, while Lucretia lamentingly questions her own weakness in confessing:

0 my child!  
To what a dreadful end are we all come!  
Why did I yield? Why did I not sustain  
Those torments? Oh, that I were all dissolved  
Into these fast and unavailing tears,  
Which flow and feel not!  

There is no alternative for Beatrice now except to face her fate with the same determination and dignity that she had shown against tyranny throughout the entire play. Shelley's dramatic art is at its highest in the last scene when

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62v, iii, 1-144. 63v, iii, 96-106. 64v, iii, 107-111.
Beatrice conquers her fear and calmly says:

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.65

Although The Cenci is considered by many critics as a  
closet drama, there are many histrionic opportunities in  
parts of the play, for example, the banquet scene, the  
scene after the violation, the scenes of the murder and its  
discovery, and parts of the prison scene.

St. John Ervine, a leading British theatrical critic  
of the time, says that in The Cenci Shelley uses an exeed-  
ingly effective device in theatrical drama, the trick of  
suspended intensity; that is, he makes the audience think  
that a character of great importance is about to enter the  
scene, and instead, a subordinate character appears. Then  
when his entrance is not expected, the important character  
comes in.66 There are two examples of this device in The  
Cenci. Beatrice enters upon the scene where Lucretia and  
Bernerdo are talking, and in a hurried voice she whispers:

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

65v, iv, 158-165.

66 Cameron and Frenz, op. cit., p. 1088.
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, He frowns on others, but he smiles on me, Even as he did after the feast last night. 67

But the person who comes in is a servant, not Count Cenci. Then enough time elapses for the audience to forget Beatrice's terror of her father's appearance. It closes in a little scene "of affectionate approaches between Beatrice and her brother, Bernardo, and their step-mother, Lucretia,"68 who reacts to their love for her by murmuring, "My dear, dear children!"69 At this moment, suddenly the door opens, and in walks Count Cenci. Shelley uses the same device in the third act. In Act III, Scene i, in which Beatrice, Lucretia, and Orsino are conspiring to have her father murdered, a footstep is heard, and they think the Count is near the door. Beatrice whispers to Orsino:

That step we hear approach must never pass The bridge of which we spoke.70

But Count Cenci does not enter; it is Giscomo. In fact, the Count does not enter at all during this scene.

Such examples of dramatic art further show that the play was not altogether lacking in stage requirements. The acted drama is so complex an art that many other characteristics

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67II, 1, 12-21.
68Quoted by Cameron and Frenz, op. cit., p. 1088.
69II, 1, 104.
70III, 1, 272-273.
besides the dramatic element are required. Even though a clearly developed plot, a consistency of structure, and a brevity of speech are required in a modern stage drama, they are not essentially dramatic requirements. Bates says that the two requirements which in the end determine that a play is dramatic are that "it present a struggle of the human will, and that it show forth in action the supreme moments of this struggle." 71

The Cenci, meeting the first requirement, certainly has a struggle of the human will. Bates outlines this struggle thus:

From the opening of the first act to the conclusion of the last, the conflict of Beatrice is waged, at the beginning against the consummation of her father's horrible design, at the end against the legacy of judicial vengeance resulting from his murder. It is a conflict in which the combatants on each side are well matched, and in which the results at stake are of tragic importance. In it the force of the protagonists is shattered; and they drag down the lesser characters with them in their ruin. 72

Furthermore, in a dramatic manner Shelley gives force to the supreme moments of the struggle, the five supreme moments being the violation, the murder, the discovery, the trial, and the condemnation. The first moment Shelley comes as nearly as possible to showing, for he brings Beatrice on the stage immediately after the violation, so that we see

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71 Bates, op. cit., p. 61.  
72 Ibid.
the effect of Cenci's act upon her will, first overpowering
her, then exciting her "to take justice and expiation into
her own hands." Bates concludes:

This is the essential element of the climax,
and the one in which we are interested; not the
violation itself, which was a mere act of physical
force, but its effect upon the will and the charac-
ter of Beatrice is of importance. Out of a very
delicate situation Shelley constructed a scene
unobjectionable on the score of propriety, and ef-
fective as a dramatic climax.74

All the other supreme moments are shown upon the stage, ex-
cept the murder of Cenci, but it has dramatic value through
the coming and going of the murderers on the stage.

While the play could stand a certain amount of cutting,
Shelley's arrangement of scenes and the sequence of action
could not be changed very well without harming the dramatic
effect, for the quieter episodes serve the function of re-
lief from the tension of the great moments, which would
have, in the opinion of Hicks and Clarke, less emotional
effect on an audience if they were brought more closely
together.75

Even though The Cenci is lacking in some of the second-
ary elements of a good play, it has some of the primary
elements. Inadequate in structure as it is and hindered
by its subject matter, with scenes composed of long speeches

73Ibid., p. 62. 74Ibid.
75Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., p. 53.
where scenes of action are needed, *The Conquered* presents a
great dramatic struggle, the emotional tone and the poetry
of which rank with the great English tragedies.
CHAPTER IV
CHARACTERIZATION

In portraying the characters in The Cenci, Shelley says that he was governed by his interpretation of the manuscript source. In his preface he says:

I have endeavored as nearly as is possible to represent the characters as they probably were, and have sought to avoid the error of making them actuated by my own conceptions of right or wrong, false or true; thus under a thin veil converting names and actions of the sixteenth century into cold impersonations of my own mind.\(^1\)

At the end of his dedication of the play to Leigh Hunt there is the important statement:

In that patient and irreconcilable enmity with domestic and political tyranny and imposture which the tenor of your life has illustrated, and which, had I health and talents, should illustrate mine, let us, comforting each other in our task, live and die.\(^2\)

This shows plainly, as Bates points out, that in "the realism of The Cenci Shelley had not at all forgotten his ethical interests and revolutionary sympathies."\(^3\) Through the

\(^2\)Ibid., "Dedication to Leigh Hunt, Esq.," p. 271.
\(^3\)Bates, op. cit., p. 64.
characters Shelley was able to present a vivid picture of the conditions under which he had grown up. The fact that the sufferer in this historical story was a woman and that she stood alone against the world, no doubt, appealed to him.

Concerning Shelley's interest in the victim, Bates adds:

Sympathy with the oppressed was probably a more constant factor in Shelley's temperament than in that of any other English poet. It affected his work from the beginning and created fixed forms for his imagined characters. From his first crude "Irishman's Song" at the age of seventeen, when he exhorted the defeated to rally and strike down the triumphant oppressor, through the revolutionary poems of "Queen Mab" and "The Revolt of Islam," to the dramas of "Prometheus Unbound" and "The Cenci," the same conception of life is dominant. This conception views the world as divided into three great classes of men: the tyrants composed mainly of kings and priests, oppressors of the rest of mankind; the heroes, individual men and women arising from time to time as saviours of mankind; and the slaves, the vast characterless mass who are oppressed by the tyrants or saved by the heroes. The idea that one man in his different relationships might belong to more than one of these three classes seems never to have occurred to Shelley.⁴

The leading characters are Count Cenci, an old grey-haired man, a horrible, wicked father, who invites his noble friends to a banquet celebrating the violent death of two of his sons; who delights in nothing but the misery of the human race; and who forcibly destroys the innocence of his own daughter; Lucretia, the kind and amiable step-mother,

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⁴Bates, op. cit., p. 65.
who joins in a plot to murder her husband; Giacomo, his son, who, because Count Genci has cheated him of his wife's dowry, joins in the plot to murder his father; Beatrice, the only daughter, who radiates beauty, purity, grace, and discernment, yet who takes the lead in all the schemes to murder her father; Orsino, a prelate, who is in love with Beatrice, and who enters into the murder plot, reasoning that Beatrice will not dare to refuse an associate in the guilt; Cardinal Camillo, a vacillating agent of the church, who is the mouthpiece for the Pope.

