

CHAPTER VII

Charles the First

‘I mean to write a play in the spirit of human nature without prejudice and passion’.¹ Thus declared Shelley when the seed of *Charles the First* were being sown in his many-splendoured fertile mind. During Shelley's stay at Pisa with Byron (August 1821- May 1822), Shelley worked on this historical play which he left unfinished. He wrote to Trelawny: ‘I am now writing a play for the stage. It is affectation to say that we write a play for any other purpose.’² The poet assumed, if completed, the play might have surpassed *The Cenci*.³

Shelley comes nearest to neutrality in *Charles the First*, at least as far as the handling of the characters and plot construction are concerned. What Shelley wrote in the preface to *The Cenci* could perhaps be applied to this also: ‘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 and wrong.’⁴

He also declared to the publishers that the play was ‘not coloured by the party spirit of the author’, but this is partly true. In his selection of material and delineation of characters, Shelley definitely betrays in the play his politico-moral concerns. At the same time it is true that the *Charles the First* is not a propaganda play either. Shelley's serious involvement in the moral issues is quite evident in this play also. His vast reading of historical accounts shows his seriousness. We agree with Cameron when he says:

The unfinished play gives the impression of a great work of art struggling to be born, like Michelangelo's captives emerging from the rock. If it had been completed on the same level on which it was begun, it might have been a play of greater power and significance than *The Cenci*.⁵

In this play Shelley tried to depart from his Elizabethan model and create a new dramatic language and form. But unfortunately the play could not be finished, perhaps due to the complexity of his material, the currents and crosscurrents of the historical forces and perhaps also because of Shelley's incomplete conception of the projected plot. But what he has left for posterity, bears ample testimony to the Shelleyan interest in the public causes and his concerns for degradation of the highly placed people from his own conception of moral stand. In fact, this play bears the stamp of his whole hearted concentration in dramatic objectivity as no other drama, except *The Cenci* does. Thus he was showing signs of his gradual maturity.

PART II

The theme struck long before he thought of the Cenci affair. He asked his wife to write the play, but Mary Shelley convinced him that only he could make such an attempt. *The Cenci* success had emboldened him and near the end of 1819 he took up the project. Till then he was vacillating: 'Unless I am sure of making something great, the play will not be written.'⁷ He thought that perhaps the composition of a play was: '...a devil of a nut... to crack.'⁸

The time was January 1822. Nevertheless, a hope lingered that after completion and if everything went according to his plans, it would be better than *The Cenci* 'as a work of art' and that he might earn pounds 150 or 200 for its copyright.⁹ In April too he could not 'seize

on the conception of the subject as a whole.¹⁰ He at last gave in to mood of despair and dropped the ideal of writing a better play than *The Cenci*:

It is impossible to compose except under the assurance of finding sympathy in what you write... I do not go on writing 'Charles the First'. Here, for the time being, the project started too ambitiously is shelved in cold storage.¹¹

As a matter of fact, he felt too unsure of the future and much dissatisfaction with the past. As a result, an unfinished play remained for posterity.

It is interesting to note that not even he refers to the possibility of a theatrical production of the play in any of the letters he wrote during the period except once in the beginning when the project took roots in his mind. Perhaps he wanted to write a good reading drama and it cannot be denied that *Charles the First* contains the germ of a true drama.

The immediate inspiration was one of Shakespeare's historical plays. His consultation of Burnett's *History of His Own Times* and Hume's *History of England* shows that he wanted to be faithful to real facts. Hume's *History* described the King and the Queen as opposites in character — one gentle and other impetuous. The historical Wentworth was somewhat a tragic figure and the jester Archy and Arch Bishop Laud are clever and practical men respectively. Thus there cannot be any wide departure from historical characters.¹²

