

**Pure Women in a Blighted World:
Protesting Rape Culture in *The Cenci* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles***

By

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Approved:

You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything... Grab 'em by the p—y. You can do anything.

—Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States, 2005

[What] are called advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition—a more accurate expression, by words in *logy* and *ism*, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries

—Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 1892

Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments..... | iii |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1..... | 5 |
| Not Just In Her Head: “Mental Theater,” Rape Culture, and Social Protest in Romantic Drama | |
| Chapter 2..... | 20 |
| Living Ever Holy and Unstained: Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Protest Against Rape Culture in <i>The Cenci</i> | |
| Chapter 3..... | 37 |
| No Law Known to Nature: Nature’s Subversion of Rape Culture in <i>Tess of the d’Urbervilles</i> | |
| Epilogue..... | 55 |
| Bibliography..... | 57 |

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Introduction

In 2005, future President Donald J. Trump uttered a series of appalling—if illuminating—comments about himself, his fame, and his perceived sexual entitlement. “It’s like a magnet,” he claimed. “[I] just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything...”¹ He boasted that his wealth and stature permit him to treat women however he so desires; women’s desires, it seems, are either immaterial or assumed to be aligned with his own. These comments ignited a political firestorm after resurfacing during the 2016 presidential election. A number of politicians from Trump’s own party denounced his statements, and some even went so far as to demand that he leave the presidential race. In the end, however, none of it mattered. Donald Trump became President, riding into office on the support of the conservative establishment, middle-class Americans, and even evangelical Christians. In the minds of these voters, Trump’s abuse of women proved to be less important than the various social, economic, and cultural concerns that aligned them with him as a candidate. Trump and his indiscretions could be tolerated; Hillary Clinton, or whatever she represented, could not.

Donald Trump’s election is therefore a perfect example of what feminist theorists call “rape culture.” Often defined as the cultural normalization of sexual violence, “rape culture” describes the broad range of norms, beliefs, and practices that permit sexual violence to survive in modern societies.² The term “normalization” does not mean that a rape culture embraces sexual violence as a positive good, *per se*. Instead, the term “normalization” suggests that a rape culture sees sexual violence as intrinsic to human nature—an

¹ David A. Fahrenthold, “Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005,” *Washington Post* (Washington, D. C.: October 8, 2016), accessed March 14, 2017.

² Debra Guckenheimer, “Rape Culture,” in *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*, ed. Claire M. Renzetti and Jeffrey L. Edleson (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), accessed November 17, 2016.

undesirable feature, perhaps, but nevertheless an ineradicable one. A rape culture therefore minimizes sexual aggressors' responsibility for their actions. It might argue that the aggressor did not know better and needs time to mature, or that the aggressor's victim tempted him into assaulting her, and that as a result she bears some of his moral burden. Punishments for sexual assault might be lenient compared with other major crimes; a court might demand an unusual degree of proof before convicting someone of a sexual offense. The end result remains the same. A man (or, on rare occasions, a woman) suffers few consequences for an indefensible act that threatens the wellbeing and reputation of an innocent person, and those who would hold him accountable are ridiculed for fighting an impossible battle against human nature.

Most scholars would state that the term "rape culture" originated in either 1974 or 1975, depending on how one interprets the semantics. The concept of rape culture, however, predates the term. Texts like *The Cenci* (1818) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891-2) precede modern feminism in their delineation of how the social order elevates men above women, permitting powerful men to abuse women at their leisure, and even to perpetrate sexual assault. These texts dramatize how some women come to perceive this violence as normal; the social order plants its doctrines in their minds, constricting their moral imagination. Such dramatizations act as potent political weapons. *The Cenci* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* subject us to the emotional trauma that sexual assault survivors experience, so that we can empathize with their plight. Their vivisection of rape culture is of immense significance to today's political environment, which is perhaps more preoccupied with eradicating sexual violence than ever before, and in which an avowed sexual predator holds the world's most prominent political office.

The origins of rape culture, as a concept, lie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the well-known writings of such Romantic (and proto-Romantic) visionaries as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Schiller, Victor Hugo, and *The Cenci*'s author, Percy Bysshe Shelley. These philosophers, dramatists, and poets articulated profound anxieties regarding the influence of social structures on human evil—and Thomas Hardy, author of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, channeled those same anxieties into his work, although he lived much later. The modern conception of rape culture could not exist without these Romantic pioneers, who developed a political and philosophical language that lets us de-naturalize and de-normalize sexual violence. In Romantic and post-Romantic literature, we find critiques of rape culture powerful enough to rival anything in modern literature, despite the two centuries that modern literature has had to refine its approach.

One might object to categorizing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, first published in 1891, as a Romantic text. 1891 does not fall within one of the timeframes thought to demarcate the Romantic era: from the late eighteenth century to the 1820s in Germany and the United Kingdom, and (by some accounts) from the 1830s to the 1850s in France and the United States.³ Yet writers now identified as “Romantic” held chronological distinctions like these in low regard. Victor Hugo, the iconic French Romantic, suggests as much in the preface to his drama *Cromwell* (1827), in which he explains his theories of literature's evolution. “[We] have in no wise pretended to assign exclusive limits to the... epochs of poetry,” he writes, “but simply... set forth their predominant characteristics.”⁴

³ The question of proper Romantic periodization remains unsettled and often debated. For a selection of these debates, please see Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Heritage of Rousseau* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); and Susan Wolfson, “Our Puny Boundaries: Why the Craving for Carving up the Nineteenth Century?” *PMLA* 116, no. 5 (October 2001): 1432-41.

⁴ Victor Hugo, “Preface to ‘Cromwell’” (1827), in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1917), 53, accessed December 21, 2016.

Hugo contends that each “epoch” or period of literature possesses its own “predominant characteristics,” shared similarities in mindset that Hugo will later term an epoch’s “germ.” These epochs lack fixed historical limits, so that one epoch’s germ might abide for centuries. It therefore does not matter, from Hugo’s perspective, that *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* takes the form of a Victorian novel. What matters is that *Tess* possesses a Romantic germ; the novel’s character, not its publication date, ought to determine its categorization.

To that end, this thesis’s first chapter will locate the “germ” of a Romantic protest against rape culture. It will discuss how the Romantic period’s most radical political and philosophical theories tended to manifest in its dramatic literature, where those theories sometimes helped to empower a critique of rape culture. This thesis’s second chapter will explore how this radical Romantic framework functions in the context of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci* (1818). It will illuminate that drama’s searing indictment of rape culture, while also addressing the drama’s more frustrating aspects. This thesis’s third and last chapter will then consider the influence of Romantic protest on Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891-2). It will demonstrate that Romantic literature informs *Tess*’s critique of patriarchal structures, and underlies *Tess*’s compassionate, weaponized portrait of its heroine. A brief epilogue will conclude this thesis, revisiting Romantic literature’s ambitions to find what, if anything, it offers to our present moment of challenging cultural and political turmoil.

Chapter 1

Not Just in Her Head: “Mental Theater,” Rape Culture, and Social Protest in Romantic Drama

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* dominated stage and page alike in the 1850s United States and Great Britain. It confronted readers with slavery’s injustices, revitalized the abolitionist movement, and proved particularly well suited to the Victorian theater: eleven London stage adaptations appeared within nine months of the novel’s publication.⁵ Yet *Uncle Tom’s* adaptations tended to excise its most daring plot elements, deeming them too outrageous for stage representation.⁶ London audiences almost never witnessed Simon Legree’s rape of his female slaves, although in the novel this abuse provokes Tom’s final, fatal act of resistance. Such details, as one reviewer complained, were “more melodramatic than natural.”⁷ Thus *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* survives in the popular imagination as a powerful melodramatic parable, one with obvious historical interest despite its troubling racial politics. Who notices its searing condemnation of sexual violence, and of the social, political, and cultural processes that normalize that violence? *Uncle Tom’s* prescient depiction of rape culture was overlooked in the 1850s and is still overlooked today, notwithstanding today’s surging interest in how sexual assault intersects with toxic social structures.

In overlooking the sexual politics of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, critics overlook its potential as a protest against rape culture—an oversight that affects a range of Romantic and post-Romantic texts. Erika Gottlieb, for instance, faults Romantic drama as a whole for addressing issues at “an almost exclusively cosmic, metaphysical level.” She claims that

⁵ Hazel Waters, “Putting on ‘Uncle Tom’ on the Victorian Stage,” *Race & Class* 42, no. 3 (January 2001): 29-48. 31.

⁶ Waters, “Putting on ‘Uncle Tom,’” 43.

⁷ Waters, “Putting on ‘Uncle Tom,’” 45.

Romantic drama does not convert its existential dilemmas into “socially and psychologically valid human interaction.”⁸ Meanwhile Daniel P. Watkins echoes Marxist critics like G. V. Plekhanov and John Fekete, who bemoan that “bourgeois” Romantic literature wants to “escape... the sordid realities of social life,” not to abolish them.⁹ Alas, Gottlieb and Watkins’s critiques do inadequate justice to Romantic dramatists like Friedrich Schiller,¹⁰ Victor Hugo, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Those dramatists created an influential literature that doubles as an instrument of social protest; they did not flinch from “sordid realities” like sexual assault. Their dramas aimed to instill in their audiences a heightened moral awareness, empowering them to alter the social order.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s concern for rape culture therefore aligns it with such Romantic dramas as *The Robbers* (1781) and *The Cenci* (1818), which both touch upon how social norms make excuses for sexual violence. In these dramas, a curious meld of heroic individualism and melodrama produces a stirring social protest, one that targets injustices both within and without our minds. After all, rape culture serves as a mental weapon, persuading sexual abusers of their ultimate innocence while isolating and shaming sexual assault survivors. Here, interior consciousness complements social consciousness; Schiller’s and Shelley’s wild, melodramatic subjects mirror our wild, melodramatic world. Their dual emphasis on our social environment and its psychological consequences forces

⁸ Erika Gottlieb, *Lost Angels of a Ruined Paradise: Themes of Cosmic Strife in Romantic Tragedy* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1981), 153.

⁹ Quoted in Daniel P. Watkins, *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993), 5.

¹⁰ It is somewhat contentious to treat Schiller as a Romantic dramatist, given that his first dramas are more often associated with the *sturm und drang* (“storm and stress”) movement. How much difference is there, however, between *sturm und drang* literature and Romantic literature as a whole? The *sturm und drang* movement earned its name for its radical aesthetics and politics, which defied conservative norms regarding both art and life. Romantic literature shares its spirit and mission; the chronological and categorical distinctions between the movements are more the invention of later scholars than of the actual writers involved. To judge for oneself, please see Helga Stipa Madland, “Sturm und Drang,” in *Encyclopedia of German Literature*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), Vol. 2, 1922-4.

us to confront the social pressures that besiege a sexual assault survivor's psyche. These dramas anticipate modern analyses of sexual violence in their demand that we resist rape culture in our lives and extirpate it in the world around us.