Because of Shelley's interest in characterization in The Genci, he laid considerable emphasis on character-analysis, and his use of pauses for self-analysis of Count Genci, Beatrice, Giacomo, and Orsino "serves to reveal their characters with varying degrees of fullness." The opening situation affords to Count Genci an opportunity, in the first few lines of the drama, to state his creed and his evil philosophy of life:

We should know each other.
As to my character for what men call crime
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 --
For you give out that you have half reformed me,
Therefore strong vanity will keep you silent
If fear should not; both will, I do not doubt.

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.6

Although the accounts which Cenci gives of himself are fundamentally true, yet sometimes they are over-striened and offensive:

I love
The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
When this shall be another's, and that mine.
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 debared
Until it be accomplished.7

The following lines, however, given by Cardinal Camillo, who remonstrates with Cenci, add much to Cenci's portrait:

How hideously look deeds of lust and blood
Through those snow white and venerable hairs! --
Your children should be sitting round you now,
But that you fear to read upon their looks
The shame and misery you have written there,
Where is your wife? Where is your gentle daughter?
Methinks her sweet looks, which make all things else
Beauteous and glad, would kill the fiend within you.
Why is she barred from all society
But her own strange and uncomplaining wrongs?
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.
Yet I have ever hoped you would amend,
And in that hope have saved your life three times.8
Judging from the information Count Cenci and Cardinal Camillo give, we deduce that the Count is a complex character. A careful study of Shelley's exposition throughout the play shows, in the opinion of Baker, that the Count's malignity is not motiveless. One basis of his motivation is given by Cardinal Camillo's allusion to Count Cenci's fiery youth, remorseless manhood, and unrepentant old age.\(^9\) Baker further analyzes this motivation:

His youth was notorious. . . . When the diet of what he calls "honey" palled, he required stronger stimulants, which he found in the sight and sound of physical suffering in others. But his sadistic appetites took in the end a deeper turn. Now he is satisfied only when he is able to affect some new victim with extreme mental agony -- and be there to watch its outward manifestations. In this last refinement upon his earlier methods of self-gratification, the Count has simply habituated himself to what Hawthorne was to exploit fictionally as the unpardonable sin, that is, the desire to finger the soul of another human being, and it appears that the hardening process in the Count is now virtually complete.\(^10\)

Another of Count Cenci's motives, so it seems, is that of the love of money. Both in the source and in the play he buys pardon for his sins through the payment of large fines to the Pope. His wish to conserve his fortune, "which he values as a guarantee of future immunity from prosecution," probably explains his cruel treatment of his sons, who are "a drain upon his resources."\(^11\) Cenci's joy at

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\(^9\)Baker, op. cit., p. 144.  
\(^10\)Ibid.  
\(^11\)Ibid., p. 145.
hearing that his two sons have accidentally been killed in Spain is frankly admitted in the presence of his astonished guests and agonized family at the banquet. The guests react with indignation, but Cenci's threat soon dissolves their anger, further showing his power to oppress:

A Guest (rising). Thou wretch!
Will none among this noble company
Check the abandoned villain?

Camillo. For God's sake
Let me dismiss the guests! You are insane,
Some ill will come of this.

Second Guest. I will!

Third Guest. And I!

Cenci (addressing those who rise with a threatening gesture).
Who moves? Who speaks?
(turning to the Company.) 'tis nothing,
Enjoy yourselves. -- Beware! For my revenge Is as the sealed commission of a king That kills, and none dare name the murderer.12

A third motive, according to Baker, is vengeance:

It appears that the Count's desire for vengeance arose from his relations with his first wife, who died, according to the source, "after she had given birth to seven unfortunate children." The Count had always been a domestic tyrant in extremis, and nothing enraged him so much as defiance of his authority, whether as parent or (observe his treatment of his second wife, Lucretia) as husband. Shelley is following his source in saying that from their earliest days he abused his children. When they were too weak to help themselves, Lucretia served them as a protector; in recent years the maturing Beatrice has assumed this office. As a result the daughter has been brought into sporadic conflict with a domestic tyrant content only with absolute power over the minds and bodies of his family.13

Because the sourcebook material is not too clear about the vengeance motive, Baker continues, it must be considered as Shelley's own refinement of the play which leaves the impression that Count Cenci's maltreatment of his children and his desire to dominate them are the result of his hatred for their mother. The first wife was wealthy, and "if the Count in those days was running true to form, he lost no time in establishing his dominance over both her fortune and her person."\(^{14}\)

In his attempt to conquer Beatrice, Count Cenci was thwarted at first by her equally strong will as evidenced by his words:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nay, hide not your face, 'tis fair;} \\
\text{Look up! Why, yesternight you dared to look} \\
\text{With disobedient insolence upon me,} \\
\text{Bending a stern and an inquiring brow} \\
\text{On what I meant.}^{15}
\end{align*}
\]

His suddenly coming into the room where she, Lucretia, and Bernardo are talking causes her to show fear, a break in her reserve that the Count maliciously enjoys:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Never again, I think, with fearless eye,} \\
\text{And brow superior, and unaltered cheek,} \\
\text{And that lip made for tenderness or scorn,} \\
\text{Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of mankind;} \\
\text{Me least of all. Now get thee to thy chamber!}^{16}
\end{align*}
\]

That he is also thinking of her mother seems clear when he immediately turns to Bernardo, dismissing him thus:

\(^{14}\)Ibid. \hspace{1cm} ^{15}\text{II, i, 105-109.}

\(^{16}\text{II, i, 116-120.}\)
Thou too, loathed image of thy cursed mother,
Thy milky, meek face makes me sick with hate!17

As soon as Beatrice and Bernardo have been dismissed, Count Cenci rounds out his "feeling of complete domestic mastery by cruelly brow-beating his second wife, Lucretia."18

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. What! It was not your counsel
That Beatrice disturbed the feast last night?
You did not hope to stir some enemies
Against me, and escape, and laugh to scorn
What every nerve of you now trembles at?
You judged that men were bolder that they are;
Few dare to stand between their grave and me.19

A strong desire for vengeance, coming from the conditions of his first marriage, therefore, seems to be another element in the motivation of Count Cenci.

Count Cenci is described in the manuscript source as an atheist, but Shelley has endowed him with a "peculiarly horrible piety,"20 writes Newman White. He always obtains Papal absolution for his sins, and he prays to God often, his perverted faith giving him a sense of protection. In the preface, Shelley gives information concerning the Italian Catholics, and this information is necessary in order that the reader may understand Count Cenci's religious habits:

17II, 1, 121-122. 18Baker, op. cit., p. 147.
To a Protestant apprehension there will appear something unnatural in the earnest and perpetual sentiment of the relations between God and men which pervade the tragedy of the Cenci. It will especially be startled at the combination of an undoubting persuasion of the truth of the popular religion with a cool and determined perseverance in enormous guilt. But religion in Italy is not, as in Protestant countries, 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. Religion coexists, as it were, in the mind of an Italian Catholic, with a faith in that of which all men have the most certain knowledge. It is interwoven with the whole fabric of life. It is adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct. It has no necessary connection with any one virtue. 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.\(^\text{21}\)

Bates says that because Count Cenci finds the representatives of religion "subservient to him in this life," he relies upon "with confidence the same treatment from the Supreme Ruler in the next."\(^\text{22}\) Bates continues:

As Cenci's sense of his own power rises, he feels more and more the closeness of his alliance with the Omnipotent. Drunk with the intoxication of command and the lust of sway, he regards the least disobedience to his will as almost equally a crime against his divine co-worker.\(^\text{23}\)

This idea of equality with God reaches its climax in the scene before the murder, when after Cenci's curse upon


\(^\text{22}\)Bates, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 67.

