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**SHELLEY'S *THE CENCI*: CORRUPTION
AND THE CALCULATING FACULTY**

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Shelley believed drama to have a greater potential for influencing man's moral improvement than any other art form. In *A Defense of Poetry* he notes: "the connexion of scenic exhibitions with the improvement or corruption of the manners of men, has been universally recognized,"¹ and he then remarks that "the connexion of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in any other form" (p. 492). In light of such statements, one would expect to find an unequivocal social message in the one drama that Shelley wrote for a mass audience. But the failure of critics to agree on an interpretation of *The Cenci* proves that this is not the case. Some commentators read the play as pure allegory, and others find it to be unrelieved realism; it has been construed to be either politically or philosophically motivated; even the theme of the play has been variously identified as religious, epistemological, historical, or moral. It is not surprising, therefore, that the character of the drama's protagonist, Beatrice Cenci, remains in dispute.

Understanding Beatrice is certainly crucial to any interpretation of *The Cenci*. An early commentator, Mary Shelley, helped establish a critical tradition when she interpreted Beatrice as an ideal figure: "The character of Beatrice, proceeding from vehement struggle to horror, to deadly resolution, and lastly to the elevated dignity of calm suffering joined to passionate tenderness and pathos, is touched with hues so vivid and so beautiful, that the poet seems to have read intimately the secrets of the noble heart imagined in the lovely countenance of the unfortunate girl."² To this ennobled picture, Leigh Hunt added a rationalization for her crime of parricide: "The reader refuses to think that a daughter has slain a *father*," Hunt observes, "precisely because a dreadful sense of what a father ought not to have done has driven her to it"³ Subsequent critics have arrived at similar conclusions. John Flagg writes that "Shelley conceives of her as a morally superior being," and in a recent essay, Erika Gottlieb claims that Beatrice's "behaviour requires our recognition of her allegorical function as a personification of Innocence, or of man's potential for purity, perfection, and immortality."⁴ A lesser critic is even persuaded to hazard a most un-Shelleyan thought, praising the "inversion of moral values implied by this most right of all murders."⁵

Many critics, however, can not attribute to Shelley the defense of murder. Rather, they discover in Beatrice's crime the flaw that defines her tragic essence. This flaw is sometimes described as a desire for revenge, a "crack in the armour of her righteousness," her "failure to persevere in 'passive resistance,' " "hybris," or "her tragic faith in a God who sanctions and even enjoins revenge and murder."⁶ By this reasoning, her crime is the means for her transformation into a tragic heroine deserving our sympathy, not our contempt. In recent years, a reaction against this idolization of Beatrice has begun thanks to the careful readings of the drama by James Rieger, Donald Reiman, and Earl Wasserman.⁷ A more negative construction of her character is taking shape. Examples of this are Walter Evert's suggestion that the tragedy of the drama might be the demise of Beatrice's moral nature and Ronald Lemoncelli's idea that "Cenci ... simultaneously *reveals* Beatrice's evil and *creates* an evil Beatrice..."⁸

There apparently is no resolution to this Babel of interpretations. Yet an accurate assessment of Beatrice's character is necessary if we are to decipher the lessons for the human heart that Shelley claims are inherent in drama of the highest species. Since the play, alone, offers no indisputable reading of Beatrice's character, there remain two options: to be contented with the existing uncertainty (professional suicide for a critic!), or to go outside the drama for help. The second task has been tried by several critics who have read *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* as companion pieces. Unfortunately, an even better heuristic method has been largely (and surprisingly) ignored—less than nineteen months after completing *The Cenci*, Shelley set down his aesthetic principles in *A Defence of Poetry*. Shelley's *Defence*, with its lengthy analysis of the dramatic genre, might clarify (or at least help to explain) the play.

Shelley's theoretical statement was written to refute Peacock's assertion in "The Four Ages of Poetry" that verse is irrelevant to an advanced society. Peacock argues that reason, not poetry, is modern man's need. Shelley avoids attacking Peacock's premise of utility and posits that poetry is *more* utilitarian than reason. He opens his defense by discriminating between two classes of mental action, "reason and imagination." According to Shelley's analysis, the imagination is the synthetic agent, reason the analytical: "Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit,

as the shadow to the substance" (p. 480). Although the two are not opposites, they are not quite complementary, either. Imagination is clearly preferable. When he then states that the "expression of the imagination" is poetry, he has established the prestige of poetry relative to the like productions of reason. The remainder of the *Defence* is the working out of this duality. Shelley declares that "the great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause" (p. 488). Having arrived at this conclusion, it is impossible for Shelley to "resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists" or to agree that "reason is more useful" (p. 500). "Poetry differs from logic," Shelley asserts. "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will" (p. 503). Instead, the "calculating faculty" (a frequent synonym for reason in the *Defence*) is both the product of poetry and dependent upon it: "Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred" (p. 503).