PART III

Shelley thought to cover the period 1633-1641, which he thought was similar to his own age, struggling against the domination of the aristocrats, in the first two acts of the play. The aristocratic clique, comprising the King, William Laud, Arch-Bishop of Canterbury and Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, imposed heavy penalties and taxes that resulted in the trial of John Hampden for his flaunting the official direction. The star-chamber dictated rules

in the hope of breaking the power of parliament. The dissenters against the church of England were also being subjected to pressure, and, failing to subordinate them to the aristocratic dictators, the Church applied terroristic methods to bring the protesters to their knees, Whitelock in his *Memorials*¹³ gives some vivid description of this terroristic method (William Prynne, a puritan lawyer was fined pound 5000 and sentenced to have his ears removed and to be imprisoned for an alleged slight on the Queen, in his *Histriomastix: A Scourge of Stage players*. Due to his continuous defiance he was again tried and stamped S.L. (Seditious libeller), this time with two other offenders, John Bastwick, a physician and Henry Burton, a preacher. Shelley treated the first trial of Prynne as a dramatic event in his opening scene.¹⁴ Whitelock's detailed description of the picturesque masque also inspired Shelley in composing the opening scene as also the colourful parade of chariots.¹⁵

But Shelley gave the scene an ironic, anti-establishment twist. The grand spectacle has been exploited by Shelley in his play as a procession of protesters and massive uprising described by citizens of London. The onlookers have been shown as murmuring 'Strafford is an apostate'. Laud is 'drunken with bold and gold', the papist Queen walks 'as if her nice feet scorned our English earth'. We may note here the speech of the second citizen giving vent to the bitter venom of the people which is clothed in words that seem like poetic echoes of a social radical of Shelley's times (Spencenes, for instance):

Here is the pomp that strips the houseless orphan.

Here is the pride that breaks the desolate heart,

These are the lilies glorious as Solomon,

Who toil not, neither do they spin,— unless

It be the webs they catch poor rogues withal.

Here is the surfeit which to them who earn

The niggard wages of the earth, scarce leaves.

The tithe that will support them till they crawl

Back to her cold hard bosom. (*Charles the First*, Sc. I, ll. 155-152).

Just after the scene of masque we are shifted to a large hall in the palace. The lawyers of the Inn of court exchanged thanks with one another. Shelley significantly ignores the names of the lawyers — Sir John Finch, Mr. Gerling, Mr. Hyde, etc. as Whitelock mentions. But he brings in a group of puritan supporters, Oliver St. John being a representative of the group. Obviously Shelley wanted to express through St. John the bitter feeling of the people against monarchy. We are shown here the Queen lecturing to St. John on Prynne's conduct and she minces no words in telling him that the French type absolute monarchy is badly needed for England.

But the hateful reply of St. John characteristically bears testimony to Shelley's political views:

Madam, the love of Englishmen can make

The lightest favour of their lawful king

Outright a despot's. — We humbly take our leaves,

Enriched by smiles which France can never buy. (*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 29-32)

The establishment received the message and argued among themselves about how to handle the rebel Scots and whether to call parliament or not. Shelley here gives a telling account of the efforts of the tyrant members of the cabinet to maintain despotic rule over the discontented public at the cost of the country. They in fact take up the challenge to meet the new uprisings for democracy as they think that imposition of taxes is the rightful conventional prerogative of the establishment. They decide to meet this challenge through armed forces, if necessary. The king arrogantly says:

...that subjects

May know how majesty can wear at will

The rugged mood.

(*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 78-80)

The Queen's uppish stance and her hatred for her ordinary countryman are writ large on her supporting speech:

My dearest lord,

I see the new born courage in your eye

Armed to strike dead the Spirit of the Time.

Which spurs to rage the many headed beast.

(*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 113-116)

We are reminded of Purganax's (Castlereagh) shrewd speech before parliament in *Swellfoot the tyrant* when Strafford speaks cynically about the policy of the Government:

Fee with coin

The loudest murmurs; feed with jealousies

Opposing factions, — be thyself of none:

And borrow gold of many, for those who lend

Will serve thee till thou payest them; and thus

Keep the fierce spirit of the hour at bay.

(*Ibid.* Sc. II, ll. 160-165)

We know Shelley nursed a bitter feeling against religious tyranny and find that Laud, the reactionary and blindly religious tyrant is depicted by Shelley as a cruel vainglorious fanatic who is hell-bent for crushing the rebellious Scots:

Let ample powers and new instructions be
Sent to the High Commissioners in Scotland.
To death, imprisonment, and confiscation,
Add torture, add the ruin of the kindred
Of the offender, and the brand of infamy.
Add mutilation: and if this suffice not,
Unleash the sword and fire, that in their thirst
They may lick up that scum of schismatics.

