

CHAPTER IV

THE CENCI

From the universal perspective of *Prometheus Unbound* to the world of state intrigues and church politics and family feuds of *The Cenci* is a long journey through all ways – psychologically, morally and philosophically, and if we may say so, also dramatically. We can do no better than quote Sperry:

Having celebrated the triumph of love and the millennium in the purified atmosphere of *Prometheus Unbound* and its “beautiful idealisms of moral excellence”, he was now impelled to depict a far darker scene, what he described in his letter dedicating *The Cenci* to Leigh Hunt as the “sad reality” reflected in the despairing plight of a virtuous heroine pressed beyond the limits of human endurance.¹

It is said that *The Cenci* is the only play in which Shelley has made an objective approach to represent his moral concern. That Shelley had the contemporary and future stage in view is never doubted. The theme is admittedly a revolt which shocked the conservative elements of the contemporary society and also some puritan dramatists. The management of Covent Garden and Drury Lane rejected the play as they thought the theme to be ‘objectionable.’²

Controversies were raised ad infinitum as to whether the play is worth reading or staging. Nevertheless, this is the only play of Shelley and perhaps of any other Romantic dramatist, which caused a great stir among both theatre people – state managers, directors, actors and actresses – as well as the academicians.

Let us first be acquainted with the favourable opinions of some major critics or Shelley scholars, both contemporary and modern. We may start with Shelley's own opinion, as he says:

I am strongly inclined to the affirmative at present, founding my hopes on this, that as a composition, it is not certainly 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 whether in imagery, opinion, or sentiment.³

The play was praised by the well-known contemporary critics like Leigh Hunt and Byron. Hunt exclaims:

What a noble book, Shelley, have you given us; what a true, stately, and yet affectionate mixture of poetry, philosophy and human nature, and horror, and all- redeeming sweetness of intention, for there is an under-song of suggestion through it all, that sings, as it were, after the storm is over, like a lark in April.⁴

Byron, too, read *The Cenci* and appreciated it as a play of power and poetry:

You also know my high opinion of your poetry – because it is of no school. I read *Cenci* – but besides that, I think the subject is essentially non-dramatic. I am not an admirer of our old dramatists as models. I deny that English have hitherto had a drama at all. Your *Cenci* however was a work of power and poetry.⁵

Among the new Elizabethans, Thomas Lovell Beddoes in particular was one who greatly admired *The Cenci*. In Shelley's play he could see virtues that were missing from his own works. Writing to his friend Kelsall, he explodes:

Why did you send me *The Cenci*! I open my own page, and see at once what damned trash it all is. No truth or feeling. How the deuces do you, a third and disinterested person, manage to tolerate it!⁶

There are other later critics who praised the play for its technique. Swinburne significantly called it 'The one great play written in the great manner of Shakespeare's pen that our literature has seen since the time of these.'⁷ Browning, too, gave the play unbridled praise, as a youth sending his copy to Kean with the suggestion that it be produced by the Covent Garden. Macready, when in retirement, is reported to have offered to return to the stage if he could appear as Count Cenci.⁸ Another critic, St. John Irvine declared that 'Shelley had a surer sense of form than Shakespeare'.⁹ A critic even declared in *The Edinburgh Review* that:

(*The Cenci*) is altogether among those miracles of genius, which no criticism can analyse.... The imaginative faculty usually appears inborn, we know, but how the dramatic talent can be acquiesced by intuition, is an incomprehensible thing.¹⁰

The mastery of incident has been described as striking by some critics for example, Francis C. Mason says:

The mystery of the possession by a mind considered to have been purely missionary, of such skill in dramatic realism remained the most astonishing impression.¹¹

Among the later critics, K.N. Cameron and Horst Franz, in their critique, conclude: 'There seems no reason why *The Cenci* should not take its recognized place as one of the classics of the stage'.¹² Even Arthur C. Hicks and R. Milton Clarke who have collected material on the subsequent career of *The Cenci* to show how it had not been appreciated by many critics,¹³ themselves believe that Shelley's tragedy, contrary to the opinion prevalent among literary and dramatic critics, is not properly classified as a closet drama unsuited to stage production. They consider it a great acting drama, one of the very best of its kind.¹⁴

More recently, Marcel Kessle and Bert O States have observed in *PMLA*:

Let us not fool ourselves about Shelley's play: it is a valuable stage piece which can attain a certain theatrical vitality.... And become an acting play. But it will never take a place beside our esteemed stage classics, beside *Macbeth, Othello, The Master Builder, Phaedra, Oedipus et...* as acting plays of the first rank, one not subject to a peculiar and exclusive combination of circumstances, which attend its presentation.¹⁵

Stuart Curran perhaps offers the most valuable opinion regarding the value of the play:

The Cenci remains the most significant serious play of its century written in English, the single work capable, had conditions of the stage allowed its enactment, of serving as the focal points for the revival of a true poetic drama in the nineteenth century. A work of rich poetic integrity, original in form and thought, in its mythic dimensions as terrifying as *Prometheus Unbound* is reassuring. *The Cenci* is not only one of Shelley's major works, but also, what is rather a different matter, one of his most important compositions. Shelley's contemporary critics understood as much.¹⁶

But we have also to consider the fact that despite successful, if not triumphant, stage performances, dating from 1886, critics have stubbornly insisted that *The Cenci* is not to be classed as an acting play. Even each of the foremost Shelley biographers, Dowden, Peck, White, thinks in this vein.

Of the elder Romantic poets, only Wordsworth and Coleridge remained silent on *The Cenci*; probably neither of them read the play, or possibly, to Wordsworth at least, Shelley, like Byron, was a moral suspect, a teacher of dangerous doctrine, made all the more seductively dangerous by the fineness of the art by which they are conveyed.¹⁷ The more tolerant Coleridge, on the other hand, takes a somewhat middle path:

... (Shelley's) discussions – tending towards atheism of a certain sort – would not have scared me; for me it would have been a semi-transparent larva, soon to be sloughed, and through which I should have seen the true image, the final metamorphoses.¹⁸

Hicks and Clarke, mentioned that *The Cenci* was liked by the stage people but not accepted on account of the theme:

It is worthy of note that Mr. Harry of Covent Garden, the first theatrical manager to consider *The Cenci* for production was so impressed that he requested Shelley to write a tragedy on some other subject, which he would gladly accept, although he considered the theme of incest in *The Cenci* so objectionable that he would not even submit the part of Beatrice to Miss O. Neill (sic) for reading.¹⁹

Perhaps this very theme of incest led Shaw to consider the play as ‘unendurably horrible’²⁰, as much as another critic, Horace Shipp who repeats it:

The Cenci was produced with garish realism, the physical horror would be overpowering – the superhuman conflict between right and wrong, the interplay of the powers of light and darkness would be hidden behind a story of incestuous passion and sadistic oppression.²¹

But Shelley’s own biographer Newman I. White is always vehement in expressing his abusive opinion regarding *The Cenci*:

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.²²

He has also observed elsewhere:

Shelley’s *The Cenci* does indeed have the appearance of great tragedy, but it breaks down upon closer analysis. Objective as it seems to be it does not in reality get beyond the great abstract triangle of Tyrant, Slave, and Rebel which robs practically all Shelley’s plays and narrative poems of real humanity and makes him the most abstract of all the Romanticists. Wordsworth’s *The Revenge* and Coleridge’s *Remorse* all belong to a class in which psychological analysis provides the main interest. With Coleridge and Wordsworth, at least this analysis is merely the author toying with his own mental projections, and it is tinged with abnormality.²³

Considering all these opinions — favourable or unfavourable — we may say at least that in this play Shelley has tried to depict a “sad reality” as objectively as he can, despite being a Romantic poet always engrossed with his subjective feelings, in order to reflect his own moral concern.