This Romantic crusade against sexual violence centers on the figure of the protagonist. The Romantic protagonist often manifests either as a liberator who strives to overthrow the established order, or as a moral anachronism who recalls us to a more ideal state of being. Schiller's Karl von Moor¹¹ epitomizes the first type; Stowe's Tom represents the second, although he mingles both. In either case, as James D. Wilson explains, the Romantic protagonist embodies a set of transformative values that have almost disappeared from the world:

Impatient and disillusioned with his debased and philistine social order, and imbued with a Rousseauistic faith in the innate goodness of the natural man, the Romantic artist frequently turns to the transcendent hero to express both disgust with existing civilization and hope for a future order based on the values inherent in the nature of his hero.¹²

Wilson's definition is useful, if general. The quintessential Romantic protagonist, like Karl von Moor or Tom, occupies the social order's margins, observing its structures and institutions from the outside. The social order denies these outcasts, slaves, and revolutionaries power and compassion; the Romantic protagonist struggles against the social order's fixed hierarchies, hoping to find justice in an unforgiving world. As a result, a marginalized person like Tom disregards the world's judgments, and instead retreats into his or her own "nature." That "nature," at least, bears no sign of the social order's corrup-

¹¹ From *The Robbers* (1781).

¹² James D. Wilson, "Tirso, Molière, and Byron: The Emergence of Don Juan as Romantic Hero," *The South Central Bulletin* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1972): 246-48, accessed July 31, 2016, 247.

tion. One's intuitions reflect an untainted standard of right and wrong in which the Romantic protagonist can trust.

Written at the height of American Romanticism, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrates how the Romantic protagonist's intrinsic virtue makes a political protest more effective. Harriet Beecher Stowe introduces Tom as "an uncommon fellow... steady, honest, capable... sensible, pious."¹³ Even slaveholders recognize his sterling character; Simon Legree, who orders Tom's execution, does so in part because he resents the slave's superior moral worth. Despite the "peculiar institution" that encloses him, Tom's "self-denying, suffering love" shines forth. It causes him to flout his master's will, to aid Legree's mistress and would-be rape victim in their escape to freedom, and to refuse to disclose their whereabouts under torture. To *Uncle Tom's* original, white readership, Tom's actions would have suggested that one's intrinsic virtue—one's personhood—survives even the worst social environment. His goodness would have appealed to those readers' sympathies, but it also would have forced them to denounce how the social order punishes the virtues that it ought to reward. After all, Tom does nothing in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but refuse to partake in evil. It is intolerable that such a refusal should result in his death. Tom's plight asks: how could the United States excuse slavery and the rape of enslaved women when basic human compassion condemns it?

Other Romantic dramas frame issues of sexual violence using this same method. They oppose our emotions to the social order's convoluted self-justifications, compelling us to choose between them. The choice is not a difficult one. The assault survivor's idealistic veneer invites us to sympathize with her; we want to align ourselves with this up-

¹³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Jane Fagan Yellin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

standing, well-intentioned woman, not distance ourselves from her. Her virtue shames the social order, which appears dishonest for maligning an innocent victim to save its own reputation. Most people would change the world to accommodate the Romantic heroine; few would change the Romantic heroine to accommodate the world. Percy Bysshe Shelley predicts this sympathetic response in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). “The functions of the poetical faculty¹⁴ are twofold,” he writes: “...it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; [and] ...it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.”¹⁵ When Romantic drama critiques sexual assault, Shelley would argue, it causes us to become disgusted with its ugliness—synonymous with injustice, given Shelley’s Platonizing equation of “beautiful” and “good.” In the idealized sexual assault survivor, we find a superior pattern of virtue for us to imitate. Hence these dramas push us to produce what they present as most pleasing: a world in which no one victimizes sexual assault survivors, and in which no one views sexual violence as normal, inevitable, or acceptable.

When the protagonist is herself a survivor, a Romantic drama can also empower rape culture’s real-world victims. An actual sexual assault survivor, like the Romantic protagonist, must defend against structures and institutions that see her as responsible for her aggressor’s actions. She, too, must trust in her moral instincts even as authorities neglect her pain, question her truthfulness, or belittle what she has suffered. As a result, an actual sexual assault survivor could take inspiration from the Romantic protagonist to

¹⁴ Please note that *A Defence of Poetry* describes most forms of creative production, including religion and politics, as “poetic” in nature.

¹⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” (1821), in *The Major Works: including Poetry, Prose and Drama*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 685.

avoid crumbling before the social order. The Romantic protagonist has learned not to ignore his or her conscience; he or she does not accept that the social order knows best. Shelley's *The Cenci*, for instance, could give the sexual assault survivor some much-needed perspective, helping her to understand her internalized shame and reminding her that the social order, not herself, deserves her contempt. Meanwhile, the protagonist's idealism aligns sexual assault survivors with "the beautiful and the good," making it harder for survivors to view themselves as in the wrong. In such dramas, rape culture's victims encounter a literature that values them.

These dramas could not uplift sexual assault survivors, however, without contrasting sexual assault survivors with the social order, the dramas' venomous portrait of which brings rape culture to life. In the Romantic dramas considered here, the protagonist seems stranded in a fallen world, where amoral self-interest has replaced selfless virtue, and socio-political constraints have buried the human spirit. If this world sometimes seems too "metaphysical," as Erika Gottlieb contends, this does not mean that it ignores realistic social and political dynamics. It keeps its focus on the moral corruption inherent in societal institutions—in states that regard conscientious objectors as traitors, as in Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers*; or in Churches that build their kingdoms in this world, as in Schiller's *Don Carlos* (1787). These dramas suspect the social, political, and economic structures that shape societal thought and action, believing them to value nothing but power and self-preservation. The social order represents the last, best stronghold of evil, over which the noble Romantic protagonist must triumph to survive.

It is frustrating, then, that so few critics credit Romantic dramatists' interest in their social environment. A few comments, taken out-of-context and misread, seem re-

sponsible. George Gordon, Lord Byron writes in a letter, “I want to make a regular English drama, no matter whether for the stage or not, which is not my object—but a mental theatre.”¹⁶ It does not matter that Byron was not offering a programmatic thesis on Romantic drama. The term “mental theatre” convinces critics like Gottlieb that Romantic drama is an insular affair, disconnected from the world outside one’s mind, which does not care whether it has a public impact or not. Even Romantic drama’s defenders underestimate its investment in politics. For instance, Alan Richardson praises Romantic drama’s interest in the “politics of consciousness,” and describes Romantic dramatists as “deeply suspicious of a consciousness isolated from social relations.” But he then ignores the connection between one’s mind and one’s social environment, elaborating upon how Romantic drama represents the mind without discussing the former.¹⁷ *The Cenci* becomes about “the tragic limits of self-consciousness,”¹⁸ not rape culture and its influence on sexual assault survivors. Is it therefore surprising that most critics would dismiss Romantic drama as, on the whole, ephemeral and apolitical?¹⁹

Yet one of the earliest Romantic dramas, Friedrich Schiller’s *The Robbers* (1781), shows how well some Romantic dramas weave socio-political detail throughout a text, the better to depict rape culture circumscribing its characters’ lives. Exiled due to his brother’s machinations, Karl von Moor wanders in the Germanic wilderness, gathering a band of followers with whom to battle the state. Karl wants to end the state’s oppression, punishing its cold, Machiavellian opportunism. His comrade Spiegelberg, however,

¹⁶ George Gordon, Lord Byron, letter to John Murray, August 23, 1821.

¹⁷ Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 3-5.

¹⁸ Richardson, *A Mental Theater*, 100.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that this misperception might derive in part from the questionable distinctions made between the *sturm und drang* and Romantic movements (see note 9). Those distinctions enable critics to see the *sturm und drang* movement’s radical politics as non-Romantic, and to characterize the resulting narrowed class of “Romantic” literature as apolitical.

mocks this idealism, and perpetrates the sort of violent sexual offenses that already permeate the culture:

We went from cell to cell, taking the clothes from one after t' other, ending with the Mother Superior... You should have seen the panic, the poor dears feeling for their knickers in the dark, and the shindy they created when they found the devil had made off with them... I dragged more than a thousand talers'-worth out of that convent, not counting the fun of it, and my lads left their calling-cards, as they'll find in nine months' time.²⁰

This monologue illustrates, in one brutal anecdote, how rape culture works. Karl's robbers subject the nuns to sexual humiliation, stealing their clothing and forcing them to appear naked before men. Spiegelberg perceives this incident as comical, narrating it with obvious relish and inviting his companions to imagine it for themselves: "You should have seen the panic..." It does not matter to the robbers that the nuns endured theft and rape—the loss of their livelihoods as well as their sense of self-worth. To them, the women's pain qualifies as good "fun." Thus *The Robbers* makes vivid a world in which men treat women like sexual objects that have no value beyond satisfying men's sick pleasure. *The Robbers* skewers this social order; it compels us to reject it and its foul culture as deplorable.

At the same time, Schiller's disgust with sexual assault is not nihilistic. His work channels a meliorist paradigm that conceives of evil, including sexual violence, as a repairable socio-cultural problem. Jean-Jacques Rousseau elaborates upon this paradigm in his 1750 *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, in which he describes "nature" as our ideal

²⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *The Robbers*, in *The Robbers; Passion and Politics*, trans. by Robert David MacDon-ald, 2nd ed. (London: OberonBooks, 2005), 90.

state of being. “One cannot reflect on morals, without taking delight in recalling the image of the simplicity of the first times,” Rousseau exclaims: “It is a fair shore, adorned by the hands of nature alone, toward which one forever turns one’s eyes, and from which one feels oneself moving away with regret.”²¹ In Rousseau’s understanding, people once lived together in humble, harmonious collectives. The social order’s refinements then muddied the distinctions between virtue and vice, making deceit and distrust possible. Yet Rousseau believes that we might recover this ideal state. “Are not [virtue’s] principles engraved in all hearts,” Rousseau asks, “and is it not enough to learn [virtue’s] Laws, to return into oneself and, in the silence of the passions, to listen to the voice of one’s conscience?”²² *The Robbers* vilifies the social order to remind us that the social order silences our conscience, subordinates us to authorities, and forces us to respect artificial codes. Schiller affirms that the social order will not save us unless we first transform it.

That axiom comports well with modern critiques of rape culture. After all, anti-rape activists cannot ascribe sexual violence to a defect inherent to human nature: to do so would undermine their mission. In such a world, a sexual aggressor would be acting in accordance with his instincts—not against them—when he assaults a woman. It would be imperative that he represses those instincts, but it nevertheless would be unfair to condemn his failure in too stringent terms. No one, in the end, has the power to alter his or her nature. In attributing evil to the social order, however, a dramatist allows us to envision sexual violence as an *unnatural* phenomenon, one that we might correct. We have the power, as well as the obligation, to reform our socio-political institutions, creating a world devoid of sexual violence.

²¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “First Discourse,” trans. Victor Gourevitch, in *The First and Second Discourses: Essay on the Origin of Languages*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 18.

²² Rousseau, “First Discourse,” 27.