\(^\text{23}\)Ibid.
Beatrice, Lucretia says:

Peace! Peace!

For thine own sake unsay those dreadful words.
When high God grants He punishes such prayers.\textsuperscript{24}

And Cenci, leaping to his feet, replies, "He does His will, I mine!"\textsuperscript{25}

Count Cenci's idea of an equality with God, together with the elements that make up the motivation, places him with the monsters of fiction. Henry Sweet has said that in creating a character Shelley had only "two alternatives, either to reproduce himself or create an abstraction," and that in Count Cenci Shelley has merely combined "every imaginable depravity into one abstraction."\textsuperscript{26} But Professor Herford, on the other hand, says that Count Cenci is Shelley's first success in creating an antagonist. Jupiter is the abstract antagonist of Prometheus. But Cenci is no Jupiter, says Kurtz, and continues:

He is too varied and inventive, and yet always consistent, in his cruelty; he is not uncomplicated, for he has qualms of conscience, and is one of those strange passionate individuals who in self-deception unite evil with piety. He has one absorbing motive in his wickedness, a realistic philosophy of conduct to the effect that the strong man lives in excessive intemperance, pleasing all his desires to the uttermost, whereas only the cowardly and weak, being unable to satisfy their desires, praise temperance and justice. Moreover, his eloquence in expounding his theory is so convincing, so removed from bombast, that one feels he is

\textsuperscript{24}IV, i, 137-138. \hfill \textsuperscript{25}IV, i, 139.

\textsuperscript{26}Quoted by Kurtz, op. cit., p. 191.
driven relentlessly forward to his fate by some demonic influence. He has the dignity and awesome grandeur of one fated to perform what he does perform. He belongs in part to Greek tragedy, not wholly to Elizabethan melodrama. He is a monster under fate; not a mere renting impossible villain. He is a study in demoniac ugliness, a Gorgon without the veil of loveliness.  

A critic of the 1886 performance finds in Count Cenci about the same qualities as the reader does:

Intellectual malignity is . . . the chief feature in the terrible individuality. A cruel light burns in his eyes, the gestures are profoundly contemptuous to everything human, and there is a diabolical cynicism as well as a delight in crime for its own sake that Mephistopheles might admire. Madness lurking in the background may account for the unheard-of-horror of his actions, but the enjoyment of superiority -- social, intellectual, physical -- over those around him, seems an even stronger motive than mere delight in blood.

Dr. Wilhelm Wagner points out that there is an evident similarity between the miserly conduct of Cenci in refusing to support his sons and the attitude of Sir Timothy Shelley to the poet. Bates takes the opposite view, saying that Cenci's avarice is already fully developed in the Italian source, and in the drama "is exhibited as one of many means for the exercise of a deep hatred much unlike anything in Timothy's shuffling disposition."

The characters who align themselves with Count Cenci

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28 Quoted by Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., pp. 36-37.
29 Bates, op. cit., pp. 67-68.
are Orsino and Cardinal Camillo, representatives of the order of the priesthood. White says that in Shelley's numerous references to priests there is not one description that contains a favorable adjective.\(^\text{30}\)

Orsino, actuated by avarice and lust, is a sly, false friend to Beatrice. The nature and result of his scheming are unravelled with great skill in the following soliloquy:

\[
\text{I must work out my own dear purposes,}
\text{I see, as from a tower, the end of all:}
\text{Her father dead; her brother bound to me}
\text{By a dark secret, surer than the grave;}
\text{Her mother scared and unexpostulating}
\text{From the dreed manner of her wish achieved;}
\text{And she! -- Once more take courage, my faint heart;}
\text{What dares a friendless maiden matched with thee?}
\text{I have such foresight as answers success;}
\text{Some unbeheld divinity doth ever,}
\text{When dreed events are near, stir up men's minds}
\text{To black suggestions; and he prospers best,}
\text{Not who becomes the instrument of ill,}
\text{But who can flatter the dark spirit, that makes}
\text{its empire and its prey of other hearts}
\text{Till it become his slave . . . as I will do.}\(^\text{31}\)
\]

That Orsino is a psychologist with a criminal mind is the opinion of Sara Ruth Watson. Just as Iago, Shakespeare's villain in Othello, "gradually bends the natural proclivities of his victims to his own advantage, so Orsino realizes that he can manage the thoughts and emotions of all the Gen-

\(^{30}\text{White, op. cit., p. 143.}\)

\(^{31}\text{II, ii, 147-161.}\)

\(^{32}\text{Sara Ruth Watson, "Shelley and Shakespeare: An Adden-
It fortunately serves my close designs
That 'tis a trick of this same family
To analyse their own and other minds . . .
From the unravelling hopes of Giacomo
I must work out my own clear purposes.33

He then convinces Beatrix and Giacomo that to murder their
father would be justifiable, but he also manages to extri-
cate himself from the responsibility of the action;

I thought to act a solemn comedy
Upon the painted scene of this new world,
And to attain in 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 ruins. . . . Ha!
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, through the misleading crowd
Which judges by what seems.34

Cardinal Camillo is treated by Shelley a little more
favorably. Bates says that he is a more nearly objective
picture of the priest than any which Shelley had portrayed;
however, Camillo's weakness of "subserviency and cowardice,
his habitual refusal to face the real problems are contempti-
ble enough."35

Beatrix represents that group of people, as outlined
by Bates, who resist tyranny. He says that her type of
character was formed by Shelley at the beginning of his

33II, 11, 107-113. 34V, 1, 77-88.
"missionary period in the cause of atheism and democracy," and further adds:

From the first, Shelley associated men and women on an equality in the work of redeeming humanity from oppression, or if at any time he made a distinction, it was the woman whom he seemed to consider the more important factor. He conceived of her neither as a household drudge nor as a social belle, but as the comrade of men, fighting by his side in the struggle for freedom. His heroes, whether men or women, are hardly differentiated by qualities of sex at all. Beatrice, feminine as she is, is feminine in qualities which she has in common with Shelley. In her as in all of his heroes of humanity, whether masculine or feminine, Shelley objectified and idealized himself.36

Dr. Wagner thinks, perhaps, that the personality of Beatrice is modelled in part upon that of Mary Godwin Shelley,37 but Bates agrees with Dr. Wagner only to the extent that her "cold fidelity, clear judgment, and insight into character" were borrowed from Mary Shelley, adding, however, that "the more important qualities of Beatrice -- her courage, independence, gentleness, and poetic eloquence -- spring unmistakably from the temperament of the poet himself."38

Concerning Shelley's leading characters, Bates continues:

So, too, the normal situation of Shelley's heroes was determined by the circumstances of his own life. He was an unsuccessful reformer in an age of reaction when reform meant persecution, not success. His revolutionary heroes likewise are the victims of tyranny and conquer spiritually only at the expense of physical defeat. Without exception,

36Ibid., p. 70.
37Ibid.
38Ibid.
the touchstone of their nobility is the endurance of suffering: they all wear the robes of martyrdom. 39

Although the activity of Beatrice is more limited in scope than that of Shelley's other heroes, and she "befriends her immediate family only instead of whole nations, nevertheless she possesses the same qualities elsewhere assigned by Shelley to his savours of the world." 40

That "Beatrice Cenci is flesh and blood there can be no doubt," Kurtz maintains, and further adds that she is "neither Shelley nor an abstraction, but one of his great studies in tragic womanhood." 41

Beatrice is introduced to us in her own dignified and sincere words, revealing her character and that of Orsino:

As I have said, speak to me not 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, 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.  
And thus I love you still, but holily,  
Even as a sister or a spirit might;  
And so I swear a cold fidelity.  
And it is well perhaps we shall not marry.  
You have a sly, equivocating vein  
That suits me not. -- 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