PART II

In Shelley's dedicatory letter to Leigh Hunt, Shelley calls *The Cenci* a 'sad reality', really the play was not born out of his own imagination; there is a direct source to which he refers in his Preface:

A manuscript was communicated to me during my travels in Italy, which was copied from the archives of the Cenci palace at Rome, and contains a detailed account of the horrors which ended in the extinction of one of the noblest and richest families of that city during the Pontificate of Clement (VIII) in the Year 1599.²⁴

Mary Shelley, in her note on *The Cenci* points out the fact that Shelley was only 'twenty six' when he wrote *The Cenci*. Mrs. Shelley, however, also refers to another fact that Shelley 'asserted that he was too metaphysical and abstract, too fond of the theatrical and the ideal, to succeed as a tragedian.'²⁵

At the same time, Shelley, as this very note points out, was confident that the art of writing a drama is not too difficult to acquire: 'There is nothing which the human mind can conceive which it may not execute, Shakespeare was only a human being.'²⁶

Mary Shelley, however, also says in her note, that Shelley after finding the 'old manuscript account of the story of *The Cenci*, 'requested her to compose a play based on that account'. But she 'entreated him to write it instead and he began, and produced swiftly, urged on by intense sympathy with the sufferings of the human beings whose passions, so long cold in the tomb, he revived, and gifted with poetic language.'²⁷

About *The Cenci*, Shelley himself informs Leigh Hunt (August 15, 1819):

My *Prometheus* is finished, and I am also on the eve of completing another sort totally different from anything you might conjecture that I should write of a more popular kind, and, if anything of mine could deserve attention of high claims.²⁸

Shelley's letter speaks of an enthusiastic mood. It may be relevant here to point out that the Italian manuscript was given to him in 1818. Mary Shelley copied it from May 18 to May 25, 1818 (29). There, as we have already pointed out, lay the germs of the play. On April 22, 1819, Shelley with Mary visited the Bologna palace and saw the picture of Beatrice Cenci.³⁰

According to Mary Shelley, Shelley took up the task of writing the drama with all seriousness (a little before or on May 14) and completed it on August 20. Then he gave the manuscript to Mary for copying it. He himself took hardly three months to complete it, though in the mean time his son died: 'We suffered a severe affliction in Rome by the loss of our eldest child.'³¹

The historical accuracy of the story in the manuscript, on the basis of which he wrote the play, has since been challenged and Shelley obviously did not care to verify.³²

But he changed the spirit and the naked horrors, of course.³³ Here he is in line with Shakespeare. In plot construction, characterisation and situations Shelley depended much on Shakespearean dramatic method. There are also some traces of Webster, Ford, Beaumont, Fletcher and Middleton. Moreover, Caldéron, whom he was reading at the time, must have influenced him. Mary Shelley, though, believed that only one passage was influenced by that reading; otherwise, it was her husband's 'judgment' and originality and that went to the making of the play:

He admired Caldéron, both for his poetry and dramatic genius; but it shows his judgment and originality that, though greatly struck by his first acquaintance with the Spanish poet, none of his peculiarities crept into the composition of *The Cenci*, and which he himself alludes as suggested by one in *El Purgatorio de San Patricio*.³⁴

But E. J. Bates gives many more evidences of influences — he links old Cenci to Lodovico Eurico in Calderon's *El Purgatorio de San Patricio*³⁵ Shelley himself admits the 'plagiarism' in footnote no. 2 in his Preface to *The Cenci*:

An idea in this speech was suggested by a most sublime passage in *El Purgatorio de San Patricio* of Calderon: the only plagiarism which I have intentionally committed in the whole piece.³⁶

PART III

Shelley composed the play during the summer in a quiet country villa, situated amidst a beautiful natural environment: 'Nature was bright, sunshiny, and cheerful, or diversified by storms of a majestic terror, such as we had never before witnessed.'³⁷ In this setting, Shelley approached the subject with the objectivity of a dramatist: '...to avoid the error of making them actuated by my own conceptions of right or wrong, false or true... to make apparent some of the most dark and secret concerns of the human heart.'³⁸

The play is based on the tale of a terrific clash between the wills of the psychotic Count Cenci and his daughter Beatrice. In order to dominate his family, the Count violates the modesty of his daughter. Driven to desperation, the gentle girl conspires with her brother

and stepmother to kill the Count. For this deed they are condemned to death by the Count's friend, the Pope.

Regarding this tragic end, Shelley himself comments in his Preface to *The Cenci* rather ironically:

The Pope, among other motives for severity, probably felt that whoever killed the Count Cenci deprived his [the Pope's] treasury of a certain and copious source of revenue.³⁹

Shelley introduces his play based on this account with a Preface and a Dedication addressed to Leigh Hunt:

In this 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 talent, should illustrate mine, let us, comforting each other in our task, live and die.⁴⁰

The Cenci is a tragedy of sober pathos. Crime and heroic innocence are thrown into relief with a swift progress of action. This sad tale of grim and sordid family affairs is dramatized by Shelley in a bleak and austere style. At the same time, there is a deep and smouldering intensity of passion and a steady tragic purpose. This five-act play is full of dramatic tension and thrills. There are clashes of wills and a moving denouement, which flow from character motivations. The suspense begins from the very start when Beatrice's destiny is gaspingly apprehended. In the middle, the result of the murder-attempt is awaited with stopped breath, and the end brings the final suspenseful moment about the fate of the culprits.

However, dramatically the Fifth Act may not be a 'masterpiece' as Mrs. Shelley claims it to be⁴¹. At the same time, it must be admitted that the philosopher, the psychologist,

the poet, and the dramatist in Shelley combine here to bring about one of the most moving tragic situations ever presented on the English stage. Marzio confesses, and then withdraws, and Beatrice denies her guilt. Camillo feels pity for Beatrice and sympathy for his dead nephew and then finally the confessions of Lucretia and Giacomo — all combine to create a tumultuous dramatic impact.

In the last scene, the tying up of Beatrice's hair by her mother and that of her mother by Beatrice ring a powerful and moving pathetic note:

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.