(Ibid. Sc. II, ll. 225-232)

Laud's monstrous suggestion to raise money at the cost of the Scots for declaring war is opposed by the Queen, and Strafford's suggestion sounds seditious:

The engine of parliaments
Might be deferred until I can bring over
The Irish regiments: that will serve to assure
The issue of the war against the Scots.
And this game won — which if lost, all is lost —
Gather these chosen leaders of the rebels,
And call then, if you will, a parliament.

(Ibid. Sc. II, ll. 344-350)

Shelley's intention becomes clear when Archy, the fool, ironically and poetically, and rather in a sombre manner, expresses the hunch of a coming deluge. This he speaks to the king and the Queen, after his brief absence and shortly after the parley referred to above:

Thus Baby Charles, and the Twelfth Night Queen of Hearts, and the overgrown schoolboy Cottington, and that little urchin Laud, — who would reduce a verdict of ‘guilty, death’, by famine, if it were impregnable by composition — all impanelled against poor Archy for presenting them bitter physic the last day of the holidays.

(Ibid. Sc. II, il. 388-392)

After Archy's forced exit, the Queen again speaks in favour of the French model of Absolutism, obliquely advocating the imposition of despotic rule in England. Her speech here has a subtle reference to castigation of the Catholic Scots:

...and, as we pass

The gallery, well decide where that Corregio

Shall hang, — the Virgin Mother

With her child, born the king of heaven and earth,

Whose reign is men's salvation.

(Ibid. Sc. II, il. 463-464)

Catherine Macaulay's depiction of Charles in regard to his ruling in England for ‘four years despotically’ by usurping ‘the power raising money without the consent of the people’ and by imposing rigorous and arbitrary penalties or offences ‘not legally punishable’ reminds us of Shelley's picture of the ruler who is made to say:

My lord of Coventry,

Lay my command upon the Courts below

That bail be not accepted for the prisoners

Under the warrant of the Star Chamber.

(Ibid. Sc. II, il. 80-83)

Shelley does not forget here to slightly soften the image of Charles and makes him vacillating, and, as if, misled by his adviser. It is noteworthy that Hume's and Clarendon's picture of Charles tallies with that of Shelley:

Oh, be our feet still tardy to shed blood,

Guilty though it may be!

(Ibid. Sc II, ll. 225-232)

Shelley's sources perhaps influenced him to depict the Queen as having powerful influence over her husband.

Prynne, Bastwick, and Bishop Williams were accused of writing seditious statements against Laud, and they were tried. The Star Chamber is the backdrop. Shelley's picture of Bastwick is that of typical puritan revolutionary, fanatical in his own ways, and having a stance of hatred to his oppressors. Jaxon is depicted as a 'moderate' royalist. The speeches of Bastwick too, bring out the conflict of the age:

Bastwick : Ye grudge me not

The only earthly favour ye can yield,

Or I think worth acceptance at your hands, —

Scorn, mutilation, and imprisonment.

(Ibid. Sc. III, ll. 23-26)

Laud : Officer, take the prisoner from the bar.

And be his tongue slit for his insolence.

Bastwick : While this hand hold a pen—

Laud : Be his hands —

Jaxon : Stop!

Forbear, my lord! the tongue, which now can speak

No terror, would interpret, being dumb,

Heaven's thunder to our harm;.....

And hands, which now writes only their own shame,

With bleeding stumps might sign our blood away.

Laud : Much more such 'mercy' among men would be,

Did all the ministers of Heaven's revenge,

Flinch thus from earthly retribution. I

Could suffer what I would inflict.