This vilification of the social order marks a radical departure from the neoclassical dramas that preceded dramas like *The Robbers*.²³ Neoclassical drama characterizes evil as an aberration—what happens, that is, when a person does *not* submit to the social order. The state appears in contrast as a noble guardian of the common good, the leaders of which punish vice and reward virtue.²⁴ Thus, in George Frideric Handel’s 1725 opera *Giulio Cesare*, Cesare murders Tolomeo for attempting to rape Cornelia. This social order, at least, does not apologize for sexual violence. Yet few critics hold neoclassical drama in high regard; its most-used descriptors include “dry,”²⁵ “wooden,” “artificial,” and “mannered.”²⁶ Its attempts to reconcile us to the social order come across as naïve or disingenuous, unable or unwilling to recognize its imperfections. Romantic drama, at least, might be more honest. As Schiller puts it, “actuality is contrasted with the highest reality as falling short of the ideal.”²⁷ His dramas do not depict an “ideal,” sanitized universe, from which the dramatist has removed the least blemish. In emphasizing the imperfection of human institutions, Schiller and his compatriots urge us not to be complacent about our world, where the social order often does nothing to fight evil.

Most Romantic dramas therefore undertake a transformative mission, one that need not flinch from the world’s sordid realities. Shelley’s comments on drama in *A Defence of Poetry* conclude with this call-to-arms:

²³ Indeed, *sturm und drang*’s original purpose—and the Romantic movement’s original purpose, insofar as one exists—was to shatter neoclassical art’s moribund aesthetic and political conventions. See note 9; also Madland, “Sturm,” 922.

²⁴ See Susan Staves, “Tragedy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830*, ed. Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89.

²⁵ R. L. Montgomery and R. Greene, “Tragedy,” in *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, and Clare Cavanaugh, 4th ed. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012), accessed June 4, 2015, 1451.

²⁶ Stuart Curran, *Shelley’s “Cenci”: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 99.

²⁷ Friedrich Schiller, “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry,” trans. Julius A. Elias, in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller and Goethe*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 197.

The drama, so long as it continues to express poetry, is as a prismatic and many-sided mirror, which collects the brightest rays of human nature and divides and reproduces them from the simplicity of these elementary forms, and touches them with majesty and beauty, and multiplies all that it reflects, and endows it with the power of propagating its like wherever it may fall.²⁸

Drama, in Shelley's figuration, operates like a "prismatic and many-sided mirror," gathering, refracting, and reflecting the human condition. The dramatist selects his or her subject matter from the raw, "elementary forms" of human behavior, and—like a jeweler with an uncut diamond—polishes it until it glitters. Thus the rough, unattractive stone of experience becomes a beautiful dramatic poem, shimmering with moral resonances that we otherwise might not have observed. His ideal drama enables us to transform ourselves; it "propagates" in its audience the same benign understanding that it extends toward its characters. If we watched a Romantic drama with an open mind, Shelley thinks, we would internalize the Romantic protagonist's drive to improve his or her world, and recognize our need to fight pain, oppression, and sexual violence. Shelley dares us to revolutionize the world in which we live and suffer.

What happens, however, when the Romantic protagonist ceases to be an unambiguous moral paragon? In *The Robbers*, Karl might desire to undermine the state, but his followers' misdeeds, as well as his failure to restrain them, implicate Karl in the state's corruption. He aims to curb the Church's political influence—a commendable goal, except that his followers exploit it to humiliate, rob, and rape innocent nuns. He also labors to sabotage state officials, hoping to weaken the state's control over local communities, but his vigilantes do so by sacking villages and slaughtering their helpless inhabitants.

²⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," 685.

Karl's robbers regard compassion as alien to their abortive rebellion; Karl, too, expresses some skepticism about how to reconcile his revolution with fine feeling. He spurns his lover Amalia while she begs him to abandon his mission, explaining, "A great sinner cannot change."²⁹ When Amalia then threatens to kill herself, Karl murders her—a last reminder that, in *The Robber's* violent world, a woman's will remains subject to a man's power. How ought we to interpret such misbehavior? Does the rogue protagonist subvert the drama's protest, or does the protagonist's deviance contribute additional dimensions to the drama's critique?

These questions become more pressing if the rogue protagonist is a sexual assault survivor. When a dramatist depicts sexual assault survivors in more ambivalent terms, she risks reinforcing cultural prejudices against them. A survivor who succumbs to despair could contribute to the belief that women never recover from sexual violence. A survivor who murders her rapist—like Beatrice in *The Cenci* (1818)—could strike her audience as an avid participant in the violence against which she rages, and become alienated from them. To be sure, the latter reading does not account for these dramas' extenuating circumstances; Beatrice believes, with good reason, that the authorities will never punish her father (who is also her rapist), and sees murder as the sole solution left to her. Nevertheless, we must consider how the audience might perceive the heroine's actions, and how their perception will affect the drama's protest against rape culture. If the dramatist gives the audience reason to doubt the heroine's virtue, then the audience could condemn her conduct, jeopardizing the drama's desire to change their minds.

To address our concerns, these problematic dramas return our focus to the social order's baleful influence. *The Cenci* in particular holds social pressures like rape culture

²⁹ Schiller, *The Robbers*, 162.

responsible for the protagonist's failures. Percy Bysshe Shelley suggests as much in his preface to the drama, where he blames "circumstance and opinion" for its tragic denouement. The term "circumstance" captures well Romantic drama's lethal intermingling of accident and design, which ensnare the heroine in the social order's malign web. Meanwhile "opinion" denotes the collective judgment of a culture—a judgment that, in this case, indicts Beatrice for her father's crimes. Shelley contends that these forces contributed to the trauma of the Count Cenci's assault; circumstance and opinion "thwarted" Beatrice's innocent "nature," precipitating her descent into reckless violence.³⁰ This explanation absolves Beatrice of patricide by attributing her decision to her social environment. If Beatrice has committed an evil act, *The Cenci* argues, then the fault lies with rape culture. The heroine's failures therefore affirm a critique of rape culture. Dramas like *The Cenci* ask that we rid the social order of evil before worrying ourselves over one woman's flaws.

In other words, certain Romantic dramas—in particular, those with tragic denouements—shift their moral burden onto the audience. They insinuate that we might fix our broken world, although the protagonist could not. Karl models this process in the scathing self-condemnation that closes *The Robbers*:

Fool that I was, I thought I could make the world a better place through terror, and maintain the rule of law through breaking it. I called it Vengeance and Right. I challenged Providence, wanting to smooth the jagged edges of her sword and equalize her partiality, but—childish vanity!—I now stand at the outer edge of a

³⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, in *The Major Works: including Poetry, Prose, and Drama*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 315.

life of horror, and realize, with weeping and gnashing of teeth, that two men such as I could flatten the whole moral structure of the world.³¹

Karl characterizes his rebellion as a terrorist enterprise that brought more “terror” to oppressed people than it did freedom. He erred, he claims, in striving to “maintain the rule of law through breaking it.” Instead of constructing a viable alternative to the social order, Karl and his followers appropriated the state’s own destructive tactics, as if he could “smooth the jagged edge of [Providence’s] sword” with another lethal weapon. Karl’s idealism congeals into “horror” as he realizes that such strategies could never save his world; his methods would plunge it into the same chaos and violence from which he sought to rescue it. Yet Karl does not direct this speech at his followers, whose anger he ignores. Nor does Karl utter this speech for his personal benefit, since he afterwards consigns himself to the authorities. Karl instead directs this speech at us, his audience, the sole people who could learn from his insight. He castigates his failure so that we might understand, and avoid, his fate.

This shift in the moral burden performs just as vital a role in dramas that focus on sexual assault survivors. The individual sexual assault survivor, like most individuals, lacks the power to demolish the social order. She only gains that power when other people gather around her as a collective, combining their influence with hers to fight rape culture. This struggle transcends one person. Although some sexual assault survivors might wither beneath the social order’s harsh glare, others will not; nor will all of the survivors’ allies cave to socio-cultural pressure. Despite the failures of the few, dramas like *The Cenci* insist that we must still pursue “the beautiful and the good.” The heroine’s

³¹ Schiller, *The Robbers*, 164.

failure ought to outrage us, but it also ought to inspire us to succeed where these flawed, heroic women could not.

Thus two components often found in Romantic drama—a mistrust of the social order, and a corresponding faith in heroic individualism—combine to advance a transformative vision, one that upholds the world’s potential for positive change. That vision lends itself well to a critique of sexual violence. It blames the existence of sexual assault on patriarchal structures that we, as individuals and as an aggregate, have the potential to abolish. It affirms sexual assault survivors’ moral innocence—and if a sexual assault survivor fails to maintain that moral innocence, it regards them with compassion, not condemnation. It understands that patriarchal structures create a rape culture hostile to our minds as well as our bodies, and it does not judge anyone for succumbing to those structures’ formidable pressure. This vision manifests itself throughout Romantic literature, although it perhaps finds its fullest expression in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci*. *The Cenci*’s benign, radical presence vindicates the claims that Shelley makes for all of Romantic drama: that it is a drama of the “highest order,” and that it brings us closer to nothing but the “highest” motives in our nature.

Chapter 2

Living Ever Holy and Unstained: Percy Bysshe Shelley's Protest Against Rape Culture in *The Cenci*

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* (1818) is perhaps the most prominent Romantic drama in English—the one text in which the Romantic theater still speaks in our own tongue. Algernon Charles Swinburne, reflecting his era's consensus, proclaimed it “the greatest tragedy written in any language for upwards of two centuries.”³² ³³ More recent critics continue to hold *The Cenci* in high esteem. According to William Jewett, *The Cenci* models how we might develop a subversive political rhetoric, as well as how the social order seeks to invalidate that rhetoric.³⁴ Melynda Nus hails the radical characterization of *The Cenci*'s heroine, Beatrice; she praises how the drama dissects and denounces her relationship to poisonous social structures. “[Beatrice] cannot be set apart from the world of sin she grew up in,” Nus writes: “its fear, falseness, and cruelty are a part of her that she cannot deny.”³⁵ *The Cenci*—because it has received these and similar praises—has dodged the criticisms often lobbed at other Romantic texts. Its critical admirers describe the drama as neither too melodramatic nor too introspective, but as progressive and outward looking, invested in its protest against an unjust social order.

The Cenci does, in fact, epitomize the Romantics' passion for social protest. Yet hailing *The Cenci*'s politics in general terms does little justice to its portrait of sexual assault's corrosive effect on one woman's mind. Beatrice, as a sexual assault survivor, must wage a psychological war against the social order—a war that undermines her faith in

³² Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Miscellanies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1886), 120.

³³ For more, see Curran, *Scorpions Ringed with Fire*, 21.

³⁴ William Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy: Romantic Drama and the Rhetoric of Agency* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 137.

³⁵ Melynda Nus, *Distance, Theatre, and the Public Voice, 1750-1850* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 144.

herself and drives her toward murderous despair. The drama asks that, whatever we think of Beatrice's conduct, we understand the complex social, cultural, and political factors that compel her to murder her father. *The Cenci* capitalizes on the philosophical and political innovations of earlier Romantic writers to offer a critique of rape culture that keeps its bite, even centuries later.