(Act V, Sc. IV, ll. 159-165)

PART IV

Shelley's moral anxiety is reflected throughout the play, especially in the behaviour, action, and words of the chief characters. It may be noted that, compared to the characters of *Prometheus Unbound*, the characters of *The Cenci* are much more realistic. In both of the plays, Shelley deals with the theme of tyranny and persecution, but in the later play the portrayal of grim and sordid reality is too frightening. Count Cenci and Beatrice are the chief characters and their moral conflicts play pivotal roles in revealing and moulding Shelley's main proposition that it is the desperate force of moral evils that are out to destroy the gentle

and good forces in man and nature. Beatrice, the central figure, is a tragic picture of actual suffering humanity. She is such a gentle and weak victim that her torture creates an overpoweringly real atmosphere of guilt and oppression which grips the heart of the audience with awe. Regarding her moral conflict, Mary Shelley comments:

... the character of Beatrice, proceeding, from vehement struggle, to horror, to deadly resolution, and lastly to the elevated dignity of calm suffering, joined to passionate tenderness and pathos, is touched with hues so vivid and so beautiful....⁴²

From the beginning, the conflict between good and evil becomes distinct. Count Cenci admits loudly:

...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 man.

(Act I, Sc. I, ll. 81-85)

Beatrice, however, is aware of his evil element and informs Orsino:

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

(Act II, Sc. II, ll. 50-53)

We have to note him as a criminal who boasts:

Beware! For my revenge

Is as the sealed commission of a King

That kills, and none dare name the murderer.

(Act I, Sc. III, ll. 96-98)

Beatrice alone has power to defy him, and this power was generated from her honesty.

Lucretia's speech proves that she has gone on struggling against his tyranny and torture for long:

Until this hour, thus you have ever stood

Between us and your father's moody wrath

Like a protecting presence: your firm mind

Has been only refuge and defence:

(Act II, Sc. I, ll. 46-49)

But when Beatrice apprehends what her father intends to do in order to punish her, at first she hesitates to defy any more:

I was just thinking

'Twere better not to struggle any more.

(Act II, Sc. II, ll. 52-53)

However, she recovers herself and regains strength:

May the ghost

Of my dead Mother plead against my soul

If I abandon her who filled the place

She left, with more, even, than a mother's love!

(Act II, Sc. I, ll. 94-97)

Count Cenci on the other hand, suspects that she is apprehensive and becomes much more resolute in his determination to assault her physically. Beatrice, naturally, becomes wild in frenzy, despair, and abomination after the apprehended onslaught on her modesty is done:

Like parricide...

Misery has killed its father: yet its father

Never like mine ... O, God, what thing am I?

(Act III, Sc. I., ll. 36-38)

But gradually she again gains control over herself and becomes determined to take revenge:

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 lighting which avenges it...

(Act III, Sc. I, ll. 86-89)

Lucretia, in the mean time, unaware of the nature of the heinous crime committed by her father, makes Beatrice aware of the 'punishment' that he deserves:

Death must be the punishment

Of crime, or the reward of trampling down

The thorns which God has strewed upon the path

Which leads to immortality.

Beatrice, then, after some brooding, determines and says:

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.

(Act III, Sc. I, ll. 218-221)

Since then Beatrice seems to be also a cold, calculating, criminal bent on taking revenge. And therein lies the difference between her and Prometheus: Prometheus revoked his curse, felt repentant of his fury and hatred and, through his union with love, became free of his imprisonment; but Beatrice, on the other hand, became a tragic heroine. As Shelley himself puts it in the Preface to *The Cenci*, is what follows:

Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to the most enormous injuries is kindness, forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, and atonement, are pernicious mistakes. Had Beatrice thought in this manner, she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character nevertheless.⁴³

So our tragic heroine commits a 'mistake' because she is a human being, and 'to err is humane'. But Prometheus is a 'titanic' figure who represented an ideal, which human beings should try to uphold. Thus *The Cenci* remains not a lyrical drama, but a drama of tragic reality — it presented not what *should be*, but what *happens*.

Count Cenci, on the other hand, is not a person without religion. Shelley himself points out in the same Preface:

Cenci himself built a chapel in the court of his Palace, and dedicated it to St. Thomas the Apostle, and established masses for the peace of his soul.⁴⁴

Strangely enough, Shelley's Cenci thinks that God has chosen him for doing things wrong:

'Tis plain I have been favoured from above,
For when I cursed my sons they died, — Ay... so...
As to the right or wrong, that's talk... repentance
... Repentance is an easy moment's work
And more depends on God than me.

(Act IV, Sc. I, ll. 39-43)

It becomes clear that Count Cenci loves evil for its sake and for him, entertainment consists in committing crimes:

My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign
Into the hands of him who wielded it;
Be it for its own punishment or theirs,
He will not ask it of me till the lash
Be broken in its last and deepest wound;
Until its hate be all inflicted.

(Act IV, Sc. I, ll. 63-68)

His hatred of Beatrice, therefore, is generated from his evil element because she is good and able to defy his omnipotent evil power in the family:

Her corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds;

Her name shall be the terror of the earth;

Her spirit shall approach the throne of God

Plague-spotted with my curses. I will make

Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin.

(Act IV, Sc. I, ll. 91-95)

He thinks that since Beatrice is his own child, God will not forgive her for defying him. Contrary to Prometheus, who forgives Jupiter, Count Cenci curses Beatrice, and does that even on the ground of her probable motherhood:

That if she ever have a child; and thou,

Quick Nature! I abjure thee by thy God,

That thou be fruitful in her, and increase

And multiply, fulfilling his command,

And my deep imprecation!

(Act IV, Sc. I, ll. 141-145)

However, this conflict between God and evil does not consummate into the defeat of evil through love and forgiveness joined with fortitude. Count Cenci is killed in his sleep, and perhaps, this very murder, committed in order to justify the outrage committed on Beatrice, generates pity for the old villain who is not able to struggle, and faces a helpless death. It may be observed here that there is no conflict on the physical level, and the spiritual conflict between the good and the evil does not indicate that the dramatist was so sure of his end — the defeat of evil — as he was in *Prometheus Unbound*. At the same time, it must also be admitted that these two dramas are technically different, and so, naturally, the ends are shown in different ways.

After the murder of Count Cenci, Beatrice remains firm and resolute in her belief in God. Like Prometheus, she is then prepared to put up with every form of suffering. She knows that in this world of corruption and crime she will not get real justice. At times she even wavers in her faith:

The God who knew my wrong, and made
Our speedy act the angel of His wrath,
Seems, and but seems, to have abandoned us.

(Act V, Sc. III, ll. 111-115)

There is also an element of stoicism:

...I
Have met with much injustice in this world;
No difference has been made by God or man,
Or any power moulding
My wretched lot,
'Twixt good or evil, as regarded me.

(Act V, Sc. IV, ll. 82-84)

Ultimately she regains hope for divine mercy:

You do well telling me to trust in God,
I hope I do trust in Him.

(Act V, Sc. IV, ll. 87-88)

But up to the end she cannot hope for human mercy and says with a kind of cold cynicism:

Oh, plead

With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,

Blind lightning, or the deaf sea, not with man!

Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,

In deeds a Cain.