(Ibid. Sc. III, II. 23-26, II. 32-44)

It may be that Shelley took suggestions from Macaulay's statements that Laud shouted 'with the utmost gall and bitterness against the unhappy prisoners whilst he magnified his own religious patience in bearing injuries' and that 'Laud whilst he was sitting in the Star chamber being told of Prynne's harangue, moved that he might be gagged'.¹⁷ This suggestion the court waived. Near the end of the act, we hear Bishop Williams is brought in and he delivers a defiant speech (as Williams later capitulated that Shelley was in two minds as to how to project him). For the fourth scene Shelley significantly echoes what Macaulay and Hume wrote about the projected flight of Hampden, Pym and Cromwell to America. This is what Macaulay writes:

The enormous, yet increasing height of monarchical tyranny which raged at this time in England, together with the small prospect of redress which the times promised, occasioned numbers of the natives to sell their estates, and to ship themselves off for America, there to enjoy a liberty lost to the inhabitants of great Britain. But these avowed destroyers of all the rights of humanity, the

bosom friend and ministers of Charles, unwilling that their fellow-citizens should anywhere possess the blessings of Freedom, prevailed with their master to issue out a proclamation, debarring the adventurous access to those uncultivated shores. Eight ships laying in the Thames, and ready to sail were stayed by an order of the council. Embarked in these were Sir Arthur Bazerio, John Hampden and Oliver Cromwell, three men of spirit, who resolved for ever to abandon a country where the laws had lost their power to protect, and fly to other extremity of the globe, there to endure a painful solitude in wild deserts, rather than submit to a government that degraded their condition beneath the condition of beasts.¹⁸

Historian Hume developed the concept of a new freedom in America unlike Macaulay, from which may have come the suggestion for Hampden's speech:

The puritans, restrained in England, shipped themselves for America, and laid there the foundations of a government which possessed all the liberty, both civil and religious, of which they found themselves bereaved in their native country.¹⁹

Obviously, Macaulay, Hume and Shelley thought that America was a land which could prove a heaven for them. Shelley's tribute to America reflects his idea of moral excellence of a country which was supposed to be free from tyranny and injustice:

Oh, light us to the isles of the evening land!
Like floating Edens cradled in the glimmer
Of sunset, through the distant mist of years
Touched by departing hope, they gleam! Lone regions,
Where Power's poor dupes and victims yet have never

Propitiated the savage fear of kings

With purest blood of noblest hearts;

(*Charles the First*, Sc. IV, ll. 22-28)

Unfortunately, the fourth scene remains fragmentary and still more unfortunately Shelley left the play unfinished as the manuscript shows nothing else except one of the notebooks which gives us some idea of the poet's design for the second act:

Act 2 Scene 1

Chiefs of the Popular Party, Hampden's trial and its effects — Reasons of Hampden and his Colleg[u]es for resistance — young Sir H. Vane's reasons:

The first rational and logical, the second impetuous and enthusiastic.

Reasonings on Hampden's trial. P. 222

The king zealous for the Church inheriting this disposition from his father.

This act to upon between the two Scotch wars.

Easter Day 1635

The reading of the liturgy

Lord Traquai'

The covenant

The determined resistance against

Charles and the liturgy —

Worse than the worse is the indecision of Mary di Medici the Queen who came to England in 1638. It was observed that the sword and pestilence

followed her wherever she went and her restless spirit embroiled everything she approached.

The King annulled at York,

Many unlawful grants; and in wh

[This is the conclusion of Shelley's plan but at the top of one of the pages is pencilled:]

Act-2

After the last Scottish war

And at the bottom:

The End- Strafford's death ²⁰

From the forgoing discussion we may have an insight into Shelley's mind, his deep hatred for despotism, monarchical tyranny, his radical humanism and also his dream of an idealistic refuge for the sensitive rebels away from moral depravation of the high and mighty.

PART – IV

The plot, as would have taken shape, has both strong and weak points. The keynote is amply sounded in the fourth scene which opens with citizens, Law students and some young men making remarks about the Masque of the Inns of court. The king, the courtiers, the revelries, and the political strategy are all displayed in their proper context. Credit must be given for this artistic manipulation of the exposition scene. The impending tragic gloom has cast its shadows before through the clash between the Masque and the Anti-Masque:

Here is Health

Followed by grim disease, glory by shame⁴

Waste by lame famine, wealth by squalid want.

And England's sin by England's punishment.