Much of *The Cenci*'s bite derives from its depiction of Beatrice as a noble woman. In the drama's preface, Percy Bysshe Shelley describes Beatrice as "a most gentle and amiable being, formed to be adorned and admired," whom we ought to regard as a paragon of virtue.³⁶ *The Cenci*'s earliest critics follow his example, commending Beatrice's "'cold fidelity,' clear judgment, and insight into character."³⁷ Her kind-heartedness compels our admiration; our refusal to appreciate her would suggest a lapse in our moral judgment. Beatrice's heroic virtue also contrasts with the brutal, venal world of her father, the Count Cenci—a world that reared her, but that has not altogether ruined her. Beatrice criticizes the social order at length, rebuking its violence and corruption in front of the Count, his friends, and even a court of law. Amidst *The Cenci*'s misogynistic world, Beatrice upholds the clear light of the ideal, anchoring the drama's critique of rape culture. She, like the quintessential Romantic protagonist, embodies what we, the audience, ought to emulate: an absolute opposition to sexual violence's normalization.

Such resistance is valuable because *The Cenci*'s Rome—like Shelley's England, or Donald Trump's United States—is rife with men who either perpetrate sexual assault or else apologize for the men who have. The Count Cenci especially demonstrates a compulsive need to control women: a common need in a culture that perceives women as

³⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 315.

³⁷ Ernest Sutherland Bates, *A Study of Shelley's Drama "The Cenci"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), 70.

objects whom men might dispose of at their leisure. When Beatrice condemns her father at a party, censuring him for celebrating his sons' deaths, the Count Cenci derides her as an "insane girl" whose concerns amount to no more than "dull domestic quarrels."³⁸ He does not, despite the seriousness and truthfulness of Beatrice's charge, believe that a woman could ever oppose him and be justified. A woman's grievance never rises above the level of a histrionic quarrel, the substance of which he, and all men, ought to regard as exaggerated. The Count Cenci therefore denies that women could make a legitimate judgment independent of a man's influence. He belittles Beatrice for believing that her opinions merit men's consideration—and when this fails to silence her, he rapes her. Beatrice is right to oppose a social order that sees such a punishment as reasonable, and not as abhorrent.

It is Beatrice's defiant, independent mind that lets her stage this protest against the social order. Despite her father's desire for a submissive daughter, she does not embrace socio-cultural doctrines that demean women. Beatrice instead subordinates these doctrines to her own conscience, so that her conscience serves as a last refuge from rape culture. "You have ever stood / Between us and your father's moody wrath / Like a protecting presence," Beatrice's stepmother, Lucretia, tells her. "Your firm mind / Has been our only refuge and defense."³⁹ Although the social order's evil might control the Count Cenci, it does not control his daughter, who has the moral and intellectual sense to repudiate it. Lucretia's praise also inverts conventional misogynistic wisdom, which imagines women as overemotional and irrational, while imagining men as logical and deliberate. It is Beatrice—not the Count Cenci, not Beatrice's own brothers—who possesses the pres-

³⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 332. 1.3.178, 181.

³⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 334. 2.1.46-9.

ence of mind to interrogate the social order's patriarchal structures and realize how horrible its normalization of sexual violence is. Her mind stands apart and above the social order, interposed "between" rape culture and its would-be victims, seemingly impenetrable to its influence.

Nevertheless, *The Cenci* is a tragic drama, and Beatrice's protest against rape culture cannot succeed within the drama's confines. Presaging modern theories of internalized oppression, the drama represents Beatrice's mind as surrendering to the stigma surrounding sexual assault—a surrender symbolized in her darkening gaze. In *The Cenci*'s earliest scenes, Beatrice's antagonists wonder at her eyes' moral influence. "...I fear / Her subtle mind," admits Orsino, the lecherous priest:

[and] her awe-inspiring gaze,
 Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve
 And lay me bare, and make me blush to see
 My hidden thoughts.⁴⁰

Orsino notes Beatrice's strength of mind, complimenting her scrupulous moral intelligence. Unlike us, however, Orsino cannot take comfort from Beatrice's goodness. He dreads it, shrinking from the "awe-inspiring gaze" that threatens to expose his mean-spirited nature. Beatrice possesses a "female gaze" that counteracts Orsino's own lustful stare. Her clear-eyed, discriminating perception promises to dissect his motives, and to uncover truths that he prefers to keep hidden even from himself. Beatrice's gaze therefore does not impose shame on Orsino so much as it awakens his dirtied conscience. It "[makes him] blush" not to suspect another person's ill opinion of him, but to suffer his

⁴⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 326. 1.2.83-7.

own latent guilt. As an extension of her virtuous conscience, Beatrice's gaze reminds *The Cenci's* men of their moral failings.

Beatrice's eyes retain their symbolic power throughout *The Cenci's* first two acts, during which her principled self-assurance is least compromised. Even the Count Cenci panics when Beatrice once “[dares] to look / With disobedient insolence” upon him. In that moment, the Count later confesses, “I sought to hide / That which I came to tell [Beatrice]”—his intention to commit sexual assault.⁴¹ He feels compelled to conceal his evil nature from her eyes; he perhaps experiences guilt for the first and the last time in his life. Thus Beatrice's gaze, with one defiant “look,” succeeds in silencing the drama's most hardened criminal. Her gaze acts as a synecdoche for the goodness that characterizes Beatrice as a whole; it shames the shameless and illuminates rape culture's falsehoods, whether for her sake or for others'.

Yet Beatrice's gaze begins to lose its power after the Count Cenci's sexual assault shatters her self-confidence. “My eyes are full of blood,” Beatrice cries to Lucretia: “I see but indistinctly.”⁴² The Count Cenci's depraved act clouds her outward and inward vision, as rage and despair render the world's physical and moral contours difficult to discern. Until this moment, Beatrice had survived near-impossible circumstances because she could see into the truth of her situation. She was her father's superior, Beatrice believed, and he could not corrupt her. Now that Beatrice questions her essential goodness, however, she cannot see into anything at all. “The wound is to her mind,” summarizes Stuart Curran, “whose disorder is reflected in her impaired vision.”⁴³ She asks Orsino, “What is this undistinguishable mist / Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow,

⁴¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 336. 2.1.106-10.

⁴² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 344. 3.1.2-3.

⁴³ Curran, *Scorpions Ringed*, 109.

/ Darkening each other?”⁴⁴ A muddle of conflicting impressions besieges Beatrice’s mind, in a mental confusion that recalls literal blindness. Each thought shades another, “darkening” the mind’s eye, until truth’s light vanishes. Beatrice must flit between seemingly “undistinguishable” interpretations of her situation; it ought not to surprise us if she alights upon an interpretation that damns her for her victimhood.

Rome’s rape culture exploits these uncertainties to graft a sense of self-loathing onto Beatrice’s once-inviolable mind. Her in-court defense of herself implies that shame over her father’s assault motivated her decision to commit patricide:

And so my lot was ordered, that a father
 First turned the moments of awakening life
 To drops, each poisoning youth’s sweet hope; and then
 Stabbed with one blow my everlasting soul;
 And my untainted fame; and even that peace
 Which sleeps within the core of the heart’s heart.
 But the wound was not mortal; so my hate
 Became the only worship that I could lift
 To our great father...⁴⁵

Beatrice upholds that the Count Cenci violated her against her will, “poisoning youth’s sweet hope,” innocence. At the same time, she avers that she will never be what she was before—nor will she ever be what she might have been. Beatrice equates the Count Cenci’s desecration of her person with a social and spiritual desecration, one that “stabbed with one blow” both her “untainted” public reputation and her “everlasting

⁴⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 349. 3.1.170-2.

⁴⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 387. 5.2.120-8.

soul.” The Count Cenci has adulterated her goodness with his evil; she can no longer be at “peace,” but must forever despise herself for the perceived contamination. According to Beatrice, neither God nor her fellow citizens will forgive her for what her father has done. She, being a broken spiritual vessel, cannot hope to serve God except through “hate” and violence.

Once she embraces a hateful assessment of her role in the sexual assault, an assessment that rape culture would endorse, Beatrice transforms into a ruthless, calculating avenger. Her gaze also develops, in the words of Laura Jane Sargent, “the Medusan power to paralyze and incapacitate her male adversaries.”⁴⁶ It moves the assassin Marzio to retract his confession, perjuring himself to protect Beatrice from prosecution. “O,” he begs her, “dart / The terrible resentment of those eyes / On the dead earth! Turn them away from me! / They wound.”⁴⁷ Beatrice’s stare has turned into a weapon that “wounds,” not a tool that “anatomizes” and brings self-awareness. It suborns deceit instead of the truth, substituting “terrible,” reckless “resentment” for principled civil disobedience. A poisonous “mist / Of thoughts” and social expectations blinds Beatrice to opportunities for transcending her existence. She believes that she has nothing left to her but evil. “In this mortal world,” she exclaims, “There is no vindication and no law / Which can adjudge and execute the doom / Of that through which I suffer.”⁴⁸

At the same time, Shelley seems to count Beatrice’s desperation against her. “The fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance,” he asserts: “If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better, but she

⁴⁶ Laura Jane Sargent, “Gender/Politics and the Beautiful Parricide: Beatrice Cenci as a Nineteenth-Century Icon” (Texas A&M University, 2000), 78.

⁴⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 384. 5.2.29-32.

⁴⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 348. 3.1.134-7.

would never have been a tragic character.”⁴⁹ On the basis of this statement, a number of critics have deemed Beatrice’s violent revenge to be dubious at best. “Within the perverse framework of this tragedy, to act is to commit evil,” comments Stuart Curran.⁵⁰ Curran admits that such a framework is unfair, but he nevertheless insists the Count Cenci’s assassination is unjustifiable. Meanwhile Earl R. Wasserman argues that when “one allows himself to receive an evil effect, it will become in turn an evil motive for a further evil consequence”—as if Beatrice had chosen for her father to assault her.⁵¹ These readings ought to strike us as complicit in the rape culture against which *The Cenci* protests. Beatrice survives neglect, humiliation, and sexual assault; it seems ridiculous that she must then embrace the Count Cenci with unqualified forgiveness.⁵²

How then ought we to approach Shelley’s comments on his own drama? If we “allow” the social order to enrage us, to borrow Wasserman’s term, then *The Cenci* faults the social order’s victims for failing to tolerate its burdens. Furthermore, if Beatrice ought to have embraced the Count Cenci with “kindness and forbearance,” then *The Cenci* requires us to grant an unjust order the compassion and respect that it will not grant its victims. Neither implication befits *The Cenci*’s otherwise radical protest against rape culture. That said, critics might have misunderstood Shelley’s comments. His words resonate with the definition of classical *hamartia*,⁵³ or “missing the mark,” that Martha Nussbaum outlines in *The Fragility of Goodness*. Nussbaum argues that, to previous generations of dramatists and classical scholars, *hamartia* would not have denoted a crippling character

⁴⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 315.

⁵⁰ Curran, *Scorpions Ringed*, 132.

⁵¹ Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), 107.

⁵² If nothing else, however, Shelley is at least consistent. Prometheus in *Prometheus Unbound* must also forgive Jupiter before he can escape Jupiter’s oppression.