(Act V, Sc. IV, ll. 105-109)

With that resignation and resolution Beatrice accepts her destiny: 'We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well.' (Act V, Sc. IV, P. 165)

Thus, in *The Cenci*, the evil element is eradicated, but not permanently, for the real evil consists not in the image of the tyrant Cenci, who is but an instrument of the corrupted Church, which as a form of social authority enables him to carry on his tyrannical torture and, still after his death, goes on persecuting the oppressed. Beatrice's tragedy, therefore, is a tragedy of a corrupt society where money is power, and the real conflict is between the Church, the society, and the oppressed humanity. That Shelley suffered from intense moral anxiety on all these accounts is writ large in the play.

Through the unfolding of the spiritual history of Beatrice, we find Shelley at his best as a dramatist who loses his identity and still reveals his insight into the minutest workings of human soul. Mary Shelley aptly comments on this aspect of Shelley as a dramatist:

The character of Beatrice, proceeding from vehement struggle to horror, to deadly resolution, and lastly, to the elevated dignity of calm suffering, joined to passionate tenderness and pathos, is touched with hues so vivid and so beautiful that the poet seems to have read intimately the secrets of the noble heart imaged in the lovely countenance of the unfortunate girl.⁴⁵

Beatrice, though young, is able to analyse her own nature:

...sorrow makes me seem,

Sternier than else my nature might have been;

(Act I, Sc. II, ll. 34-35)

She is also capable of analyzing her father's nature:

And with this outward show of love he mocks

His inward hate. (*Ibid*, ll. 50-51)

Even Count Cenci notices her fortitude and defiance; her "fearless eyes", brow superior", "Unaltered cheek" and "that lip made for tenderness or scorn"

(Act II, Sc II, ll. 116-117)

But she is not an ideal character, not a saint, and therefore, as she commits a tragic error, i.e. takes revenge in place of forgiving the oppressor, is taken to the gallows in spite of her heroic defiance and belief that she is not guilty. Perhaps, she becomes, however, conscious of her tragic error at the end, and so, in her farewell speech to her brother Bernardo who, it seems, is left alone, helpless and miserable in the world of crime, corruption and persecution, she leaves a message for suffering humanity ; it is, in other words, Shelley's message for the future golden era:

One thing more, my child:

For thine own sake be constant to the love

Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,

Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,

Lived ever holy and unstained. And though

Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name

Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow

For men to point at as they pass, do thou

Forbear and never think a thought unkind

Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves.

So mayest thou die as I do; fear and pain

Being subdued.

(Act V, Sc. IV 11. 145-155)

Thus the tragedy of Beatrice shows what would have happened if Prometheus would not have revoked his curse and have not forgiven Jupiter. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the final speech of Demogorgon warns humanity that the evil serpent may at any time coil around Eternity. In order to avoid it mankind 'must forgive wrongs Darker than death or night' and Beatrice has unfortunately been unable to do so. Thus Beatrice becomes an erring Prometheus, a failing Prometheus, who in her farewell speech admits the value of forgiveness and thus gains a Christ-like moral triumph.

PART V

Shelley himself comments on the play's language in his Preface;

I have avoided with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry, and I imagine there will scarcely be found a detached simile or a single isolated description, unless Beatrice's description of the chasm appointed for her father's murder should be judged to be of that nature.⁴⁶

Shelley says this in his own way regarding the language he has tried to use in the play. Thus his two predecessors Wordsworth and Coleridge have also put stress on the use of the 'familiar language of men,' Shelley further clarifies his point:

But it must be the real language of men in general and not that of any particular class to whose society the writer happens to belong. ⁴⁷

Thus in imagery, passion and familiar language Shelley wanted to come nearest to men's heart:

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 assure flesh for the redemption of mortal passion...⁴⁸

Mrs. Shelley also stresses on the fact that Shelley tried to avoid 'mere poetry.' ⁴⁹ Shelley himself said further: 'I have been cautious to avoid the introducing of faults of youthful composition; diffuseness, a profusion of inapplicable imagery, vagueness, generality and as Hamlet says, 'Words, words.' ⁵⁰

As a matter of fact the dramatic quality of the style of the play, as E. S. Bates explains, consists in its balance between superficiality and suavity of imagery, the fusing of figures with the emotion of characters, avoidance of dramatically irrelevant poetry. He concludes only from example, the gravity of the expression of imagery, use of emotional epithets, etc. This quality gives lucidity, directness, and force to the style.⁵¹

Shelley's command over a wide range of dramatic expressions — from pungent irony to touching heights of lyrical fervour — is to be noted in *The Cenci*. The speech of the Count announcing the unexpected deaths of his sons contains the ring of dramatic speech. The speaker's soul in all its deeper nuances is laid bare:

You hear me not, I tell you they are dead;
And they will need no food or raiment more;
The tapers that did light them the dark way
Are their last cost. The Pope, I think, will not
Expect I should maintain them in their coffins.
Rejoice with me — my heart is wondrous glad.

(Act I, Sc. III, ll. 39-50)

Such passages are fit for stage effect. Beatrice's body, mind and soul are all groaning under her father's assault, the nature of which cannot be disclosed by her;

Beatrice: O, God, what thing am I?
...Who art thou, questioner? I have no father.
(Aside) She is the madhouse nurse who tends on me,
It is a piteous office

(Act III, Sc. I, ll. 38-42)

The murder scene closely follows Shakespearean diction and imagery – the rush of deeply studied lines unconsciously get mixed up with Shelley's own :

Marzio: ... I knew it was the ghost,
Of my dead father speaking through his lips,
And could not Kill him.

(Act IV, Sc. III. ll 20-22)

The language of *The Cenci*, is also, at places, an imitation of Shakespearean diction. But that has not become a demerit, on the other hand, as Shelley has superbly used that type

of diction to suit his drama, it has turned out a merit. K. N. Cameron's comment illustrates this point cogently;

The Cenci, with its archaisms and soliloquies strikes the reader as old fashioned in a way that Shelley's non-dramatic poetry does not. On the stage, however, these defects are lost in the dramatic movement of the play or are glossed over by audiences conditioned to the Shakespearean manner.⁵²

Otherwise, the style is marred outwardly by 'unduly long speeches and long soliloquies and lack of flashing dialogue,' and inwardly by what Leavis calls 'emphasis and insistence serving instead of realization.'⁵³

In order to refute this charge that Shelley indulges in long, philosophical speeches, we have to bear in mind that Shakespeare too, cannot help using often lengthy narrations by a single character. Even long speeches in Shakespeare have dramatic effect and they not only have action, but also help in extending the action of the play. In case of Shelley also, the poet has been able to get rid of the habit of flying high on the wings of lyrical raptures and has been able to use his command over language and narrative skill, in such way that dramatic effect is reinforced instead of spoiling it.

Mary Shelley's comments may be relevant here;

The fifth act is a masterpiece. It is the finest thing (Shelley) ever wrote, and may claim proud comparison not only with any contemporary, but preceding poet. The varying feelings of Beatrice are expressed with passionate, heart-rending eloquence.⁵⁴

Beatrice's final speech in the play justifies the comment of Mrs. Shelley. This brief farewell speech creates in the mind of the audience and the readers, a delicate balance of sympathy and ironic awareness.