And, as the effect pursues the cause foregone,

Lo, giving substance to my words, behold

At once the sign and the thing signified—

A troop of cripples, beggars, and lean outcasts;

Horsed upon stumbling jades, carted with dung,

Dragged for a day from cellars and low cabins

And rotten hiding-places, to point the moral

Of this presentment, and bearing up the rear

Of painted pomp with misery.

(Charles the First, Sc. I, ll. 162-174)

The second scene is impressive. It shows the King and the Queen in council and all the main figures are brought before the front stage. We know about the suppressing measures and orders issued by the King which throw enough hint about the discontent prevalent among the people. The third scene is rather complicated. From the court of the Star Chamber the Archbishop Laud is seen doling out his cruel justice. At the trial of the Bishop of Lincoln he is seen gladly presiding whereas he should have been indebted to him for his first promotion. His mockery of justice adds fuel to the public discontent.

The fourth scene, though incomplete, would have shown Hampden, Pym, the young Sir Henry Vane, Cromwell and his daughter about to embark for America, being arrested by the King's orders. But the fragment of this scene consists of only one speech and Cromwell has nothing to say. Archy speaks two lines in the next fragment and then a soliloquy and a song follows:

Archy : A widow bird sat mourning

Upon a wintry bough.

Heighho! The lark and the owl!

One flies the morning and one lulls the night: —

Only the nightingale, poor fond soul,

Sings like the fool through darkness and light.

A widow bird sat mourning for her love

Upon a wintry bough:

The frozen wind crept on above,

The freezing stream below.

There was no leaf upon the forest bare,

No flower upon the ground,

And little motion in the air

Except the mill-wheel's sound.

(Charles the First, Act. I, Sc. V. ll. 3-16)

Rossetti has suggested that the Fool was to sing the song after the imprisonment or execution of Charles.²¹

The final catastrophe is to be anticipated through a number of suggestions from the beginning — i.e. the various sarcastic comments made by the citizens towards the king (ll. 102 -107), the subdued anger shown by St. John and the gentleman of the Inns of Court at the Queen's behaviour, the opposition and resentment towards the authority because of the orders, the terror-stricken Court, the utter foolishness of the advisers, the failure of the new taxes to refill Treasury, Laud's merciless so-called justice, Archy's bitter remarks, his mirth turning into bitterness, and despair — all this reminds us of Shakespeare's Fool in *King Lear* and such characters in Beddoes.

'Just and generous' King Charles rises to tragic dimension. 'Wicked Counsels' (l. 126) surround him. He marries a lady whose pride for France, 'her fatherland' is disturbing to the English. She cannot get rid of the idea of the divinity of kingship. (ll. 436-437) Charles is like 'a cat caught in a rat trap'. Proud Queen Henrietta always goads her husband to acquire power and authority. She tearfully pleads with him not to summon the parliament. She has something of a Lady Macbeth in her. The third Citizen described her thus:

Amidst her ladies walks the papist queen

As if her nice feet scorned our English earth.

The Canaanitish Jezebel! I would be

A dog if I might tear her with my teeth!

(*Charles the First*, ll. 67-70).

Shelley intended Laud, the Archbishop, to be the villain of the piece. He is extremely cruel and a hard -boiled puritan. The second citizen comments:

Rather says the Pope:

London will soon be his Rome: he walks

As if he trod upon the heads of men:

He looks elate, drunken with blood and gold:—

Beside him move the Babylonian women,

Invisibly, and with her as with his shadow,

Mitred adulterer! he is joined in sin,

Which turns Heaven's milk of mercy to revenge.

(Charles the First, Sc. I. ll. 58-65)

Strafford, however, is not that bad. True, he too urges the king to be despotic:

That which would be ambition in a subject

Is duty in a sovereign:

(Ibid, Sc. II, ll. 150-151)

He comments elsewhere:

Now if a man should call his dearest enemies

To sit in licensed judgement on his life,

His Majesty might wisely take that course. (Aside to Cottington)

It is enough to expect from these lean imposts

That they perform the office of a scourge,

Without more profit.