⁵³ According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, one of the defining elements of tragic drama.

flaw in the protagonist. Instead, *hamartia* would have connoted the failure to know, for certain, what is best: a universal failure that causes even well-intentioned people to commit questionable acts in difficult situations.⁵⁴ Thus Shelley does not intend to censure his heroine when he states that she could have been “wiser and better.” For Beatrice to remain a tragic character, and for *The Cenci* to have its desired effect, she cannot know what “the fit return to make” is—no more than Orestes or Oedipus or Phaedra can know what “the fit return” is in their dramas.

Whatever the case, *The Cenci* offers us abundant reasons to forgive Beatrice’s *hamartia*. The drama recreates the patriarchal injustices of Renaissance-era Rome in such blistering, oppressive detail that we cannot blame anyone for succumbing to his or her poisonous environment. In Jeffrey N. Cox’s words, several “interlocking sets of oppression” dominate the world of *The Cenci*, such that “the personal and familial tyranny of Cenci is supported by the social tyranny of a hierarchical social and religious system.”⁵⁵ It strikes us as cruel to condemn Beatrice’s attempt to escape this impossible situation; a moral judgment seems almost irrelevant.

It is not as if *The Cenci*’s other characters help Beatrice even when she fights the social order through non-violent means. After Beatrice begs her father’s dinner guests to punish his crimes, the Count Cenci dissuades them from interfering in his affairs:

I hope that my good friends here
 Will think of their own daughters—or perhaps
 Of their own throats—before they lend an ear

⁵⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 382-3.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey N Cox, “The dramatist,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69.

To this wild girl.⁵⁶

According to the Count Cenci, Beatrice's defiance threatens more than just his power and wellbeing. Her rebellious behavior endangers all of the men who inhabit the patriarchal order; in fact, it threatens the patriarchal order itself. The Count Cenci observes that granting Beatrice's request would set a dangerous precedent, one that would permit a woman to question a man's power if she believed herself to inhabit a superior moral position. That precedent would contradict the patriarchal order's defining principles, which seek to set male domination above female criticism. As a result, the Count Cenci suggests that his guests ought to let him triumph under the worst circumstances, so that they might triumph under better ones. He reminds the assembled men to "think of their own daughters"—daughters who could imitate Beatrice's example, and rebel against their own fathers. Beatrice consequently comes to expect that other people will not save her from her father's sexual predations.

The social order's patriarchal foundations also prevent it from aiding Beatrice. "He [the Pope] holds it of the most dangerous example / In aught to weaken the paternal power," explains the Cardinal Camillo, "Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own."⁵⁷ Camillo equates the Count Cenci's power over Beatrice with the Pope's power over his religious and political subjects, describing the former as the "shadow" of the latter. After all, both men reign as "paternal" despots; both men also exploit the trappings of fatherhood to command obedience from their subordinates. The Pope's and the Count Cenci's authorities differ in degree, not in kind. Hence the Pope-led state cannot censure the Count Cenci without undermining the *raison d'être* of its own rule. Like the guests at the Count

⁵⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 331. 1.3.129-32.

⁵⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 340. 2.2.54-6.

Cenci's party, the state must instead suppress Beatrice's "most dangerous example"—although at least Camillo acknowledges that Beatrice, not the state, is in the right. The state will protect the system that most benefits it. Taken together, these characters' inactions create an unsparing portrait of a world in which a patriarch's privileges matter more than an endangered woman's welfare. Their failures persuade Beatrice that, to punish her father for raping her, she must punish him herself.

To be sure, the state does issue a belated warrant for the Count Cenci's arrest, suggesting that Beatrice might have waited for the state to act. Earl R. Wasserman, however, urges us not to put too much faith in the state's good intentions. "To think... that this is cosmic irony," he writes, "is to assume that the Count's crimes should have been entrusted to the law, an assumption that contradicts the ethics upon which the drama is built."⁵⁸ *The Cenci* has shown us, again and again, that the patriarchal state values male solidarity above moral authority. If the state had undertaken the Count Cenci's prosecution, it might have pardoned him, or issued a lenient sentence, or otherwise made excuses for the Count's misconduct. The drama gives us no guarantee that the state would have handed down a sentence in proportion to the Count Cenci's crimes. In addition, the state's much-delayed willingness to punish the Count renders its later treatment of Beatrice hypocritical. The Pope and his advisors want Beatrice's father to suffer for his crimes. Nonetheless, when Beatrice fulfills that desire on the state's behalf, the state resolves to persecute her. There is no reason for us to believe that a misogynistic court would have offered Beatrice a just, dependable alternative to patricide.

It is worth noting the intellectual debts that this moral perspective owes to Percy Bysshe Shelley's familial connections. Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe's second wife, was

⁵⁸ Wasserman, *Shelley*, 93.

the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose work documents the damage that patriarchal norms wreak upon women. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) decries the negative impact of men's sexual predations on women. "...I will venture to assert," Wollstonecraft writes, "that all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, which I have already enlarged on, branch out of one grand cause—want of chastity in men."⁵⁹ She argues that men's harsh and often hypocritical treatment of women warps women's behavior; *The Cenci*, insofar as it attributes Beatrice's moral decline to her father's persecution, builds upon Wollstonecraft's critique.

As a result, we ought to agree with Percy Bysshe Shelley's proclamation that "no person can be truly dishonored by the act of another."⁶⁰ The Count Cenci's actions debase no one but himself; what threatens to debase Beatrice is her conviction that sexual assault dishonors its victim—a conviction that places her in need of, but beyond all hope for, redemption. One could contend, as Earl R. Wasserman does, that Beatrice "allows" herself to believe this misogynistic nonsense. The drama's dense social and psychological fabric nevertheless renders her error comprehensible, not reprehensible. Beatrice's father, friends, and religion teach her that sexual assault damns the perpetrator and his victim alike. After an actual sexual assault instigates a moral panic, Beatrice has nothing to cling to but this misogynistic cant. No proto-feminist exists in *The Cenci*'s Rome to correct her; we ought not to blame one miserable woman for the madness of an entire culture. We, as readers and spectators, benefit from the drama's well-rounded perspective on Beatrice's fate. Beatrice herself does not.

⁵⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" and "*The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*," ed. Anne Mellor and Noelle Chao (New York: Pearson Education, 2007), 170.

⁶⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 316.

Yet *The Cenci*'s perspective—its indictment of rape culture, its vindication of Beatrice's rebellion, its anatomization of her internalized oppression—would avail us nothing if *The Cenci* failed to provide a constructive vision of the world. Its protest is purposeless to the extent that it characterizes progress as impossible. For some critics, *The Cenci* advances just such a nihilistic perspective. "Racked like Lear on a wheel of fire, all men and all men's ideals succumb to the insidious thrust of evil," remarks Stuart Curran: "And from the ashes of that fire no phoenix arises."⁶¹ He interprets the tragic fall of Beatrice, Lucretia, and Giacomo as the triumph of evil, which has overwhelmed the characters' noblest "ideals" and seduced them into murder and deception. With their ignominious deaths, all hope for a better world ends, the future promising nothing but despair. Even Beatrice, our exceptional, admirable heroine, fails to cast off the depressive weight of socio-political pressures, according to Curran's reading. "Worse than despair, / Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope," she laments, resigning herself to a universe devoid of goodness.⁶²

This nihilism prevails until the drama's last moments, in which Beatrice—tinged with regret—turns to her stepmother and binds her hair. "How often / Have we done this for one another," she muses: "Now / We shall not do it anymore."⁶³ This small, wistful gesture concludes *The Cenci*, as the two women depart for their execution with a sense of renewed grace. Jeffrey N. Cox describes this moment as one of feminine protest, in which Beatrice repudiates rape culture's normalization of violence. "In her final moments of life," he writes, "Beatrice gestures towards a feminine response to patriarchal violence, to a human community set against the hierarchical universe offered by traditional church

⁶¹ Curran, *Scorpions Ringed*, 136.

⁶² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 397. 5.4.97-8.

⁶³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 399. 5.4.162-4.

and state.”⁶⁴ She does not confront death with anger or fear—both responses that the patriarchal system would consider natural. Such behavior would do nothing but affirm rape culture’s caricature of her as a crazed murderess, and Beatrice does not intend to flatter its prejudices. She instead stands as an example of dignified, principled resistance, incarnating the values of fortitude and fellowship that the social order suppresses.

Cox, however, minimizes the significance of Beatrice’s last-minute metamorphosis, conceding, “[It] is only a gesture.”⁶⁵ This conclusion undervalues the political power of a gesture. How Beatrice presents herself on the scaffold will determine the fate of her social protest. Her farewell to Bernardo, her youngest brother, clarifies the inspirational impression that she wants to leave:

One thing more, my child:

For thine own sake be constant to the love
 Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
 Tho’ wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
 Lived ever holy and unstained.⁶⁶

Beatrice asks her brother to remember a Beatrice different from the woman whom we have sometimes encountered in *The Cenci*. Our Beatrice did choose “terrible resentment” over unconditional, and unreasonable, “love,” murdering the Count Cenci when she could not reform him. Our Beatrice has also, at one moment or another, believed herself to be lost. When confronted with death, however, Beatrice realizes that her essential virtue must still survive beneath patricide’s “strange cloud of crime and shame.” She wants Bernardo to memorialize her as an uncompromising champion of the good, one who has

⁶⁴ Cox, “The dramatist,”

⁶⁵ Cox, “The dramatist,”

⁶⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, 399. 5.4.145-9.

remained “holy and unstained” despite the decisions that circumstances forced upon her. In doing so, she asks her brother to revere the values for which she died, to have compassion for her, and therefore to disseminate the legend of a heroic, martyred Beatrice. That Beatrice—a Beatrice who has recovered her psychological integrity, as well as her moral purpose—might well inspire others to adopt her just crusade.

One wonders to what extent Mary Shelley’s insights might have influenced *The Cenci*’s constructive approach to sexual trauma. She translated the historical records that provided drama with its plot, suggesting her deep involvement with her husband’s project.⁶⁷ In fact, Mary Shelley would later hail *The Cenci*’s fifth act as his “masterpiece,” praising its “passionate, heart-rending” expression of Beatrice’s inner turmoil.⁶⁸ Her novella *Mathilda* (1819) also focuses, like *The Cenci*, on a woman’s tragic attempt to overcome sexual trauma. The eponymous heroine leads a sheltered, loveless existence until her long-lost father returns—and professes his passionate, sexual love for her. Mathilda’s father kills himself before acting on his impulses, but memories of his confession continue to haunt Mathilda, and she finds herself unable to pursue a romance with the idealized poet Woodville. In the end, however, Mathilda experiences a late surge of hope after an encounter with the natural world. “Thou wilt ever be the same,” she sighs, marveling at nature’s perennial survival even as she herself dies of a lingering illness.⁶⁹ Whatever the mess that humans have made of their relationships, some untainted loveliness survives in

⁶⁷ See *Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci*, trans. Mary Shelley, in *Mary Shelley’s Literary Lives and Other Writings*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002).

⁶⁸ Mary Shelley, “Mary Shelley’s Introductory Note, 1839 Edition,” on *Frankenstein: The Pennsylvania Electronic Edition*, accessed March 9, 2017.