...My Lord,

We are quite ready, Well, 'tis very well.

(Act V, Sc IV, ll. 164-165)

Stuart M. Sperry has also chosen this scene to point out Shelley's control over language;

Our attention is caught by the imagery of knitting and untying of Beatrice's hair, the metaphor Shelley uses throughout with great delicacy for his heroine's virginity, on which, as we have seen, the construction of her character depends.⁵⁵

On the whole, we may say that in this play Shelley's diction is conversational, bare of undue ornamentation and carefully chosen in order to suit to character and theme. The blank verse is dignified and yet flexible enough. Shelley, quite skilfully, aware of moral concern, suits his style of versification to the particular emotional tone required by the context of the play. For instance, whereas Orsino's monologue is low keyed and relaxed, Cenci's characterisation is the successful proof of his tortures ('the dry, fixed eye ball; the pale quivering lip') and it is done in the tone of compressed intensity. Moreover, again and again in the play Orsino reveals his hypocrisy by resorting to shrewd language:

Doubt not but I will use my utmost skill

So that the Pope attend to your complaint,

(Act I, Sc. II, ll. 41-42)

Shelley's keen dramatic sense helps him to create a great many situations where one character breaks into the speech of another, or where a sentence is suspended in the middle and another begins.

Stuart Curran aptly comments over Shelley's language in *The Cenci* :

The diction never requires an editorial gloss, and only in a few instances are or confronted with a convoluted syntax reminiscent of the difficult passages that abound in the nature of Shakespeare. Shelley indulges in a few poetical archaisms, but never in a new Elizabethan diction; his language is unforced and natural.... its language is vigorous and still current, a continuing testament to the efficacy of Shelley's 'Wordsworthian' conception of the language of drama. ⁵⁶

Regarding the use of imagery in the play, it may be pointed out that except Seville's dramatic entrance just after the death of Count Cenci; Shelley has used imagery that is pervasive but subtle. Usually the characters that are orally inadequate expose themselves by their choice of particular words. There is a stern irony in the model of the Greek tragedies, in the dream of Bernerdo who hopes that the Pope will one day free him from the dark halls of the Cenci palace, for ultimately he will be consigned to the galleys for life.

In fact, Shelley's technique in this play is more Greek than Elizabethan (though it is also true that the play abounds in Elizabethan and Shakespearean influences). The simplicity of structure takes its place within the context of a simplicity of style, Shelley remains within the confines of the Cenci Palace, except exposing the importance of the nobles and Camillo, until the Count has been murdered. With this view in consideration Northrop Frye comments: 'There is no tragedy of this type in Shakespeare.'⁵⁷

PART VI

The Cenci was composed at the poet's twenty seven years of age, still, we may say, it can be ranked with the historical plays of Shakespeare. In character portrayal, probe into the psychological depth of human mind, and philosophical reflection, it may even be compared to *Hamlet* of Shakespeare. Marlowe's tragedies, it is true, are more dramatic and more crowded with characters, but these perhaps lack to some extent the subtle shades of emotion and fine feelings so beautifully expressed in Shelley's tragedy. It is a well known fact that Shelley was indebted to the Elizabethans.⁵⁸

But Shelley has skilfully enough, used the Shakespearean devices and thus has made his tragedy not a mere imitation, but an original product of his creative genius. Bernard Shaw, one of the many who discuss Shelley's debt to Elizabethan models, possibly explains why *The Cenci* may be considered a great drama with certain limitations;

The Cenci... is a failure in the sense in which we call an experiment with a negative result a failure. But the powers called forth by it were so extraordinary that many generations of audiences will probably solicit to have the experiment repeated on them, in spite of the incidental tedium. And if the play be ever adequately acted, the experiments will not even be temporarily fatiguing to witness, though it perhaps may prove at one or two points unendurably horrible.⁵⁹

The question is why as a drama, which can, with predictable confidence be put on the stage in its entirety or very nearly without calling attention to broad structural faults— *The Cenci* falls far short of success as a stage play. The answer will be found in the explanation given by Shaw, quoted just now.

But Curran, who stands on another ground, explains Shelley's use of Elizabethan devices in a superb way: he meant not to copy or imitate, but to recreate in the language of his day the vigour and vitality of the Elizabethan stage.⁶⁰

In *The Cenci* Giacomo develops to a great length the similarities between the soul and a lamp. Here we find a Shakespearean influence—Othello already evolved this similitude. But this is not a matter of plagiarism, but an error of taste. Desmond King-Hale comments on this point:

Every writer, however independent, uses phrases which have lodged in his memory, and there is no disgrace in doing so in moderation, Shelley does not go beyond moderation, for less than five percent of the lines of the play are under suspicion, and even if all the Shakespearean echoes were clearly proven, which they are not, they would be only a minor flaw in a casting structure, on a level with those in *Venice Preserved*.⁶¹

Keeping this view in mind, we may point out that Shelley perhaps, after all, was not at all dependent on Webster for his trial scene, and on Shakespeare for the murder scene. Curran explains Shelley's dependence on his source in the following way:

Shelley is accurately following his source, where the murderers stay from killing an old man and Beatrice drives them to the act by vowing to do it herself if they will prove themselves such cowards.⁶²

At the same time, it may be that Shakespeare himself was inspired by the Cenci scandal. Actually Curran has held up this suggestion:

This instance of "Plagiarism" is frequently cited as the most obvious of Shelley's borrowings in *The Cenci*. Ironically, however, it may be that

Shakespeare originally borrowed the scene from contemporary accounts of the Cenci murder. Since *Macbeth* can definitely be dated shortly after the accession of James I in 1603 and *The Cenci* scandal of 1599 had gained considerable notoriety, a version of the "Relation" could easily have influenced Shakespeare. Indeed, such a course is all but taken for granted by Maria Luisa Abrasion, with May Willis, in *The Secret Archives of the Vatican*, (Boston and Toronto, (1969, p. 209) ⁶⁵

The Banquet scene of *The Cenci* has also been considered Shakespearean, but except for the feast itself, the scene develops on its own course. There is on the other hand, much similarity with the feast described by Seneca, at which Atreus served up two of Thystes' children to the king because, almost in the same way, Cenci imagines the wine to be the blood of his sons, and drinks it up in a ritualistic manner.

Shakespearean influence is present to some extent also in the great speech of Beatrice in the final scene of the play. It begins like Claudio's confrontation of mortality in *Measure for Measure*, but her reaction is also natural enough to face the sentence of death.

In general Shelley borrows from Shakespeare with a less obvious and far more effective hand than any of his contemporaries.