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., pp. 70-71.
41 Kurtz, op. cit., p. 191.
Making my true suspicion seem your wrong.
Ah, no! forgive me; sorrow makes me seem
Sterner than else my nature might have been. 42

From the beginning of the play to the end, Beatrice is
portrayed as being deeply religious, but her religion does
not conform to that of a Roman Catholic. In her prayers
to God there is no mention of an intercession by the saints
or the Virgin Mary. Bates points out that the dependence
upon the ritual of litany, mass, and confession, all of
which are so prominent in the Italian narrative, is entirely
omitted by Shelley. 43 The relation of Beatrice to the
clergymen Orsino and Cardinal Camillo is not the "spiritually
subordinate relation of a Roman Catholic woman, however no-
bile, to the prelates of her church, but the English woman's
relation of free equality." 44

Beatrice looks for help to God, not to the church. In
the banquet scene she tells the guests how she has prayed
that Count Cenci might change:

I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights
And lifted up to God, the Father of all,
Passionate prayers. 45

In the first madness of her torture she is intuitively
certain, in the opinion of Kurtz, that the punishment must
be stupendous. 46

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42I, i, 14-35. 43Bates, op. cit., pp. 71-72.
44Ibid. 45I, iii, 117-119.
46Kurtz, op. cit., p. 192.
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.\(^{47}\)

Beatrice is held back by her own conscience. Baker says of her:

> When she asks herself the crucial question — "Where shall I turn?" — one wonders why she has not turned to flight. She is, of course, a prisoner in the Cenci Palace just as certainly as Tasso was a prisoner in Santa Anne; yet even if this were not so, she would have chosen to remain; her stepmother and her younger brother must have her assistance.\(^{48}\)

She thinks of suicide, but in order that other people might keep their faith in God, she rejects the idea:

\[ \text{0 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.}\(^{49}\)

Neither life nor death can give her rest. There remains recourse to law, but she realizes that people would not believe her story, and that her father's money would overbid justice:

\[ \text{Ay, lay all bare So that my unpolluted fame should be With vilest gossips a stale mouthed story;} \]

\(^{47}\)III, 1, 86-91 \quad ^{48}\text{Baker, op. cit., p. 149.}

\(^{49}\)III, 1, 95-103.
A mock, a byword, an astonishment; --
If this were done, which never shall be done,
Think of the offender's gold, his dreaded hate,
And the strange horror of the accuser's tale,
Baffling belief, and overpowering speech;
Scarce whispered, unimaginable, wrapped
In hideous hints . . . Oh, most assured redress! 50

Man's law cannot be trusted:

In this mortal world
There is no vindication and no law
Which can adjudge and execute the doom
Of that through which I suffer. 51

In order that she might not do an irrational thing in
her great grief, Beatrice again prays:

I pray thee, God,
Let me not be bewildered while I judge.
If I must live day after day, and keep
These limbs, the unworthy temple of Thy spirit,
As a foul den from which what Thou abhorrest
May mock Thee, unavenged . . . it shall not be. 52

That Beatrice believes the decision she reached concerning
a just retribution was the result of prayer is expressed in
these lines:

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. 53

Thus Beatrice, like her father, identifies her cause
with that of God, Bates concludes, but where "Genco's God
was a God of Power, hers is a God of Justice." 54 She has

50 III, 1, 157-166. 51 III, 1, 134-137.
52 III, 1, 126-131. 53 III, 1, 218-221.
54 Bates, op. cit., p. 72.
faith that God will right her wrongs, and she never wavers in her belief that the murder of her father is a sacred deed. She even asks the murderers, "Ye know it is a high and holy deed?"\(^55\) Immediately after the murder has been committed, she says to Marzio:

Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God
To a just use. Live long and thrive! And, mark,
If thou hast crimes, repent: this deed is none.\(^56\)

We have seen Beatrice in suffering, in deliberation, in decision, and in deed. With the discovery of the murder, she restates her case in defense, feeling no guilt. To the Pope's legate, Savella, she says:

Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord,
I am more innocent of parricide
Than is a child born fatherless.\(^57\)

Concerning Beatrice's frustration, brought about by society's failure to accept as sacred her act, Bates writes:

During these scenes of anguish when her soul seemed to stand before God Himself asking His approval, the world's probable opinion of her act has hardly occurred to Beatrice. With the coming of Savella immediately after the murder, she finds herself face to face with a new problem. Her act was a righteous act -- this is her deepest faith -- and the consciousness of her renewed purity makes life once more desirable; but against her suddenly arise men who call this holiest act of hers a crime. She has no reason to trust in justice at their hands; when has she ever seen them render justice? She is determined to believe that God approves her act; if he does approve he cannot let her be punished for

\(^{55}\) IV, i, 35.  
\(^{56}\) IV, iii, 54-56.  
\(^{57}\) IV, iv, 112-114.
it; and yet in her heart she knows that if she acknowledges the act she will be punished, and God's justice will be mocked. She is accused of the murder of her father, but the man she killed was no father to her. If she be sentenced, injustice will have been proved more powerful than justice, Cenci more powerful than God. Not merely her own life but her faith in the moral order is at stake. If it but be vindicated, what matter a few more torments of herself, or of Marzio, Lucretia, and Giacomo? 58

Such was perhaps the underlying psychology of the situation as it appealed to Shelley, but he did not succeed in making this clear enough for an ordinary stage production. The reviews of the performance of The Cenci in 1886 "show plainly that Beatrice's denial of her deed completely alienated the sympathy of the critics." 59 The Saturday Review of London criticized it thus:

The denial of her deed by Beatrice when in prison is wholly out of keeping with the exaltation of rage and sense of wrong by which it was inspired. As it is, she falls below herself, and no reason is given for the fall. 60

The Liverpool Courier criticizes Beatrice:

In prolonging the play after the death of Cenci the poet made a double mistake. He caused the action to drag, and he made Beatrice become a bore, if not worse. She is tedious, and, unhappily, she is unsympathetic. Her clinging to life is unheroic, and her endeavor to prove that she is innocent of the crime she prompted is specious and a failure. 61

58 Bates, op. cit., pp. 72-73. 59 Ibid., p. 73.
60 Quoted by Cameron and Frenz, op. cit., pp. 1083-1084. 61 Ibid., p. 1084.
Beatrice's denial has its effect upon the reader as well as the audience, as Baker points out:

A frequent objection to Shelley's conduct of the fifth act is that Beatrice there appears as an ignoble liar. She steadfastly denies any part in the murder of the Count, even though her associates are being tortured for information, and she displays no compunction when she imperiously compels the hired assassin Marzio to withdraw the confession which has implicated her in the crime. Since this behavior appears to contradict the notion that Beatrice embodies the spirit of good, the fifth act is held to be inconsistent with the remainder of the play.62

After first discussing the reaction that Shelley probably intended the reader to have, Kurtz then expresses the same criticism of the fifth act that Baker points out:

Like Antigone, she perceives a higher justice, and boldly asserts her duty to become its instrument. It is not so much that her father's honor demands his death, as that the unnatural crime demands an unnatural punishment, to the vision of which conventional law cannot rise. And she, in turn, is punished by law unlawfully, but not justly. The reader to whom this contention is convincing, holding her guiltless, cannot have pity for her, if pity implies sympathy with one who suffers not without culpability but beyond the measure of his guilt. He must feel, instead, an intense, almost unbearable compassion for sufferings attributable, not to any demerit in the victim, but to a stupendous misfortune. . . .