⁶⁹ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996), 65.

nature. One person's suffering need not dissuade us from searching out a more innocent, beautiful world for ourselves.

Beatrice gives voice to a similar sad optimism in her last interview with Bernardo. She presents herself to Bernardo as an instructive failure, one that might encourage future assaults on the socio-political system, and that cautions others against succumbing to the system's insidious doubts and fears. *The Cenci* as a whole justifies this self-presentation. The drama encloses us within the same rancid rape culture that deceives its heroine, delineating the "interlocking sets of oppression" that obscure her judgment. It also exposes us to the inner-workings of her consciousness; we cannot resent her choices, because we understand the tortured deliberations and mistaken assumptions that have produced them. If *The Cenci* had given us a perfect Beatrice, we could not have so clearly seen how the social order enmeshes us in impossible circumstances over which we exercise little control. "[Beatrice's] is a situation," explains Stuart Sperry, "deliberately contrived to compel us to recognize the bankruptcy of conventional kinds of ethical discrimination, to force upon us the necessity of ascending to a higher level of moral awareness."⁷⁰ *The Cenci* outrages us, enlightens us, and empowers us, so that we might succeed where its heroine—enmeshed in rape culture's oppressive structures—cannot help but fail.

Hence *The Cenci* capitalizes on the innovations of Romantic writers as diverse as Friedrich Schiller, Victor Hugo, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. It is a sophisticated drama that also exposes the structures of rape culture, which otherwise remain hidden behind familiar masks. It makes vivid the pain that sexual assault survivors experience; it subjecting us to the same discomfort that Beatrice, its heroine, endures. *The Cenci* demands

⁷⁰ Stuart M Sperry, "The Ethical Politics of Shelley's 'The Cenci,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 411-27, 425.

that we empathize with Beatrice in her struggle against her social environment—a struggle in which she fails, since her environment’s fatal norms permeate her consciousness. Yet *The Cenci* does not put an end to the Romantic and post-Romantic interest in sexual violence. That interest survives well into the Victorian period, with later writers building on *The Cenci*’s example and importing its critique of rape culture into other literary forms. One novel in particular, Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), dives deep into rape culture’s psychological ramifications, expanding upon *The Cenci*’s investigation into Beatrice’s consciousness. Given this innovativeness and influence, it seems clear that *The Cenci* constitutes a “drama of the highest order.” In this text, at least, Romantic drama⁷¹ has earned our highest consideration.

⁷¹ To be clear, *The Cenci* was not staged for decades after its print publication; its radical treatment of sexual violence assured it fervent opposition from generations of theatrical censors. *The Cenci*’s success as a printed text nevertheless meant that its prescient critique of rape culture could reach an audience receptive to its claims. Its absence from the theater did not amount to its absence from public discourse.

Chapter 3

No Law Known to Nature: Nature's Subversion of Rape Culture in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

“Stagey,”⁷² “tragic,” “dramatic”⁷³—ever since its initial 1891 publication, Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* has provoked comparisons to the theater. Lucy Lockwood Hazard was perhaps the first scholar to note its dramatic “art of selection”: in *Tess*, “the strictest economy is observed, and every detail made to bear upon the predetermined end.”⁷⁴ The novel, like an effective drama, propels its characters toward scenes of conflict and confrontation, the better to maximize its theatrical potential. Each of these scenes reinforces the novel’s central message, reminding us again and again of the heroine’s desire for peace, love, and acceptance. As a result, it is almost impossible to mistake Hardy’s anger at the cultural forces that drive Tess, a sexual assault survivor, toward self-destruction. Not for nothing did Hardy, in 1867, consider working as a professional melodramatist.⁷⁵

Despite this recognition of *Tess*’s dramatic technique, critics have not produced a comprehensive discussion of Hardy’s dramatic influences. Hazard cites no one except the Greek tragedians as possible inspirations; she sees Hardy’s novels as classical, and nothing more, in their treatment of character and fate.⁷⁶ Riza Öztürk, writing almost a century

⁷² “From ‘The Saturday Review’ (January 16, 1892),” in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, ed. Scott Elledge, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 383.

⁷³ R. H. Sutton, “From ‘The Spectator’ (January 23, 1892),” in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, ed. Scott Elledge, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 385.

⁷⁴ Lucy Lockwood Hazard, “Thomas Hardy as a Dramatic Novelist” (University of California, 1917), accessed March 25, 2015, 61-2.

⁷⁵ Mark Ford, *Thomas Hardy: Half a Londoner* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), 91.

⁷⁶ Hazard, “Dramatic Novelist,” 60.

later, mentions no influences later than the major Elizabethan dramatists.⁷⁷ He attributes *Tess* and *Jude the Obscure*'s (1895) emphasis on an oppressive social environment to Hardy's own innovations, not noticing the influence of earlier dramatic models. It goes without saying that those models' influence deserves more attention.

After all, *Tess* betrays extensive debts to *The Cenci* and its Romantic ethos. Both texts feature an innocent heroine who, having suffered a sexual assault, blames herself for this fate and comes to seek vengeance through violence. There is ample reason to suspect that the similarities are not coincidental. "I have been thinking that of all the dead men whom I should like to meet," Hardy once wrote, "...I should choose Shelley, not only for his unearthly, weird, wild appearance & genius, but for his genuineness, earnestness, & enthusiasms on behalf of the oppressed."⁷⁸ Hardy owned no fewer than five editions of Shelley's poems, each of them marked and annotated throughout,⁷⁹ and this admiration for Shelley manifests throughout the later writer's *oeuvre*. *Jude the Obscure* (1895) uses Shelley's "Epipsychidion" (1820) as a recurring motif, and Hardy's poem "Shelley's Skylark" (1913) takes as its starting point Shelley's ode "To a Skylark" (1820). Moreover, Tess's last words echo Beatrice's. Beatrice tells her executioner, "We are ready";⁸⁰ Tess tells the police, "I am ready."⁸¹

Even if Hardy were unfamiliar with Shelley, however, it would be reasonable to see *Tess* as building on *The Cenci*'s protest of rape culture. Thomas Hardy often charac-

⁷⁷ Öztürk, Riza, *The Origin of Hardy's Tragic Vision* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 5.

⁷⁸ Hardy, Thomas, letter to Florence Henniker, January 24, 1897, in *Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate and Richard L. Purdy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), Vol. 2, 144.

⁷⁹ Millgate, Michael, "Hardy Catalogue," on Thomas Hardy's Library at Max Gate: Catalogue of an Attempted Reconstruction (September 27, 2014), accessed February 6, 2017.

⁸⁰ Shelley, *The Cenci*, 399. 5.4.165.

⁸¹ Hardy, Thomas, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, ed. Scott Elledge, 3rd ed (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 313.

terizes his fiction as a neo-Romantic project; he hailed Romanticism as an abiding motive with an ever-evolving form—a form that he would alter to suit his present moment. “Romanticism will exist in human nature as long as human nature exists,” he writes in *The Life of Thomas Hardy*: “The point is (in imaginative literature) to adopt that form of Romanticism which is the mood of the age.”⁸² This sentiment is itself Romantic in origin and recalls the ideas of philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder,⁸³ who claimed that each age develops its own means for encoding immortal truths in art.⁸⁴ It also recalls the writings of poet Charles Baudelaire, who defined “romanticism” as “the most up-to-date expression of beauty... analogous to the moral attitudes of the age.”⁸⁵ Hardy embraces this project of aesthetic development, and his fiction therefore reintroduces Romanticism’s philosophical and political innovations to a Victorian readership. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* continues *The Cenci*’s crusade against rape culture, reinforcing and elaborating upon Shelley’s indictment of oppressive patriarchal values.

In particular, *Tess* borrows the notion—implicit in *The Cenci*, and explicit in a writer like Rousseau—that everyone possesses an essential moral innocence. *Tess*, like Rousseau, posits this innocence as a kind of natural law, which causes us, in the absence of toxic social structures, to act with compassion toward others and ourselves. The philosopher Charles Taylor explains that, for Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and

⁸² Thomas Hardy qtd. Emily Florence Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1962), 147.

⁸³ The resemblance again might be no accident. In his notebooks, Hardy recording another critic’s praises of Herder, including a passage that hails Herder for understanding “the natural history of literature, its vital relation to the life behind it, its close and inevitable connection with human history and development.” See Thomas Hardy, *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Lennart A. Björk (New York: New York University Press, 1985), Vol. 2, 82.

⁸⁴ See Johann Gottfried Herder, “Shakespeare,” trans. H. B. Nisbet, in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller and Goethe*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846,” trans. P. E. Charvet, in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art & Artists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 52-3.

William Blake whom Hardy admired, nature “stands as a reservoir of good, of innocent desire or benevolence and love of the good.”⁸⁶ It acts as a metonym (and often a literal habitat) for our most benign intuitions, which ask us to live, to love, and to unite with others in pursuit of mutual peace and happiness. To access these intuitions, Romantic-era writers demanded that we heed “the voice of nature within us” and purge ourselves of the various unnatural social and ethical theories that clutter our minds.⁸⁷ The end result would be a more benevolent, natural moral order.

Tess of the d’Urbervilles invokes this notion of a natural moral order to absolve Tess of the shame that surrounds surviving sexual assault:

Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding in the haunts of innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly.⁸⁸

The “sleeping birds” and “skipping rabbits” summon images of a playful, unthreatening nature, which poses no danger to Tess’s wellbeing. Nature accepts Tess, allowing her to ramble through its “haunts of innocence,” enticing her with sights meant to make her feel in “accord” with its gentleness. This beneficence contrasts the natural world with the man-made social order, which condemns Tess to ostracism and a life of hard labor, and

⁸⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 370.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *Self*, 370.

⁸⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 67.

denies her forgiveness for a crime that Alec d'Urberville committed. The "accepted social law" manufactures the antagonism between Tess, a sexual assault survivor, and her environment; that environment, left to its own devices, would recognize no difference. Thus *Tess* expresses a Romantic desire for us to discard rape culture's artificial shame, and to embrace the freedom from prejudice that perhaps exists in a more natural manner of living.

Tess's characterization further affirms this faith in nature as a benevolent moral reservoir. The narrator identifies Tess with nature's own innocence, which has inoculated her against societal conditioning: "Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience," the narrator asserts, his language aligning her with the kinds of figures that often appear in Wordsworth or Blake.⁸⁹ Hardy then lists the elements that suggest Tess's natural virtue. "The dialect was on her tongue to some extent," he notes, "...as rich an utterance as any to be found in human speech."⁹⁰ Tess's original, rustic accent has survived her education; this "rich" twang ties her to pre-civilized life, and to Wordsworth's valorization of common speech in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The narrator also defends Tess's sexual nature against potential moral objections. "Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still," he assures us. "As she walked along to-day, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then."⁹¹ A childlike unconsciousness abides within Tess. She still sees life through the eyes of a nine year-old girl, and her unaffected smile recalls that of a five year-old child, not that of an experienced coquette. The narra-

⁸⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 8.

⁹⁰ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 8.

⁹¹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 8.

tor therefore presents Tess as an embodiment of the natural moral order; he makes clear that her intuitions, which we ought to value, reflect nature's own virtue.