PART VII

Shelley's struggle to stage his play throws some interesting light on the reaction of the people who mattered in the theatre of his time. St. John Irvine argued that *The Cenci* is not a "closet drama" but a stage play.⁶⁴ Shelley himself had stage production in mind from the very beginning and wrote to Thomas Love Peacock in London:

The object of the present letter is to ask a favour of you— I have written a tragedy on the subject of a story well known in Italy, and in my conception eminently dramatic— have taken some pains to make my play fit for representation, and those who have already seen it judge favourably. What you to do is to procure for me its presentation at Covent Garden.⁶⁵

As he desired Kean and O'Neil to play the Count and Beatrice respectively, he was disappointed to know that it was impossible for Kean to play the chief male character.

Somehow Shelley felt that stark exhibition of incest on the stage would not be desirable, so he tried to lessen the actual horror of the incident: 'This story of *The Cenci* is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous; anything like a dry exhibition of it on the stage would be insupportable.'⁶⁶

He also thought that the author's name should remain incognito for the success of the play on the stage (by then Shelley had earned some infamy)⁶⁷ and wanted to print it after its rejection.⁶⁸ Then he got 250 copies printed in Italy, a reason being that his contemplated audience would be able to comprehend the theme more easily. Mrs. Shelley comments about the rejection of it Major Harris of the Covent Garden:

(Mr. Harris) pronounced the subject to be so objectionable that he could not even submit the part to Miss O'Neil for perusal, but expressed his desire that the author would write a tragedy on some other subject, which he would gladly accept.⁶⁹

Drury Lane Theatre Management also rejected the play on the ground that the story was too horrible.⁷⁰ Some later day famous actors and actresses, however like Macready Phelps and Miss Clym had coveted to play the chief roles to test their histrionic talents, when the play was actually produced on the stage.⁷¹ Much later, on May 6, 1886, *The Cenci* was produced by the Shelley Society at the Grand Theatre. It was, however, a private show. Even then, 'it was not suitable for performance.' (Alma Murray who rose to stardom by playing Beatrice thought so).⁷²

The audience on May 6 numbered about 2,400 people and included such notables as Browning, Meredith, Lowell and Sir Percy Florence Shelley, the poet's son.⁷³

The contemporary newspaper reviewers, however, thought it unacceptable.⁷⁴

The first public presentation of this tragedy took place a year before Shelley's centenary, on 16th January 1891. It was not known to the Shelley Society. It was staged by a Parisian company under the management of the poet Paul Fort in France.⁷⁵

Three weeks before the centenary, Florence Farr and a small group of actors enacted the final scenes of the play, on 14th July, 1892. It was, however, a private production.⁷⁶

After the First World War, *The Cenci* was staged many times. In November 1919, it was produced at Coburg, Germany but it was an insignificant production.⁷⁷ The Russian production of twenty-six performances, during the same season was much more significant.⁷⁸

The Cenci was performed also in Prague (June 1922) and Spain (Nov, 25, 1923).⁷⁹ It was again produced in Germany in 1924 for nine performances. It was the last in the flurry of continental performances in the early 1920's.⁸⁰

At this time in Europe many interesting productions of the play occurred, but among those the most significant one was the production by Sybil Thorndike. The play was staged at the New Theatre, London, in 1922 and in Empire Theatre in March 1926.

Stuart Curran's view regarding the stage performances of the play is worth while to mention, for it sums up its stage history in the decade of the 20's:

The 1920's had made its point, Shelley's point, the *The Cenci* was "fit for representation". In the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, England and the United States, the tragedy had succeeded on Stage — sometimes indifferently; it is true, but also sometimes very well.⁸¹

The seventeen performances in Paris, in the year of 1935 were also successful. Curran calls it one of 'the most important stage events of the twentieth century'⁸². The play was also staged in 1940 (USA) and in 1950⁸³. In 1959 *The Cenci* was professionally produced in England by London's Old Vic Company. It ran for thirty performances, from the end of April to the 6th of June.⁸⁴ All these successful stage presentations prove that this play of moral concern contains good materials.

PART VIII

The criticism of *The Cenci* reaches a certain point between praise and condemnation. Admittedly the faults of *The Cenci* as a stage play are its extremely horrible scenes, echoes of Elizabethan plays and the inwardness of the dramatist. But we must remember that, essentially, it is a poetic drama and in part comparable with the best tragic scenes of English drama. Obviously without the central vent and the deep-dyed villainy, there could be no drama in the play. Therefore, the defects are in the very nature of the plot and character. As there are many irrelevant scenes and long speeches and soliloquies, in most of the performances, we understand, these have been curtailed without affecting the dramatic interest.⁸⁵

The faults of the play are not far to seek. The main theme is not only horrible but also repulsive. The central event is made the climax, for the other impudent events like the deaths of Cenci's sons, the incest, the murder of Cenci or the execution cannot be presented on the stage. Therefore the interest shifts from action to passion and character:

My pangs are of the mind, and of the heart,
And of the soul;

(Act V. Sc. III, ll. (65-66)

Hence the moments before and after the action are emphasized. The first act is devoid of all action. There is only an analysis or exposition of the past, present and future motive of the chief characters. In the third scene only some sort of action is seen when Count Cenci resolves that:

It must be done: it shall be done, I swear!

(Act I., Sc. III, l. 178).

This scene could have been the beginning, giving a key-note to the thing about to happen and then Orsino's real designs towards Beatrice being shown. In that case the third scene would have revealed the past and set half of interest rolling towards future events. The second act too unnecessarily prolongs the anticipation for action, delaying the climax. Although Beatrice's shock at the sin committed on her brings the first scene of the third act nearer to dramatic interests, the next scenes (II and III) take them away. The information of Cenci's escape could be disclosed later. In the Act IV, scenes II and III contain much dramatic conflicts echoing Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Then the last scene of that act, showing Beatrice lying, has some dramatic element. Act V brings intense drama only after the first scene. Thus, with a few dramatic scenes, Shelley has been able to draw the praise of the most sensitive literary figures since his time.

The two chief characters are no doubt great tragic characters, but the contrasting colours are diametrically opposite. One is downright villain who believes that God is on his side. The father image in him symbolizes tyrannical power. The idealist Shelley persecuted by his father and society, has perhaps something to do with this portrayal. On the other hand, Beatrice is unconvincingly good. Like Desdemona she suffers. But whereas the Shakespearean character is a victim of falsehood which is caused by Iago's mischief and her husband's credulous nature, Beatrice, however, after being tortured, commits crime herself. She can neither narrate her persecution nor confess her share in the murder of her father. So she has to tell a lie. Shelley was at a fix to bring the solution artistically or in the least plausible way. Drama of course suffers. The problem with the spectator or the reader will be how to accept sympathetically a suddenly turned shameless liar as a character of tragic dimension. Macbeth's tragic decline is accountable and he never loses our sympathy. Beatrice does not admit of committing the crime: in that case she should have clarified why she does not think so. She may think herself justified in her action but she should have confessed it.