Shelley applies this distinction between the imagination and reason to the dramatic genre as well. He identifies two types of drama, the poetic and the non-poetic, and it is this discussion which sheds light upon his own dramatic practice. Poetic drama he defines in imaginative terms: "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 ..." (p. 491). Non-poetic drama, on the other hand, is corrupt, "cold," and obscene. It need not induce immorality; it is enough that the drama itself lacks imagination: "the corruption which has been imputed to the drama as an effect, begins, when the poetry employed in its constitution, ends" (p. 490). The poetic drama is splendid with poetry; in the "unimaginative" drama, "the calculating principle pervades all forms of dramatic exhibition, and poetry ceases to be expressed upon them" (p. 491).

The two types of drama Shelley identifies in his *Defence* find reflection in the two dramas he composed in 1819, *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*. There can be little disagreement that *Prometheus Unbound* is a drama imbued with imagination. In his preface to the lyrical drama, he observes that the mind of the poet who composes such a work is "the mirror of all that is lovely in the visible universe."

He expands this image in terms that echo his discussion of poetic drama in his *Defence*: "A Poet, is the combined product of such internal powers as modify the nature of others, and of such external influences as excite and sustain these powers Every man's mind ... is the mirror upon which all forms are reflected, and in which they compose one form" (p. 135).

Furthermore, Shelley states that *Prometheus Unbound* is not a "reasoned system" (emphasis added) or a "didactic work," and thus he anticipates his comment in *A Defence* that "in periods of the decay of social life, the drama ... becomes a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines ..." (p. 491). It is as if Shelley had formed his thoughts concerning drama in his *Defence* with one eye upon the "Preface" to his mythic masterpiece. Although his lyrical drama is suffused with poetry and operates on the imaginative level, Shelley himself declared that *The Cenci* was a "composition of totally different character."⁹

Shelley is not alone in comparing the two dramas. Donald Reiman and Earl Wasserman anchor much of their explication of *The Cenci* upon *Prometheus Unbound*. Though both critics compare and contrast the two plays, neither views the dramas as antipodal. Nor do they connect Shelley's practice and his theory in *A Defence of Poetry*, a connection that might produce valuable results. If *Prometheus Unbound* represents imaginative drama as defined in *A Defence*, *The Cenci* may be its unimaginative counterpart. This popular drama would then be Shelley's attempt to dramatize the consequences of faith in reason, to portray the error of trusting in the calculating faculty, and to demonstrate — through the example of Beatrice — the corrupting power of failed imagination upon virtue. And support for such an hypothesis may be found in *The Cenci*.

Before attempting such a reading, one qualification is needed. Shelley's discussion of "unimaginative" drama in *A Defence* occurs within his historical survey of corrupt dramatists and corrupt times. Because much of his discussion refers to existing works, he never specifically states that a poet might purposely compose a work that reflects an "unimaginative" world for a moral end. Simultaneously, he fails to preclude such a possibility. While his focus is upon corrupt drama as the product of corruption, his theories concerning reason and imagination may be applied to *The Cenci* without suggesting that Shelley is a corrupt artist.¹⁰ At the beginning of his historical survey of drama, in fact, Shelley notes: "the presence or absence of poetry in

its most perfect and universal form has been found to be connected with good and evil conduct and habit" (p. 490). This principle pertains, whether within the dramatic world of *The Cenci* or the historical world of Shelley's study. In *The Cenci*, Shelley creates a world whose inhabitants are divorced from imagination and proud of their calculating facility; they embody Shelley's theoretical speculation concerning reason, corruption, and obscenity. Having established such a world, Shelley studies the inevitable results, and the corruption that occurs remains within the dramatic framework for the edification of the audience.

From the opening scene, Count Cenci appears to be a man of the most subtle analyzing ability. Conversing with Camillo, the Pope's representative, the Count brags about his ability to discern human motivation, and he reminds the legate: "you gave out that you have half reformed me, / Therefore strong vanity will keep you silent / If fear should not; both will, I do not doubt" (I. i. 74-76). Likewise, Cenci comprehends his own personality and discloses that "I am what your theologians call / Hardened" (I. i. 93-94). The Cenci we see on stage is fully aware of his strengths and weaknesses. He admits that in youth he "was happier," but also realizes that there is little he can do but go on. He understands that his own pride compels him to "act the thing thought" (I. i. 97), although old age makes that compulsion increasingly difficult to carry out. He also couples his self-knowledge with his insight into the motivation of others when he states: "I have no remorse and little fear, / Which are, I think, the checks of other men" (I. i. 84-85).