Indeed, the omniscient narrator takes an active role in illuminating the Romantic framework that undergirds *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This third-person narration constitutes at least one advantage that the novel, as a protest form, has over dramas like *The Cenci*. A drama's audience must judge the characters and the text without too much explicit guidance from the dramatist. A novel's readers, on the other hand, can take into account the novelist's stated opinions, provided that the novelist has recorded them in the narrator's comments. Thus *Tess* can discourse at length about the natural moral order, whereas *The Cenci* must be more circumspect or else risk transforming its characters into the author's featureless mouthpieces. A novel's narrator can also lend the narrative a consistent aesthetic grandeur—a guarantee that no drama can give. An individual actress could fail to incarnate Beatrice's immense dignity; Tess finds a surer partner in Hardy's prose. This is not to devalue the drama as a protest form, or to insinuate that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is superior to *The Cenci*, but to remind us that a novel and a drama will exploit different resources and conventions to protest rape culture.

Tess's descriptive narration, for instance, enables the novel to elevate tableaux that might come across as maudlin without the narration. It is the narrator who invests the image of Tess baptizing her dying child with its peculiar dramatic power:

The ecstasy of faith almost apotheosized her; it set upon her face a glowing irradiation, and brought a red spot into the middle of each cheek; while the miniature candle-flame inverted in her eye-pupils shone like a diamond. The children gazed up at her with more and more reverence, and no longer had a will for questioning.

She did not look like Sissy to them now, but as a being large, towering, and awful—a divine personage with whom they had nothing in common.⁹²

The ecstatic combination of maternal love and religious desperation transfigures Tess, transforming her from a victimized field worker into a “divine personage,” a veritable nature goddess who commands her siblings’ respect. She exudes moral and emotional authority; her eyes shine like diamonds, and her face radiates light. The writing’s feverish pitch causes us, like Tess’s siblings, no longer to perceive her as familiar or typical. She has transcended the confines of realism to become something larger, more towering, and more awful than her sordid world often permits. Tess becomes, in other words, a triumphant Romantic heroine. The narrator’s elaborate descriptions ensure that we will not see Tess as weak—as a victim who is too pathetic to help herself, perhaps, or as a licentious seductress who is responsible for her sexual assault.

Yet the same language that brands Tess a Romantic heroine strikes some critics as complicit in her sexual subjugation. Penny Boumelha, Kathleen Blake, and Linda Shires fault *Tess* for its “overly romantic and egocentric”⁹³ need to present Tess as “a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form.”⁹⁴ According to these critics, Tess’s characterization modulates between a respectful realism and a distortive idealism: she appears at one moment like a human woman, and at another like the mythic quintessence of womanliness.⁹⁵ Boumelha and Blake in particular claim that, on several occasions, the novel demands an inhuman perfection of its heroine. The following de-

⁹² Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 75.

⁹³ Linda M. Shires, “The radical aesthetic of ‘Tess of the d’Urbervilles,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155.

⁹⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 103.

⁹⁵ Kathleen Blake, “Pure Tess: Hardy on Knowing a Woman,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1982): 689-705, accessed March 26, 2015, 699.

scription merits scorn from both: “The brimfulness of [Tess’s] nature breathed from her... It was a moment when a woman’s soul is more incarnate than at any other time; when the spiritual beauty bespeaks itself flesh; and sex takes the outside place in the presentation.”⁹⁶ Boumelha and Blake contend that the narrator confuses Tess’s natural virtue with her sexual potential. Her spirit has inscribed itself upon her flesh, where, it seems, “a woman’s soul” reveals its essence. As a result, these critics accuse *Tess* of conflating women’s virtue with their sexual attractiveness, and of depicting them as doll-like sex-idols. For them, the novel substitutes one form of sexual oppression with another.

To see Tess’s characterization as oppressive, however, one would have to misread how Thomas Hardy perceives the relationship between realism and idealism. “Idealism [what seems] v. Materialism [what is],” he writes in his notebooks: “Supposed to be irreconcilable—but by deliberately recognizing that idealism is idealism there ought to be no difficulty.”⁹⁷ He here defines “realism” as the artist’s straightforward, literal presentation of an object. “Idealism,” in contrast, refers to the artist’s figurative presentation of an object—to the presentation of an object as something that it “seems” like, not as something that it in fact “is.” Both of these modes perform crucial functions, in life as in art. When describing heightened psychological states, we need not suppress our sense of metaphor to remain grounded in the “real” world. Instead, we require a sense of metaphor to communicate the unique, overwhelming significance that an object, person, or experience has for us. Hence Tess appears as a “divine personage” when a person in her situation might well feel or appear divine—when wandering in the pre-dawn light with one’s lover, or when standing over one’s dying child and delivering his last rites. As heightened

⁹⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 133.

⁹⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Literary Notebooks*, Vol. 1, 139. Emphases and misspellings Hardy’s.

as *Tess*'s narration might become, it is more often than not proportionate to the circumstances at hand. The narrator's figurative language aims to honor one's perception of the object; it does not aim to displace or to devalue that object's "real" existence.

Tess's interactions with Angel Clare indicate how the relationship between realism and idealizing metaphors ought to function. In their courtship's earliest phases, when Angel "half-teasingly" calls Tess "Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names," Tess, confused, rebukes him. "Call me Tess," she insists.⁹⁸ Thus *Tess*'s heroine, as well as *Tess* itself, believes that realism must temper idealism. Tess perceives herself to be a human person, one who deserves the respect accorded to all human persons. If someone wants to give her his love, that person must give it to "Tess," and not to an Anglo-Saxon reproduction of "Artemis" or "Demeter," or to an inhuman incarnation of nature's goodness. That kind of idealization would amount to dehumanization, as it would negate Tess's self-conception to flatter another person's desires. Angel, before confessing his love to Tess, learns to better integrate the "ideal" with the "real." Watching her at work, he realizes, "...there was nothing ethereal about [her face]: all was real vitality, real warmth... And it was the touch of the imperfect upon the would-be perfect that gave the sweetness, because it was that which gave the humanity."⁹⁹ The novel asks, in the end, that we see Tess's ideal self as one with her real self. Tess is divine for being what she is: a natural, compassionate person.

Blake, Boumelha, and Shires's critiques neglect this emphasis on Tess's moral character, although it is central to the novel's protest against rape culture. The novel idealizes Tess's virtue as much as it does her attractiveness. When the narrator comments

⁹⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 103.

⁹⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 118.

that “the brimfulness of her nature breathed from her,” the comment could refer to Tess’s sexual nature, but it seems likelier to refer to her moral nature. Nature, in Romantic discourse, involves more than one’s sex. The narrator moreover affirms that Tess’s “soul” and “spiritual” self make her beautiful and worth admiring. *Tess* therefore lavishes compassion upon Tess because of her inborn inclination toward virtue, not her sexual attractiveness. Tess’s natural moral virtue marks her as the “Pure Woman” of the novel’s subtitle; that natural moral virtue keeps her a “Pure Woman” even after her fateful encounter with Alec d’Urberville. The novel’s idealization of Tess obliterates the notion that sexual assault robs the survivor of her moral worth.

That sentiment comprises *Tess*’s most moving debt to Romantic thinkers and artists. Alas, the world of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* does not share this compassion. *Tess*’s novelistic breadth allows it to depict, in minute detail, how the social order normalizes sexual violence. Mrs. Durbeyfield, Tess’s mother, demonstrates rape culture’s penetration into even the closest filial bonds. Once she suspects Alec d’Urberville’s prurient interest in her daughter, Mrs. Durbeyfield does nothing to protect Tess from his predations. She instead readies Tess for his consumption. “[She] put upon [Tess] the white frock that Tess had worn at the club-walking,” the narrator relates, “the airy fullness of which... might cause [Tess] to be estimated as a woman when she was not much more than a child.”¹⁰⁰ Mrs. Durbeyfield labors to provoke Alec’s sexual appetites, draping Tess in a billowing dress to disguise her lingering childishness and heighten her attractiveness. She dangles her daughter in front of Alec as bait; she anticipates that a liaison with him will prove profitable for her and her husband. The social order classifies Tess’s body as a

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 35.

bankable good, which her parents might auction to the highest bidder, but over which Tess herself has no control.

These and other incidents accumulate throughout *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, illustrating how the social order denies young women power over their own lives. If a woman resists the social order's dictates, she receives a stern rebuke—if not worse. “Why didn't ye think of doing some good for your family instead o' thinking only of yourself?” Mrs. Durbeyfield exclaims, condemning Tess for not marrying Alec. “You ought to have been more careful if you didn't mean to get him to make you his wife.”¹⁰¹ She had expected that Tess would perform according to the appropriate social scripts; those scripts demand that Tess must wed her rapist, the better to atone for her supposed crime. Tess's mother upholds that it would be shocking and selfish to pursue a different course of action, not least because a different course of action would prevent Mrs. Durbeyfield from extorting material concessions. As a result, she cannot imagine that Tess would ever spurn an offer of marriage. Tess does in fact reject Alec's proposal. Yet Tess will continue to struggle with pressure to reconcile with her rapist, and that pressure will later convince her to become Alec's mistress. The social order's rape culture provides sexual assault survivors with few plausible alternatives to self-debasement.

In addition, the novel depicts the “immeasurable social chasm”¹⁰² that separates sexual assault survivors from other women, preventing survivors from integrating back into the social order. A sexual assault survivor can never describe herself as an honorable woman, unless, perhaps, she marries her rapist. This “social chasm,” first mentioned after Alec assaults Tess, causes Angel to abandon his tainted wife. “How can forgiveness meet

¹⁰¹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*. 64.

¹⁰² Thomas Hardy, *Tess*. 58.

such a grotesque—prestidigitation as that!”¹⁰³ Angel tells her. The revelation seems to him like a “prestidigitation,” or parlor trick¹⁰⁴—a sudden, absurd transformation. Tess no longer strikes him as the virtuous woman whom he had loved just moments ago; she has become a tainted, unendurable creature, whose flaws he could not hope to forgive. She ought never to have presented herself as a viable wife. To vindicate this prejudice, Angel asserts that Tess’s own vices made her a victim. Her “want of firmness”¹⁰⁵ exposed her to Alec’s lust, and she is therefore culpable for Alec’s crime. To be sure, Angel’s characterization of the sexual assault is inaccurate. Alec raped Tess while she slept, and no additional moral “firmness” would have dissuaded him. Yet this is rape culture speaking through Angel to exclude Tess from the social order. A sexual assault survivor cannot live as if she were a decent, pure woman; Tess has no choice but to seize whatever miserable opportunities come to her.

The social order’s crowning injustice is to devalue women’s conscious will—a devaluation that permits rapists to dismiss their victims’ consent as immaterial. When Tess reminds Alec that she has never done anything to encourage his attentions, Alec claims that Tess’s intent does not matter. “Of course you have done nothing except retain your pretty face and shapely figure,” he explains: “[That] tight pinafore-thing sets it off, and that wing-bonnet—you field-girls should never wear those bonnets if you wish to keep out of danger.”¹⁰⁶ The resemblances between Alec’s arguments and those of modern rape apologists are appalling. Alec acknowledges that Tess does not desire his abusive attentions, at least to the extent that desire manifests itself in speech and action. Alec be-

¹⁰³ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 179.