Another dramatic flaw lies in the portrayal of the minor characters. They seem fibre-made to serve a limited purpose. Lucretia has to help the heroine in undergoing her suffering and the readers or spectators to feel the evolution, in her character. Giacomo lacks initiative and joins the conspiracy at the motivation of Orsino and Bernerdo has no individuality. Thus these three almost passive characters just serve the purpose of chorus. Orsino's hypocritical self analysis in soliloquies delays action and hence makes dramatic interest suffer. The judges are sternly just. Pope and Cardinal Camillo, in spite of being humane, cannot help Beatrice. The characters in *The Cenci* represent as expected Shelley's well-known division of mankind — 'Tyrant, slave and rebel'.⁸⁶

There are some other demerits like slow action, too many long speeches and frequent scene changing, soliloquies which are perhaps more than required, though they do not sound monotonous.

But, above all, we have to remember that since it is a poetic drama, it is fated to have these faults. Here Shelley lays stress on moral degradation as an inherent weakness in the sensual aspect of man. He saw the story as prominently a work for the stage and felt that he had to try to be realistic, as he says, he 'endeavoured as nearly as possible to represent the character as they probably were.'⁸⁷

St. John Irvine ignores these faults and comments: 'Shelley had a surer sense of form than Shakespeare.'⁸⁸

Perhaps, he noted that *The Cenci* was probably the first tragedy by a Romantic dramatist, presenting psychological analysis and characterization. Shelley himself remarks regarding the play:

[It was] 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 the produced by such a development.⁸⁹

We may take into consideration Curran's comment in this respect: this play is a psychological study whose focus is Beatrice, the Romantic Everyman with whom we identify and in whose defeat we are forced to see our own.⁹⁰

Though the play was not accepted by the contemporary stage, Shelley himself was optimistic regarding its fate:

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 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 in imagery, opinion or sentiment.⁹¹

Stuart M. Sperry, the Harvard Shelley scholar, analyses the play against its contemporary background, and praises it eloquently, in spite of all the demerits. Nonetheless *The Cenci* remains the most stage-worthy and dramatically effective play composed in the Romantic period in England, a play that has been mounted in recent memory by London's Old Vic Company with considerable success.⁹²

PART IX

The Cenci remains a dramatically effective play, because it raises powerful and impelling moral issues that disturb people in all ages. The awful revelations of the monstrous heart of Count Cenci, the hopeless agony and desolation of Beatrice staggering from her transitory error to stoic resignation and a patient waiting for the ultimate to come are all reflected vividly in the play. Her calm resignation, perhaps in a way symbolises the triumph of good over evil. It is a representation of the suffering and patience of humanity, its agonies without ecstasies.

But the intrigues of state and church centred on the family Circle of *The Cenci*, raises a particular ethical problem. Shelley's argument with Thomas Jefferson Hogg as to the reconcilability of law with morality may be cited here to throw light on Shelley's moral concerns, Shelley denies Hogg's assertion 'that it is a duty to comply with the established laws of your Country' and considers the motives of Sophocles' Antigone who is the dearest archetype for his own Beatrice. Shelley's letter for that raises the most perturbing question: But the question is, is Antigone immoral? Did she wrong when she acted in direct violation of the laws of a prejudiced society? ⁹³ At the end of the letter, Shelley clearly stated that 'political affairs are quite distinct from morality.'

This moral problem, the potential opposition between uncompromising idealism and practical expediency, is the very issue presented in *The Cenci* within a deeply moving situation. The fundamental issue is: is Beatrice justified in planning the murder of her father, according to the dictates of her conscience and in adopting violent means to relieve both her family and herself of an insupportable tyranny?

Shelley, as a dramatist, as we have already seen in his Preface, prepares the readers for this dilemma:

Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in his manner she would have never been a tragic character.⁹⁴

This passage points out the moral imperative which Beatrice violates in carrying out the murder of her own father. On the other hand, the practical reality of her situation is that isolated by the political corruption of the society, Church and state that surrounded her and the action of her father, she seems to have not other way than to adopt the very violent means of her torturers.

Shelley thus deliberately centres this drama on an ethical issue. Despite the Preface putting forward an ideal of human forbearance the action proceeds and the play raises a fundamental question: is there no limit to what Beatrice must put up with?

Carlos Baker and Robert F. Whiteman think that though Beatrice acted as a brave and desperate human being, she was wrong.⁹⁵ There are, however, some modern critics, among whom is Stuart Curran, who think that as Beatrice had to act within a corrupt universe, she should not be judged in terms of simple ethical grounds. He comments:

That peace

Which sleeps within the care of the heart's heart

(V. ii, 124-125)

is the moral fabric on which she founds her life, the traditional Christian morality by which man is redeemed from evil through love and in which at its simplest level God rewards the good and punishes the evil.... Cenci bends his efforts towards Beatrice's moral fabric, and she struggles for its preservation as for life itself.⁹⁶

After celebrating the conquest of love in *Prometheus Unbound* and its 'beautiful idealisms of moral excellence', Shelley was now compelled to depict a darker scene of 'sad reality' which portrays an honest and noble lady pressed beyond the limits of human endurance.

It seems that the ordeal of Beatrice tries to dramatize the actual possibility of failure. Her characterization is easily conceived as of two distinct parts. In the first two acts she is an innocent young girl, and that part of her character is contrasted with the mature avenger of the last three. But though the contrast is there, Shelley has not let it remain static. Actually the play is a tragic record of her progressive disillusionment with Orsino, with her father, with the world, with God.

Curran compares Beatrice with Cordelia on the ground of coldness and thinks that Beatrice's 'coldness' has ample cause.⁹⁷ After the sexual assault, symbolically she is compelled to become a part of the evil she has so long defied. Her father thus violates the very core of her moral system. That is why she is then asking not for more vengeance, but for retribution, for the re-establishment of moral values through the destruction of her father, who is to her then nothing but an incarnation of Evil itself.

The arrival of Savella, the Legate of Pope, with a warrant for moments after the commission of the murder is, no doubt, an ironic event. This event may be interpreted in two ways. It may indicate that had she only waited with patience, the course of justice would have

been taken out of her hands. On the other hand, it may point out the absurdities of a cruel and illogical world in which Beatrice is punished for the execution of which the society has ordained too late.

Thus this unexpected arrival again raises an ethical issue. In *Prometheus Unbound* also, Shelley has created an ironical situation. The truth of the prophecies trust in necessity and the ultimate triumph of the good, and Shelley points it out in the drama that in order to be delivered of his bondage, Prometheus has only to summon his spirit of determination and perseverance. And the same time, it is true that although he can be sure of the end of his torture he has no way of knowing its extent. It is not easy for him to persevere for reaching the end, without the means to fix the destined hour and the manner of his liberation. If, after long defiance his endurance would have yielded the fatal secret to Jupiter and just after that he would have discovered that the promised liberation was at hand, it would have been a tragedy also for Prometheus, as is the case with Beatrice. Thus *The Cenci* represents the undoing of an honest but human heroine, failing to uphold the Promethean ideal. She fails on account of two kinds of pressures the external pressure of the force of oppression and the internal one of her vulnerable human nature. Thus it seems that Beatrice fails because she is less fortified and less determined than Prometheus.