(Ibid., Sc. II. ll. 276-281)

He also whispers aphorisms from Machiavelli and Bacon (Sc. I, ll. 55-56). Yet his love for the King cannot be doubted:

I Own

No friend but thee, no enemies but thine;

Thy lightest thought is my eternal law.

How weak, how short, is life to pay — (Ibid. Sc. II. ll. 203-206)

He is devoted to his friend for ever —

Oh! My dear liege, take back the wealth thou gavest

With that, take all I held, but as in trust

For thee, of mine inheritance: leave me but

This unprovided body for thy service,

And a mind dedicated to no care

Expect thy safety:- but assemble not

A Parliament. Hundreds will bring, like me;

Their fortunes, as they would their blood, before — (Ibid. Sc. II, ll. 299-308)

He is mercifully just:

'twere politic and just that Williams taste

The bitter fruit of his connection with

The schismatics. But, you, my Lord Archbishop,

Who owed your first promotion to his favour;

Who grew beneath his smile — (Ibid. Sc. III. II. 55-59)

Shelley paints him like Camillo of *The Cenci* and Mahmud of *Hellas* as an even Character. The contrast between Laud and Strafford would have been a subject of great dramatic interest had the play been completed. Other characters are well defined. Some of them would look like Lucretia, Bernardo and Giacomo of *The Cenci*.

It would be wild guess to think that, if completed, the play would have been a major tragedy in which human passion would build up the plot. In point of style and manner, Shelley wrote to Trelawny, he wanted to 'approach as near the great dramatist as my feeble powers will permit' and his model was *King Lear*. In this respect *Charles the First* shows an advance over *The Cenci*. Long tiring speeches are there and Shakespearean imagery and echoes are in plenty.²² But the diction and imagery are lively and realistic language has a popular ring:

Queen: Have you not noted the Fool of late

Has lost his careless mirth, and that his words

Sound like the echoes of our saddest fears?

What can it mean? I should be loth to think

Some factious slave has tutored him.

King : Oh, No!

He is but Occasion's pupil. (*Charles the First*, Sc. II, ll446-451)

Thus Shelley's verse is at times 'very effective'²³

It is natural to be curious about the reason of his not completing the play. Some plausible guesses may be hazarded here:

The poet's dislike of Capital punishment,²⁴ his unwillingness to show that the intolerant puritans as victorious,²⁵ his lack of sympathy for the subjects,²⁶ an impossibility of seeing an idealistic denouement 'on account of the refusal of later facts to conform to the prophecy that liberty will triumph over tyranny,'²⁷ the poet's uncertainty of delivering the goods²⁸ and in his being irked by

'factual discipline',²⁹ — all these are conjectures only. But one thing is certain that Shelley did not lose confidence in his potential dramatic talent as he believed he was gifted with. In fact, the poet was gradually waking up to discover the power of his dramatic genius *Charles the First* is singularly free from the 'fantastic creations of his fancy, or his idealism.'³⁰

Peacock's views seem justified:

... if his life had been prolonged, I shall think, he would have accomplished something worthy of the best days of theatrical literature. If the gorgeous scenery of his poetry could have been peopled and strong feelings, which he was so capable of expressing, had been accommodated to characters such as have added his name to those of the masters of the art.³¹

Shelley's weaknesses as a dramatic artist are also obvious here — imitation of Elizabethan models, lack of discipline, love for lyrical flights, and self-projection. All this is due to his inexperience in dramaturgy. Excepting *The Cenci*, a stage drama in the true sense of the term, no other stagable play was attempted by him.

PART V

That Shelley suffered in his mind some moral anxiety about the *Charles the First* is quite evident in his comments in *A Philosophical View of Reform*:

From England then first began to pass away the stain of conquest.... By rapid gradation the nation was conducted to the temporary abolition of aristocracy and episcopacy, and to the mighty example, which, 'in teaching nations how to live', England afforded to the world — of bringing, public justice, one of those chiefs of a conspiracy of privileged murderers and robbers whose impurity has been the consecration of time.³²

The political slant was thus unavoidable in *Charles the First* and passage after passage can be quoted to show that Shelley was advocating through his play some parliamentary reforms and a sort of republicanism in order to remove all tyrannical rules and privileges of the high and mighty.

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