¹⁰⁴ “prestidigitation, n.,” in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed March 31, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 182.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 259.

lieves, however, that Tess's dress and appearance speak a language more telling than that of her conscious will. Her "pretty face," "shapely figure," "tight pinafore-thing," and "wing-bonnet" proclaim the possessor's readiness for sexual action, whether the possessor voices that readiness or not. In *Tess's* rape culture, men ascribe a significance to inanimate objects that overrides the explicit intentions of a woman's mind. An individual woman like Tess lacks the power to break through that overvaluation, and she suffers for it.

In such an environment, a woman's consciousness might as well not exist. Tess seems to reach that conclusion: poor, homeless, and starving, she prostitutes herself to Alec and becomes like "a corpse upon the current,"¹⁰⁷ drifting listlessly toward destruction. She, like Beatrice, has internalized rape culture's vile opinion of her; but she, unlike Beatrice, also adopts an attitude of near-absolute submission. Tess in fact pleads with Angel to murder her, saying, "I think I should love you more... since there's no other way of escape for 'ee. I feel I am so utterly worthless."¹⁰⁸ She evaluates her moral character according to patriarchal standards that denigrate her value as a human being. Tess equates the loss of her virginity with the loss of her human worth; a deflowered Tess is a "worthless" Tess, and Angel, as her husband, would do well to end her contemptible existence. Later, Tess strikes the same attitude with Alec d'Urberville. "Now punish me!" she cries: "Whip me, crush me... I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim: that's the law."¹⁰⁹ She might intend to sound ironic here—to illustrate the ridiculousness, and not the justice, of this "law." Yet Tess's decision to become Alec's mistress suggests that

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 299.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 187-188.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 261.

these words hold some sincere weight with her. She embraces the identity that rape culture assigns her: that of a “victim” who must always respect the social order.

Tess’s tragic decline makes for a powerful indictment of rape culture. She devolves from a self-assured, forward-thinking heroine into a defeatist wreck who invites even the people who love her to abuse her. In the process, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* compels us to have compassion for Tess, and almost none for the culture that ruined her. Indeed, Tess’s fate has moved even half-skeptical critics to a rare eloquence. “The system which has entrapped her into such grotesque choices deserves the blame as much as any individual may,” writes Shires: “Any system which perpetually victimizes women and men... should itself be drained of blood and breath.”¹¹⁰ The disgust with which some reviewers greeted *Tess* shows how well it needed its complacent, misogynistic culture. “We confess that this is a story which... it is very difficult to read,” exclaims an 1892 review in the *Spectator*, “because in almost every page the mind rebels against the steady assumptions of the author, and shrinks from the untrue picture of a universe so blank and godless.”¹¹¹ Like the best Romantic dramas, *Tess* aligns us with an embattled ideal against an oppressive social order. The social order, it seems, recognized its face in the portrait, and flinched to behold its own ugliness.

At the same time, it is tempting to judge Tess for her reactions to her intolerable situation. Is Tess as powerful a Romantic heroine as Beatrice Cenci, her likeliest precursor? Tess might strike us as weaker than Beatrice; her heroic stature diminishes as the novel unfolds. In the novel’s earliest chapters, Tess rejects her rapist as a potential husband, defying Alec’s desires, her mother’s wishes, and her culture’s conventions. She in-

¹¹⁰ Shires, “The radical aesthetic,” 154.

¹¹¹ Sutton, “From ‘The Spectator,’” 385.

stead builds a newer, better life for herself elsewhere, free from the judgment and shame that festered in her former village. In later chapters, however, Tess succumbs to Alec's desires, her family's desperation, and her own despair. She acts as her rapist's mistress, accepting injustice as her due. We detect in Beatrice the development of a similar false consciousness—of a conscience riddled with rape culture's flawed values and assumptions. Beatrice nevertheless resists passive unconsciousness. She insists on action, and never perceives herself as a powerless victim. Although we might not admire her descent into patricide, we at least respect her spirit. The vision of a fiercer Tess—of a heroine who would murder a man before degrading herself as his mistress—haunts us.

Yet that vision distracts us from the raw, inexorable power that rape culture brings to bear against its victims. In her thrilling final confrontation with Alec, Tess describes the means with which he coerced her into their exploitative relationship:

...you had used your cruel persuasion upon me.... you did not stop using it—no—you did not stop! My little sisters and brothers and my mother's needs—they were the things you moved me by.... and you said my husband would never come back—never; and you taunted me, and said what a simpleton I was to expect him! And at last I believed you and gave way! And then he came back! Now he is gone... O yes, I have lost him now—again because of—you!... O, you have torn my life all to pieces ... made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again!... O God—I can't bear this!—I cannot!¹¹²

In one brutal monologue, Tess flings an entire novel's argument back at her abuser. She eviscerates the two lies that Alec had used in his "cruel persuasion" of her: first, that she could never achieve social redemption; and second, that she and her loved ones could not

¹¹² Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 301.

survive unless she became Alec's mistress. Alec had told Tess that Angel "would never come back"—that as a ruined woman, she would be a "simpleton" to expect forgiveness from a respectable man like him. Meanwhile Tess's mother, brothers, and sisters were starving and in need of protection, which Alec claims that he—and he alone—would provide. Tess, bitter and hopeless, believed him. But Angel's return reveals the insidiousness of rape culture's lies. Angel has forgiven Tess, and if he can forgive her, who else has the right to persecute her? Tess's rushed, fractured sentences render her rage immediate to us. She has seized hold of the truth, and the truth has made her again into a "large, towering, awful" heroine, whose words we ought to heed.

Thus Tess herself explains how her inaction is compatible with a critique of rape culture. Tess's willingness to accept abuse reflects the extent to which the social order has undermined her self-esteem and her hope. Alec's "cruel persuasion" hinges on the argument that Angel will "never come back" and love his wife; Angel himself claims that a husband's devotion cannot overcome the taint of sexual assault. Mrs. Durbeyfield does not praise her daughter for spurning her rapist's advances, but instead excoriates her for forgoing the promise of financial rewards. The men and women whom she meets regard her as either a pariah or a prostitute. It therefore ought not to shock us that she would utter such nonsense as, "The punishment you have measured out to me is deserved... and you are right and just to be angry with me."¹¹³ What else would Tess's poisonous culture teach her? Nor ought it to surprise us when Tess later concludes that "it is all injustice,"¹¹⁴ and ceases to struggle against her victimizers. She realistically evinces a condition that modern psychologists call "learned helplessness"—a state of perpetual inaction,

¹¹³ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 264.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*, 281.

depression, and self-loathing, which one develops after being exposed, for an extended period of time, to intolerable suffering over which one has control.¹¹⁵ Tess's learned helplessness leaves her dazed and disillusioned, convinced that nothing could ever improve her situation. If we dislike how Tess has adapted to the world around her, it would be better to fight the real-life structures that produce those adaptations, than to assail the novelist who documents them, or to patronize a fictional character who models rape culture's most extreme effects on our minds.

Perhaps the most enduring element in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is its demand that we do just that: give our unconditional compassion to its heroine, and reserve our unmitigated scorn for the social order. In the end, even Angel decides against vilifying Tess, seeing her at last as the "Pure Woman" whom she has always been. "[Here] was this deserted wife of his, this passionately fond woman, clinging to him without a suspicion that he would be anything to her but a protector," the narrator tells us. "Tenderness was absolutely dominant in Clare at last."¹¹⁶ *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* appeals to our ultimate faith in Tess's natural innocence—an innocence that has survived sexual assault, social persecution, and murder. It channels a Romantic-era idealism that describes our innate, unfiltered impulses as ones of "tenderness." It attributes Tess's fall from grace to nefarious social structures that punish her for her innocence, and prevent others' from communing with their better nature. If we reconnect with the natural law that posits "tenderness" as the first rule of social interaction; if we deconstruct cultural doctrines that marginalize

¹¹⁵ Anne C. Peterson, "Learned Helplessness," in *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science*, ed. W. Edward Craighead and Charles B. Nemeroff, 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001).

¹¹⁶ Thomas Hardy, *Tess*. 304.

women, and the working class, and sexual assault survivors; then we might still create the fairer world that *Tess*, and Shelley, and the Romantics see as our birthright.

Epilogue

“In a drama of the highest order there is little food for censure or hatred,” Shelley tells us in *A Defence of Poetry*. “It teaches rather self-knowledge and self-respect. Neither the eye nor the mind can see itself, unless reflected upon that which it resembles.”¹¹⁷ Shelley promises that drama in particular, and Romantic literature in general, will make visible that which remains invisible in our own experience. The spectacle of representation will distance us from the raw material of our lives, so that we might discover the flaws in what otherwise lies too close for analysis. As readers and spectators, this means that we watch as the characters’ minds process the world around them, resisting or perhaps succumbing to its false values. Our identification with them might, in the case of a text with radical subject matter, persuade us to embrace the world’s outcasts—the slaves, the apostates, and the sexual assault survivors whom we before mistreated and misunderstood. Romantic literature is therefore a literature “of the highest order,” which appeals to the “highest” elements in our nature. In doing so, it demands nothing less than the “highest” of this fallen world in which we live.

We might dismiss Shelley’s sentiments as simplistic outpourings better suited to a more naïve age. Yet some of our most radical political ideas—the modern experience that we set against Romantic-era innocence—first developed in the work of Romantic writers like Friedrich Schiller, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and others. Those ideas include the concept of rape culture, which swims near to the surface in Schiller’s *The Robbers*, crawls ashore in Shelley’s *The Cenci*, and later evolves into Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. *The Robbers* depicts patriarchal power structures that inflict sexual violence upon women as a

¹¹⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” 685.

matter of course. *The Cenci* further demonstrates how those structures constrain women's bodies and minds, the better to convince them that resistance is futile. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* then shows us a sexual assault survivor whose natural virtue cannot protect her against the cruel judgments and shame of a misogynistic social order. If we condescend to these writers' supposed socio-cultural naïveté, it is because their own achievements provided us with the intellectual foundations that we needed to surpass them.

At the same time, these writers' insights still have much to offer us. Beatrice and Tess's false sense of wrongdoing resonates with the deep-rooted shame that sexual assault survivors experience—shame that discourages them from reporting assaults to the authorities. *The Cenci* and *Tess* also expose the sophisticated social, political, and rhetorical strategies that allow sexual predators to avoid justice: *The Cenci* dramatizes the state's selfish desire to suppress even the most reasonable challenge, and *Tess* sheds light on the small incidents and actions that make sexual assault survivors feel isolated and hopeless. As a collective, these texts exhort sexual assault survivors like Beatrice and Tess not to accept the social order's blistering assessments as true. The embattled ideals and fallen worlds of Romantic literature might seem too melodramatic or stylized to have much modern political relevance. But how can we describe our ideals if not as embattled in this fallen world where a sexual predator can become President? Romantic literature rallies us to action at a time when action is essential. It is not just innovative for its time; it is indispensable for our time, and for all times.

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