But many a reader, even if he admits Shelley's intention to produce this effect, will feel that Beatrice with all her deliberation and defense makes but a weak argument to support her right to interpret and administer the divine justice. He will find a flaw in her judgment, the result of a passion akin to her father's. He will then discover less megalomaniac, and more culpability; and compassion will yield to pity. And he may well support this criticism of her character by adducing in proof of her weakness that singular episode in which before her

62Baker, op. cit., p. 147.
judges she denies that she had even planned the crime, and disingenuously argues that if she had, she surely would not have neglected so trivial a precaution for her safety as the death of her creature, the assassin. Moreover, she shows no pity for the torture and death of Merzio, one of the assassins, but only indignation that he should have regarded her as a parricide. It would have been yet more magnanimous to have taken all the blame, immediately, as did Antigone. If she is fighting to shield brother and mother, she might well take all the responsibility to herself. It is difficult to see how the circumstances being what they are, and she being what she is, she can do other than contrive or commit the murder. But it is also difficult to reconcile her high arguments with the disingenuousness, except on the grounds of an imperfect craftsmanship that failed to realize the inconsistency.63

Bates, on the other hand, defends Beatrice's behavior:

It is probable that Shelley hardly realized the existence of this inconsistency, since, like the nobler qualities of Beatrice, it is the reflection of an element of his own character. However much we may love and reverence the general nobility and purity of Shelley's personality, it is vain to deny that he combined with an extraordinary love of abstract truth and readiness to suffer for it a considerable degree of laxity in his concrete practice.

So keenly does Shelley feel the injustice of Beatrice's situation and her right to demand aid from God that her insincerity toward the cruel world seems to him no evidence of any weakness of character. After the trial, as before, she retains her sense of perfect innocence and expectation of God's help.64

However inconsistent Beatrice may seem in some parts of the fifth act, she remains the same in her tenderness and consideration for the family. Even after Lucretia and Gisomo have confessed, Beatrice, alternating between depression and hope, comforts them:

63bid. 64Bates, op. cit., pp. 73-74.
Take cheer! The God who knew my wrong, and made
Our speedy act the angel of His wrath,
Seems, and but seems, to have abandoned us. 65

But when the news of the sentence is received, her rebellious reaction is unavoidable. At first it is her youth that rebels at the idea of physical death:

Can it be possible I have
To die so suddenly? 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; hear no more
Blithe voice of living thing. 66

Her next reaction is despair over the seemingly complete destruction of all in which she had trusted:

No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world;
The wide, gray, lampless, deep, unpeopled world. 67

The rebellion does not last long, however, and Beatrice becomes reconciled to death:

Come, obscure Death,
And wind me in thine all-embracing arms!
Like a fond mother hide me in thy bosom,
And rock me to the sleep from which none wake. 68

The sincere belief that she was justified in her deed is again expressed in her final words to Bernardo:

One thing more, my child:
For thine own sake be constant to the love
Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
Though wraped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
Lived ever holy and unstained. 69

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65V, i11, 113-116.  
66V, iv, 48-54.  
67V, iv, 58-59.  
68V, iv, 115-119.  
69V, iv, 145-149.
Beatrice is a beautiful, brave, unselfish girl, who has been subjected to a heinous crime by the fiendish hate of her father. In return, not out of a spirit of revenge, but as an act of justice, she plans and has carried out the murder of her father. Thus to satisfy the laws of the state Beatrice must die.

The minor characters aligned with Beatrice belong to the great class who are "the passive victims of oppression, representatives of that mass of mankind for which Shelley had large hopes in the future, but little respect in the present." 70

Lucretia, the stepmother, has a pleasing disposition, but she is weak and helpless. Bates says of her:

She is not animated by Beatrice's sense of justice of their deed, and in vain tries to imitate the attitude of innocence. Her morality is not a matter of her own inner consciousness, but of the external decrees of men. No intervention of God in their behalf is expected by her, and from the very fact that her religious sense is so much weaker than that of Beatrice it suffers from no shock of disillusionment. She tries to comfort Beatrice's despair, and to the very end entirely fails to comprehend the real issues at stake. 71

In the last scene of Act V, in her conversation with Giscome, Lucretia's lack of comprehension is very evident:

Giscome. Know you not, Mother...
Sister, know you not?
Bernardo even now is gone to implore
The Pope to grant our pardon.

70 Bates, op. cit., p. 77.  
71 Ibid., pp. 77-78.
Lucretia.
Child, perhaps
It will be granted. We may all then live
To make these woes a tale for distant years;
Oh, what a thought! It gushes to my heart
Like the warm blood.72

Giacomo is the same type of nonentity as Lucretia.
Practically all of his speeches in the play are complaints
about the wrongs his family has suffered at the hands of
Count Cenci, yet he has done nothing to right these wrongs.
Bates introduces the idea that in Giacomo we see portrayed
"Shelley’s conception of the despicable nature of remorse."73
After the plan of murder is presented, Giacomo is very
determined that his father must die, even declaring:
I am resolved, although this very hand
Must quench the life that animated it.74
But when Orsino tells him of the discovery of the murder,
Giacomo is struck by remorse, saying:

Alas! Alas!
It was a wicked thought, a piteous deed,
To kill an old and hoary-headed father.75

When his confession has destroyed his sister’s chance
of life, he is filled with an added remorse;

To have killed
My father first, and then betrayed my sister.76

Bernardo, the younger brother, plays an indefinite
part. In the first place, the reader is not sure just how

72v, iv, 90-96. 73 Bates, op. cit., p. 78.
74III, 11, 59-60. 75V, 1, 9-11.
76V, iii, 99-100.
old this son is, for his age "seems to vary from scene to scene in accordance with the mood and situation." He appears to be a little boy in the second act in that he is crying because his father has struck Incretia. Then he tells her how good a mother she has been to him:

0 more, more
Then ever mother was to any child,
That have you been to me.78

Again he shows his affection for his stepmother by these words:

I would not leave you in this wretchedness,
Even though the Pope should make me free to live
In some blithe place, like others of my age,
With sports, and delicate food, and the fresh air.79

Concerning this speech, Bates says:

This speech is not a natural one for a boy of any age to have uttered, but taken in conjunction with the previous weeping it does leave us with the impression of a mere child of over-developed sensibilities and cloistered delicacy.80

Yet, he further adds, "in spite of this vagueness and careless inconsistency" in the delineation of Bernardo, the affection between brother and sister is effective. It is possible that, in this demonstration of affection, Shelley was reviewing the happiness of his early associations with his sister Elizabeth.81

77 Bates, op. cit., p. 79.  
78II, 1, 8-10.  
79II, 1, 99-102.  
80 Bates, op. cit., p. 79.  
81 Ibid.
On the whole, these minor characters play an unimportant part. Hicks and Clarke think their function is to emphasize the two main characters of Beatrice and Count Cenci.

The weakness of Lucretia and Giacomo sets off the strength of Beatrice; Bernardo's youth and innocence are contrasted with Cenci's age and complex depravity, the mercenary motives of the assassins with Beatrice's devotion to justice, the cold and craven villainy of Orsino with the bold and arrogant sadism of the Count, Camillo's commiseration with the Judge's steely severity. 82

Beatrice and Count Cenci, together with the minor characters, served as the means through which Shelley was able to present a situation embodying certain abstract ideas about oppression as exerted by tyrannical parents, the corrupted church, and the letter-of-the-law state. Whatever weaknesses or inconsistencies in character or characterization may at first seem patent in the play might easily be, not a fault in Shelley's dramatic technique, but simply the result of his deep concern with the abstract conception of justice, the characters assuming a position of secondary importance in his mind.