Curran, however, tries to justify Beatrice, pointing it out that she 'Kills for the sake of justice', that she kills 'not out of revenge, but imperative self defence.'⁹⁸

We may say that Beatrice is ultimately to be judged by the standard dramatized in *Prometheus Unbound* and reaffirmed in the Preface to *The Cenci* — the principle of forbearance and non-violence. Towards the end of the play, Beatrice goes on lying to the judges and mercilessly compels Marzio to retreat his confession and embrace death on the rack. Thus in adopting the violence of her father, ironically she becomes in a way her father's

child, through she was not so at the outset of the play. The Count somehow seems to triumph as he corrupts her soul, her deeper integrity, by inducing her to believe that she can escape injuries that appear to her intolerable only through taking revenge by violent means, thus becoming identified with her own father whom she detests. The ultimate tragedy of Beatrice is that she is either unable or unwilling to see that she has been morally perverted.

We should turn to Shelley's Preface for his statement on the moral issue:

It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification; of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification: it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.⁹⁹

The paradox of the play is that we sympathise with Beatrice, as she defies her father, and also at the end when she prepares herself for execution in complete conviction of her own innocence, and that the same time we are compelled to recognize that she has taken recourse to her father's violent means.

The tragedy of Beatrice is that she has erred, has lost the ability to judge her own situation, has committed an act of 'retaliation' and thus has become guilty of a 'pernicious mistake'. And we are placed to condemn and pity her at the same time.

To Shelley, hope is to cardinal virtue necessary to generate resolution for waiting the promised hour of liberation from the characters of the Tyrant. But in *The Cenci*, Beatrice in her sorrow, anguish and, despair, considers hope as 'the only ill' 'worse than despair.' (Act V Sc. IV, ll. 97)

Her singular triumph in the face of despair is to accept the meaninglessness of the external world without relinquishing the meaningfulness of her internal values. She is at last prepared to die in peace with herself, 'fear and pain/Being subdued.' (Act. V., Sc. IV. ll., 155-156) Thus her greatest moment as a moral being consists in the calm reaffirmation of her belief in the good her father and the Pope sought to shatter, a reaffirmation by which she greets death committed to a meaning the universe denies to man.

We have already referred to the weakness of the minor characters in the play, which is not merely accidental. As *The Cenci* offers a study of the conflicting nature of good and evil, Shelley brings these minor characters to explain, how it is that good men are defenceless when confronted by evil and how they impotently watch the destruction of the ideals of beauty, truth and justice.

To Beatrice, the conflict of the play is between good and evil. She believes, and we also find so, that she fights for survival in a confrontation of good and evil. But the Count Cenci who believes in God, but does not care either for good or evil, reduces the confrontation to a personal level where it is merely a struggle of wills. He wants to restore the strength of his old and failing personality through the spiritual destruction of his daughter. He is having an undaunted struggle with morality in which he wants to be victorious. He can obtain his end only through the total subjection of his daughter to him.

Curran considers the Count as a grate Romantic hero and compares him to Faust and Manfred. He comments: 'Together the three forms a trinity of demigods, of overreachers seeking to expand the limits of human endeavours.'¹⁰⁰

We may sum up the ultimate failure of Count Cenci in this way — this romantic overreaching and craving for a negative absolute, like Faust's and Manfred's is doomed to failure, to utter ruin and decay which tries to destroy the sheer goodness of Beatrice who triumphs in the long run with her calm and stoic acceptance of death.

PART - X

This tragedy of humanity becomes a heart-rending tragedy of the highest magnitude. Shakespeare nearly always ended his tragedy with a hopeful note, but Shelley's tragedy ends with a conflict between the means and the end unresolved. At the end of Hamlet's tragedy there is Fortinbrass with his broad shoulders — but in the tragedy of Shelley there remains Bernardo — a mere, delicate boy. And this, perhaps, is significant in regard to Shelley's own wavering faith, — none too sanguine — about the future of humanity. Perhaps he felt that the world must wait for a Prometheus before it is liberated from the appalling tyranny, which was grinding life, faith, and hope out of man in his own age. Thus in this play Shelley has been successful in making a fusion of actual reality and a human problem of eternal significance.

Shelley's aim was clear. He himself tells in his Preface that he wants 'to make apparent some of the most dark and secret corners of the human heart'.¹⁰¹ In order to do that he was aware that he should '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 moral deformity from which they spring. There must also be nothing attempted to make the exhibition subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose. The highest moral purpose aimed at the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in

proportion to the possession of which knowledge every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant and kind. ¹⁰²

Further, in the dedicatory letter to Leigh Hunt, Shelley points out the fact that here he has not taken the role of a propagator: 'I lay aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor, and am content to paint, with such colours as my own heart furnishes, that which has been'. ¹⁰³

Mrs. Shelley also in her note on the play refers to another letter in which Shelley says the same thing:

It is written without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions, which characterizes my other compositions; I have attended simply to the impartial development of such characters, as it is probable the persons represented really were, ... ¹⁰⁴

In spite of all these admissions, Shelley's philosophy is not to be missed in the action of the play.

The Cenci represents a conflict between external moral directive and inner moral sense. Shelley is a romantic rebel who believed that persecuted humanity will ultimately reach a point in the golden age and at the same time he was uncertain about the means to attain this end. In his *Prometheus Unbound* the hero is delivered from his bondage and mankind is freed from its shackles, through human minds' union with forgiveness generated from the spirit of love. *The Cenci* is a later work where Shelley has become more mature and his experience in the mean time has perhaps compelled him to realize that the conflict with bitter reality is the fate of every idealist rebel. Beatrice therefore is a rebel who is not delivered of her bondage to attain and enjoy a millennium. On the other hand, she leaves Bernardo alone to fight against the evil, corruption and persecution. Shelley's dream of

millennium, as represented in the earlier drama, has an elevating inspiring value, at least for the idealists. *The Cenci* carries a far more important significance — it warns the dreamers and the rebels that it is not so easy to bring the millennium that even the brightest, gentlest and most innocent rebel may even have to face the worst in reality, in course of fighting against the evils of the world.

Thus we find that throughout the play Shelley is not only disturbed by the potency and mystery of evil, but he is also concerned about the means by which evil could be, if not eradicated, confronted.

What Art Young, a recent critic says about *The Cenci* is significant enough:

In *The Cenci* Shelley identifies with the persecuted who in their attempt to create a better life turn to violence. But despite his sympathy with suffering humanity he maintains the perspective of a non-violent philosopher when the struggle becomes violent. Violence in reality does not accomplish the goals of those who better this world, and it can never be condoned morally. Yet Shelley in *The Cenci* imaginatively communicates his empathy with the suffering and frustrated men and women who bravely and determinedly combat evil, and who through a lack of wisdom turn to violence.¹⁰⁵

In *The Cenci* Shelley imaginatively portrays the 'sad reality' of innocence corrupted and deluded and the tragedy of Human potential unfulfilled. That is why *The Cenci* will go on carrying a message for the innocent humanity so long the mankind will have to put up with oppression and exploitation. The revolutionaries of the world still dream of a world free of corruption, injustice and slavery. *The Cenci* bears a warning for them, makes them aware of the impending danger awaiting their conflict with the evil system of society.

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