82 Hicks and Clarke, op. cit., pp. 53-54.
CHAPTER V

STYLE

The Cenci gives to the reader a different idea of the range of Shelley's poetical ability, for mainly his productions are poems, all of which give a certain philosophy of life, either in the form of vehement rhetoric or of didactic narrative, or in impassioned lyrics. That he himself was perfectly conscious of the new form is clear from what he says in the dedication of the play to Leigh Hunt:

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. I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor, and am content to paint, with such colors as my own heart furnishes, that which has been.1

In writing The Cenci, Shelley had to deal with two opposing ideals of style. On the one hand, in that he was dealing with a more realistic work than he had before attempted, his language needed to be clear and simple enough to be understood by an ordinary audience in a theatre. In his preface, Shelley outlines this realistic need:

1Shelley, Poetical Works, "Dedication to Leigh Hunt, Esq.," p. 271.
In a dramatic composition the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another, the former being reserved simply for the full development and illustration of the latter. Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion. It is thus that the most remote and the most familiar imagery may alike be fit for dramatic purposes when employed in the illustration of strong feeling, which raises what is low, and levels to the apprehension that which is lofty, casting over all the shadow of its own greatness. In other respects, I have written more carelessly; that is, without an over-festidious and learned choice of words. In this respect I entirely agree with those modern critics who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men.  

On the other hand, Bates points out the fact that the repulsive subject of *The Cenci* made it necessary for Shelley to use language of unusual beauty to raise it to the poetical level. The following statement from Shelley's preface shows that he realized the need for idealization:

> 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.

The diction, on the whole, is dramatic; that is, it is limited mainly to the expression of present feeling, and usually it does not have imagery which the passion does not actually create. There is one lyric only, that of Beatrice,

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3 Bates, *op. cit.,* p. 82.
and it is in harmony with her and the situation, being sung after Lucretia and Giacomo have confessed. Beatrice, attempting to cheer her family, says:

Let us not think that we shall die for this. . . .
Come, I will sing some low, sleepy tune,
Not cheerful, nor yet sad; some dull old thing,
Some outworn and unused monotony,
Such as our country gossips sing and spin,
Till they almost forget they live:

Then Beatrice sings this weird song:

False friend, wilt thou smile or weep
When my life is laid asleep?
Little cares for a smile or tear,
The clay-cold corpse upon the bier!
Farewell! Heigho!
What is this whispers low?
There is a snake in thy smile, my dear;
And bitter poison within thy tear.

Imagery and description are noticeably excluded in the play; furthermore, that which is used is not very sensuous, leaving no vivid concrete pictures in the mind of the reader. Shelley's vocabulary had been early influenced by his large amount of philosophical reading, and added to this philosophical diction was his natural preference, so it seems, for an intellectual idea rather than a concrete picture. There are some beautiful passages, however, among which is the account of a rocky chasm on the road to Petrella:

Beatrice.
Two miles on this side of the fort, 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,

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5v, iii, 116; 123-127. 6v, iii, 130-137.
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 and hour, 
Clings to the mass of life; yet clinging, leans; 
And leaning, makes more dark the dread abyss 
In which it fears to fall; beneath this crag 
Ruge as despair, as if in weariness, 
The melancholy mountain yawns . . . below, 
You hear but see not an impetuous torrent 
Raging among the caverns, and a bridge 
Crosses the chasm; and high above there grow, 
With intersecting trunks, from crag to crag, 
Cedars, and yews, and pines; whose tangled hair 
Is matted in one solid roof of shade 
By the dark ivy's twine. At noonday here 
'Tis twilight, and at sunset blackest night. 7

This passage is typical of Shelley's description, for he 
saw everything through an emotional medium and as related 
to pain or death; yet his rocky chasm is a real gorge, 
fringed with cedars, yews, and pines, though he says nothing 
about the variation of shades of green in the trees. Some 
persons see color, but Shelley sees only light and shade. 
The image he creates here is enveloped in a shadowy mist, 
made up of such descriptive phrases as those in the quoted 
passage.

The line which Orsino speaks as he is meditating Cenci's 
murder and its consequences, "I see as from a tower, the end 
of all," 8 is striking for its serious and lofty idea. It is 
"the sum total of completeness." 9

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7III, i, 243-265. 8II, ii, 147.
The imaginations which Beatrice gives in many beautiful passages during her violent mental agitations are more effective when read in connection with the gross violation which caused them; yet, in the following, the pain is lessened by the frantic and impressive excuse which is given for the guilt:

Beatrice. What hideous thought was that I had even now?
'Tis gone; and yet its burthen remains here O'er these dull eyes . . . upon this weary heart!
O, world! O, life! O, day! O, misery!
Lucretia. What ails thee, my poor child? She answers not;
Her spirit apprehends the sense of pain,
But not its cause; suffering has dried away
The source from which it sprung . . .
Beatrice (frantically). Like parricide . . .
Misery has killed its father.10

Another passage of effective diction is the one in which Beatrice, having recovered somewhat from her mental agony, tells Orsino in an obscure manner about the wrong she has suffered:

Beatrice. Welcome, Friend!
I have to tell you that, since lest we met,
I have endured a wrong so great and strange,
That neither life nor death can give me rest.
Ask me not what it is, for there are deeds
Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongues.
Orsino. And what is he who has thus injured you?
Beatrice. The man they call my father; a dread name.11

Genci's angry description of the piercing light of day is striking. The imagery in this passage is typical of

10III, 1, 29-38. 11III, 1, 138-144.
Shelley's brevity in dealing with figures of speech, the personification being carried not more than one line:

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!12

The imagery used in the following passage has an effective emotional appeal. The Indicator, July 26, 1820, says there is "no passage in the modern or ancient drama in which the effect of bodily torture is expressed in a more brief, comprehensive, imaginative manner, than in an observation made by a judge to one of the assassins".13

**Messio.** My God! I did not kill him; I know nothing;
Olimpic sold the robe to me from which
You would infer my guilt.
**Second Judge.** Away with him!
**First Judge.** Dare you, with lips yet white
from the rack's kiss
Speak false? Is it so soft a questioner,
That you would bandy lover's talk with it
Till it wind out your life and soul?14

Shelley's indirect manner of describing Count Cenci's tyranny is beautifully illustrated by the words of Beatrice, when at the banquet she tries, unsuccessfully, to get the nobles to take her and her family beyond the reach of his cruel treatment:

12II, 1, 174-180.
13Reprinted by Johnson, op. cit., p. 56.
14v, ii, 5-11.
0 God! That I were buried with my brothers!
And that the flowers of this departed spring
Were fading on my grave! And that my father
Were celebrating now one feast for all!15

The figures of speech, similes, metaphors, and personifications, that make up Giacomo's soliloquy, given while he is waiting to hear news of his father's murder, though not the most striking, perhaps, show Shelley's power to develop human passion. John Todhunter says that the imagery used "produces a sensation like the awful hush that precedes a thunderstorm."16

'Tis midnight, and Orsino comes not yet.
What! can the everlasting elements
Feel with a worm like man? If so, the shaft
Of mercy-winged lightning would not fall
On stones and trees. My wife and children sleep;
They are now living in unmeaning dreams;
But I must wake, still doubting if that deed
Be just which is most necessary. 0,
Thou unreplenished lamp! whose narrow fire
Is shaken by the wind, and on whose edge
Devouring darkness hovers! Thou small flame,
Which, as a dying pulse rises and falls,
Still flickerest up and down, how very soon,
Did I not feed thee, wouldst thou fail and be
As thou hast never been! So wastes and sinks
Even now, perhaps, the life that kindled mine:
But that no power can fill with vital oil
That broken lamp of flesh. Ha! 'tis the blood
Which fed these veins that ebbs till all is cold;
It is the form that moulded mine that sinks
Into the white and yellow spasm of death;
It is the soul by which mine was arrayed
In God's immortal likeness which now stands

15 I, iii, 137-140.

Naked before Heaven's judgment seat! (A bell strikes.)

One! Two!
The hours crawl on; and when my hairs are white,
My son will then perhaps be waiting thus,
Tortured between just hate and vain remorse;
Chiding the tardy messenger of news
Like those which I expect. I almost wish
He be not deed, although my wrongs are great;
Yet . . . 'Tis Orsino's step . . . 17

Although there are many striking passages, made so by
beautiful images, emotional appeals, and indirect descrip-
tions, there are also phrases and passages containing con-
fused and unintelligible imagery. One example of not very
intelligible imagery is that of the crag which is "Huge as
despair"; 18 another is that Cenci bears

e darker, deadlier gloom,
Than the earth's shade, or interlunar air. 19

A criticism in The British Review, June, 1821, says
that the following speech of Beatrix, wildly uttered in her
reaction to the death sentence, is "metaphysical jargon in
substance, dressed out in much flautingly half-worn fin-
ergy":

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!
If sometimes, as a shape more like himself,

17III, 11, 1-30. 18III, 1, 256.
19II, 1, 189-190.
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,
And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
Scorn, pain, despair? Who ever yet returned
To teach the laws of Death's untrodden realm?
Unjust perhaps as those which drive us now,
Oh, whither, whither? 20

In the crowd of images put into one of the speeches of
Beatrice, uttered during her most agonized moments of the
play, there is neither truth nor poetic beauty. Misery like
hers is too intensely occupied with its own pain to dwell
so much on unrelated ideas. The British Review, June, 1821,
vehemently attacks these lines in saying that misery does
not cause the pavement to sink, or the wall to spin around,
or the sunshine to become black; it does not stain the heaven
with blood; it does not change the qualities of the air; nor
does it clothe itself in a mist which glues the limbs to-
gether, eats into the sinews, and dissolves the flesh; still
less does it suppose itself dead. This is not the language
either of extreme misery or of incipient madness; it is the
bombast of a declamation, straining to be energetic, and
falling into extravagant and unnatural rant. 21

Two other stylistic elements found in passages of the

20Quoted by White, The Unextinguished Hearth, p. 214;
the lines are from The Congi, V, iv, 57-74.

21Ibid., p. 215.
play are the Cockney style of burlesque and the Italian style of innuendo. For example, Beatrice and Bernardo are embracing each other, when the officers come to take them away.

Beatrice. Oh, tear him not away!
Judge. Guards, do your duty.
Bernardo (embracing Beatrice). Oh! would ye divide body from soul?
Officer. That is the headsman's business.\textsuperscript{22}

An example of innuendo is found in Count Cenci's reply to Cardinal Camillo's grave admonition, bidding him to amend his wicked ways. Todhunter says to write a speech like this without melodramatic exaggeration is an accomplishment for any dramatist;\textsuperscript{23}

Cardinal,
One thing, I pray you, recollect henceforth,
And so we shall converse with less restraint.
A man you knew spoke of my wife and daughter --
He was accustomed to frequent my house;
So the next day his wife and daughter came
And asked if I had seen him; and I smiled;
I think they never saw him any more.\textsuperscript{24}

Shelley never completely lost the characteristics of a metaphysician who had turned poet, reminds Bates, and his interest was always in ideas or emotions generated by ideas, rather than in sensations.\textsuperscript{25} Firkins adds that the remarkable thing about the abstraction of Shelley is that it is

\textsuperscript{22}V, iii, 92-95.
\textsuperscript{23}Todhunter, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{24}I, 1, 58-65.
\textsuperscript{25}Bates, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 82.
not associated with any lack of imagination, and that it is not accompanied by any high development of the logical and intellectual capacities. The element of abstraction shows itself in the structure and the style of the poems.

Shelley's feeling for time does not show itself in the temporal extension of his narratives; instead he is somewhat partial to compression, for *The Cenci* can cover, at most, no more than a few months, and its effect is much more abbreviated. The effect of his personification is different, however, for the hours become unreliable guides:

O, that the hour when present led 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!27

Firkins points out that of all the figures from nature the most frequent and the most remarkable in their frequency are those drawn from caverns or caves. Shelley's keen sense of concealment, the obscurity, and the complexity of the human mind is expressed in such imagery as is found in the following:

But a friend's bosom
Is as the inmost cave of our own mind
Where we sit shut from the wide gaze of day,
And from the all-communicating air.29

27V, 1, 5-9.  
28Firkins, op. cit., p. 37.
29II, 11, 88-91.
The lines just quoted regard the mind as a unit; in those which follow, its parts are presented as combinations or multitudes:

What is this undistinguishable mist
Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow,
Darkening each other?30

The same conception of mind is illustrated in this passage spoken by Count Cenci:

to Bernardo,

He is so innocent, I will bequeath
The memory of these deeds, and make his youth
The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts
Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb.31

In the long simile given in the description of the rock Petrelia, previously quoted, there are two parts; the rock, and the description of its moral counterpart, the despondent soul. Firkins suggests that these two descriptions ought to be mutually exclusive, each confining itself to its own field of mind or matter.32 Shelley puts the moral element in his picture of the rock by saying:

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.33

Nor does he keep the material element out of his description of the soul:

Even as a wretched soul hour after hour,
Cling to the mass of life; yet clinging, leans;

30III, i, 170-172. 31IV, i, 50-54.
32Firkins, op. cit., p. 57. 33III, i, 248-251.
And leaning, makes more dark the dread abyss
In which it fears to fall.\textsuperscript{34}

In dealing with ghosts, Shelley uses the "dim soul-curdling Teutonic idea."\textsuperscript{35} Beatrice, describing her thoughts when she is attempting to plan what should be done, says:

I, whose thought
Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up
In its own formless horror.\textsuperscript{36}

Firkins says that in this passage just quoted Shelley's thought, like that of Beatrice,
is shrouded and folded up in its own formless horror; the image cannot be exposed, tested, analyzed, but its magnificence is beyond question; it reduces to a sort of childishness the attempts of Poe, Bulwer, and others to exploit the ghost in a terror-breeding narrative.\textsuperscript{37}

In \textit{The Cenci}, Shelley's interest in effluence is shown in his use of the smile to express terror. Lucretia says to Beatrice:

You talked of something that your father did
After that dreadful feast? Could it be worse
Than when he smiled, and cried, "My sons are dead!"\textsuperscript{38}

It is the smile of Cenci that Beatrice dreads;

\textbf{Bernardo.} Oh, sister, sister, prithee, speak to us!
\textbf{Beatrice} (speaking very slowly with a forced calmness).
It was one word, Mother, 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.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{34}III, i, 252-255. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{35}Firkins, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{36}III, i, 109-111. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{37}Firkins, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{38}II, i, 35-37. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{39}II, i, 62-66.
Cenci himself seems to be aware of its malevolent effect, for in the passage telling about the man whom he wanted to silence, he says:

So the next day his wife and daughter came
And asked if I had seen him; and I smiled;
I think they never saw him any more.\textsuperscript{40}

Regardless of the imagery and abstractions used in \textit{The Cenci}, Shelley did attain a realistic style. Wordsworth's general theory of diction, to which Shelley gave allegiance in his preface, was put into practice without any of the disastrous results sometimes achieved by Wordsworth himself.\textsuperscript{41} While the majority of the words in \textit{The Cenci} are those of ordinary conversation, none of them are trite and insignificant.

Among the words that do not adhere completely to Shelley's realistic style are the poetic abbreviations found throughout the play:

\begin{quote}
Will ne'er absolve me from my priestly vow.\textsuperscript{42}
'Tis mocking us somewhat too solemnly.\textsuperscript{43}

If the lightning
Of God has e'er descended to avenge.\textsuperscript{44}
But light the lamp; let us not talk i' the dark.\textsuperscript{45}

My Lord, 'twas what she looked.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40]I, 63-65.
\item[41]Bates, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 85.
\item[42]I, 64.
\item[43]I, 72.
\item[44]III, 180.
\item[45]III, 50.
\item[46]IV, 98.
\end{footnotes}
Other such abbreviated words Shelley used are o'er, ere, wert, 'twill, and 'twere. Some of the other conventional poetic words used are:

Wouldst thou have honour and obedience
Who art a torturer? 47

Thou art unlike thyself; thine eyes shoot forth. 48

Shelley is fond of utilizing the poet's privilege of accenting the final ed, as in aged, wingèd, armèd, and veinèd. Other examples are:

Thou loathed wretch!
Hide thee from my abhorrence. 49

To hear the death of my accursed sons! 50

Shelley's adjectives are sometimes compounded into one, usually with beautiful effect:

Nor memories
Of tranquil childhood; nor home-sheltered love. 51

If so, the shaft
Of mercy-wingèd lightning would not fall
On stones and trees. 52

How slow
Behind the course of thought, even sick with speed,
Lags leaden-footed time. 53

A gold-inwoven robe. 54

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47I, iii, 148-149. 48III, i, 81.
49IV, i, 12-13. 50I, iii, 80.
51III, i, 290-291. 52III, ii, 3-5.
53IV, ii, 2-4. 54IV, iv, 83-84.
Clearness is one of the major elements of style in *The Cenci*. This is due, not only to the diction of ordinary conversation, but also to the brevity and simplicity of the sentence structure. The average length of the sentence is between two and three lines, only one in the entire play being twenty lines long.\(^{55}\) The structure of the sentence is usually simple; the few complex ones are loose, revealing their meaning with each clause. The periodic sentence, a type of sentence Shelley used effectively in *Prometheus Unbound*, is infrequently used in *The Cenci*, its use being restricted to the more declamatory passages. The inverted sentence is rarely used. Such interruptions as the parentheses and such incoherences as the anacoluthon and the ellipses are avoided.\(^{56}\) In this way, the style of *The Cenci* is characterized by its lucidity.

The sentence structure of *The Cenci* is designed mainly for effect. The theme and plot of the drama naturally promote such vehement and emphatic speeches of reprimand, appeal, command, scorn, and hopelessness, all of which Shelley handles "with a temperance that prevents monotony, and that gives to each speech its due weight of importance,"\(^{57}\) Among the devices which Shelley uses for rhetorical effect

\(^{55}\)III, i, 243-263.  
\(^{56}\)Bates, *op. cit.*, p. 87.  
\(^{57}\)Ibid., pp. 87-88.
is the cumulative repetition of phrase construction. The following two passages illustrate this device:

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.  

A priest who has forsworn the God he serves; A judge who makes Truth weep at his decree; A friend who should weave counsel, as I now, But as the mantle of some selfish guile; A father who is all a tyrant seems, Were the profancer for his sacred name.  

Another device which Shelley uses for rhetorical effect is the question. Many such examples as the following are found in the play:

It was not by your counsel That Beatrice disturbed the feast last night? You did not hope to stir some enemies Against me, and escape, and laugh to scorn What every nerve of you now trembles at?  

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?  

But sometimes Shelley perhaps overuses the rhetorical question. The response to Count Cenci to Lucretia's intercession.
for Beatrice is one rhetorical question after another, powerful at first, but a little monotonous before Count Cenci finishes his speech:

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 dungeon 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 strangle me when overcome by wine?
Seeing we had no other judge but God,
And he had sentenced me, and there were none
But you to be the executioners
Of his decree enregistered in Heaven?
Oh, no! You said not this.  

Shelley's doctrine of one ultimate principle and his intense desire for the ideal probably led to his considering every thought or object as possessed of a personality. Thus throughout his poetry Shelley interrelates abstract ideas and nature. The apostrophe is used skillfully in *The Cenci* to promote rhetorical effect in the sentences. The following passages illustrate this use:

Death! Death! Our law and our religion call thee
A punishment and a reward.  

Conscience! Oh, thou most insolent of lies!
They say that sleep, that healing dew of Heaven,

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63II, i, 130-148. 64III, i, 117-118.
Steeps not in balm the foldings of the brain
Which thinks thee an impostor. 65

A more elaborate apostrophe is shown in these lines:

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 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 tonight. 66

Just as effective as the use of apostrophe is Shelley's
use of the exclamation. In forming declarative sentences to
express intense emotion, Shelley gains more striking effect
by making of them, not simple declarative sentences, but ex-
clamatory sentences. The following passage is an example:

The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls
Spin round! ...
The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
The sunshine on the floor is black! 67

The following exclamations, in the opinion of Bates, seem
unnatural and affected: 68

Beatrice. 0, world! 0, life! 0, day! 0, misery! 69
Lucretia. 0, terror! 0, despair! 70

65IV, i, 177-180.
66I, iii, 77-89.
67III, 1, 9-10, 13-14.
68Bates, op. cit., p. 90.
69III, 1, 32.
70IV, iv, 19.
Bernardo. O life! O world! Cover me! 71

Instances of irony are found in the play, and it is used with "varying degrees of subtlety ranging from the open and repeated sneers of Cenci to the suppressed but piercing bitterness of Beatrice." 72 Cenci makes the following jeering statement:

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. 73

There is irony in these lines from Beatrice:

Ye may soon share such merriment again
As fathers make over their children's graves. 74

Thus by a repetition of phrase constructions, the interrogative sentence, the apostrophe, the exclamation, and instances of irony Shelley has given The Cenci a directness and an intensity of style that is definitely dramatic.

The Cenci is written in blank verse, and in general the rhythm is smooth. Although the play differs in many respects from Shelley's other writings, his command of melody is just as evident in this production. Alliteration is used throughout the play, as, for example, in these lines:

71V, iv, 128. 72Bates, op. cit., p. 191.
73I, i, 27-34. 74I, iii, 124-125.
Stand sheltered by a father's hoary hair? 
What, if 'tis he who clothed us in these limbs 
Who tortures them, and triumphs? What, if we, 
The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh, 
His children and his wife, whom he is bound 
To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find 
No refuge in this merciless wide world? 75

On the whole, the rhythm satisfies the dramatic requirement, 
and in addition it ranks *The Cenci* as pleasing poetry.

**Conclusion**

Finally, Shelley's life was a preparation for this 
sort of thing. The story of the Cenci, as given in the 
manuscript source, is fearful and shocking, and it recalled 
to Shelley the unhappy experiences of his school days at 
Eton and Oxford, his relations with his parents, particularly 
with his father, and his dealings with the court in the Chan-
cery suit. Here, too, was an opportunity to use the horror 
element of the Gothic romance, which he had enjoyed reading 
in his youth, and an opportunity to try out the dramatic 
principles which he had studied in the Shakespearean and 
Elizabethan dramas. Thus *The Cenci* is a product of his re-
action against the injustice inflicted upon Beatrice by 
Count Cenci, the church, and the state.

*The Cenci* is typical of Shelley's idea of escape from 
the world of reality. The subject chosen was from history, 
and the theme was far removed from universal sympathy and 
interest.

75i, iii, 101-107.
Shelley's preoccupation with abstractions and his intense passion for justice caused him to see only the pathetic quality of the victims' fate, the boundless cruelty of the oppressors, and the weaknesses of their defenders.

The play does have a well-developed plot, interesting characterizations in the persons of Beatrice and Count Cenci, and a pleasing style. The dramatic quality is intensified through beautiful imagery, effective speeches, and rhetorical sentences.

The play, however, will probably never appeal to the masses. It does not have a stage history, being rejected because of its theme and the long speeches, which Shelley found necessary to use for clearness and character development; but those who read it as a closet drama will find The Cenci to be a forceful and effective play. In its clearness and in its beauty of blank verse, The Cenci is a great piece of literary art.
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**Articles**