This penchant for self-anatomizing that characterizes Cenci is complemented by a calculating nature; both depend upon reason for their existence. During the drama, consequently, we witness Cenci plotting and intriguing. He is driven to action and surrounds himself with conspiracies. Never is he without a scheme. When his ultimate strategy is confounded by Beatrice, he is both prophetic and perceptive as he states: "'tis her stubborn will / Which by its own consent shall stoop as low / As that which drags it down" (IV. i. 10-12). The lengthy speech that follows, where Cenci first threatens his absent daughter and then curses her, is a model of reason, deranged. Cenci initiates his harangue with faulty inductive logic that permits him to posit a special relationship to God. From this semi-divine position, he hopes his daughter might "Die in despair, blaspheming" (IV. i. 50). As

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his anger mounts, he comes to see himself as a divine "scourge" charged with the punishment of Beatrice. And by the close of his speech, Cenci casuistically fuses the temporal "father" and the spiritual "father." He assumes the authority of God, and "like a fiend" calls curses upon Beatrice.

Cenci's reliance upon his own mental ability does not bring him happiness; one of the ironies of the drama is that this same mental agility discloses to him his failure. At one point in the planning of his revenge, Cenci laments: "Tis an awful thing / To touch such mischief as I now conceive" (II. i. 124-125). Alone on stage, he admits to himself his weakness: "I said / I would not drink this evening; but I must" (I. iii. 169-170). Fortified with alcohol, he vows his revenge upon Beatrice, but hesitates: "I feel my spirits fail / With thinking what I have decreed to do" (I. iii. 171-172). He drinks more wine, clouds his reason, and then says: "the charm works well." But before his resolution again fails, he vows to himself, "It must be done; it shall be done, I swear" (I. iii. 178). With characteristic insight, Cenci comes to realize that he is the victim of his own pride and compulsion. As forthright as he is discerning, just prior to his own murder, Cenci, addressing Beatrice, calls her "my bane and my disease, / Whose sight infects and poisons me" (IV. i. 118-119). In Kenneth Neill Cameron's words, Count Cenci is "no stock villain."¹¹

Giacomo (Cenci's weak but well-intentioned son), acting as a foil to his father, helps to illustrate the Count's weakness. When goaded by Orsino to revenge against Cenci, Giacomo demurs and remarks that the mind is a fallible instrument. He says to Orsino: "Ask me not what I think; the unwilling brain / Feigns often what it would not" (II. ii. 82-83). Rather than chance the mind's trickery, rather than court the possibility of being compelled to act upon what is thought, Giacomo relies upon his heart. He spurns Orsino and says: "My heart denies itself / To *think* what you demand" (emphasis added; II. ii. 86-87). Unfortunately for the entire Cenci family, his father knows no such deference.

As the play progresses, Count Cenci is seen to be a man trapped by his own intellect and scornful of his feelings. For him, the will takes precedence over all else. He is dimly aware of the compulsive, self-destructive nature of his own personality, yet pride in his own mental ability drives him on. Early in the play, Orsino (with unusual sensitivity) reflects on Cenci's character:

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

The calculating principle, the analytical power, tempts pride and will. This leads to corruption.

Orsino's indictment includes the entire Cenci family; he charges them all with the potential for pride, willfulness, and a misplaced trust in their intellectual prowess. Reasonably, we may infer from Orsino's statement the fall of any person who participates in this family "trick," including Beatrice. This does not mean that Beatrice must be a corrupt figure either at the beginning of the drama or its end. But the possibility exists. Furthermore, if (as some critics recognize) Count Cenci contaminates Beatrice during the drama, she may just as easily have been corrupted by him prior to the play's opening. Beatrice's corruption at the start of the drama must remain a moot question. What is certain is that, from the beginning of the play, she (like Count Cenci) analyzes her own and other minds, she is proud and willful, and she excels at oratory. From the first, indeed, Shelley is careful to parallel the two protagonists. The play opens with Cenci negotiating his freedom from a priest whom he controls; in the subsequent scene, Beatrice does the same with a priest whom she controls. When the two first meet on stage, the clash of their personalities implies a similarity that is borne out by later events. At the Count's heinous banquet, for instance, Beatrice is a match for her father's arrogance when she commands him: "Retire thou, impious man! Aye hide thyself / Where never eye can look upon thee more" (I. iii. 146-147). As the play proceeds, the virtuous Beatrice comes to resemble her father more and more, until they both blaspheme, assume the prerogatives of God, and die in despair. In fact, the *innocent* Beatrice is little more than a memory within the play. On stage, her actions are selfish and her speeches are models of dissemblance. Even her own frequent references to her goodness become suspect when, a murderess before the Pope's court, she tries to conceal her guilt by touting that same reputation for virtue. When *The Cenci* draws to a close, qualities that A *Defence of Poetry* attributed to "unimaginative" and "corrupt" char-

acters are equally applicable to Count Cenci and Beatrice. Both are "cold, cruel, and sensual"; the two are "insensible and selfish"; they are motivated by "lust, fear, avarice, cruelty, and fraud." In his "Preface" to the drama, Shelley faults Beatrice when he says: "Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes" (p. 240).

The Beatrice who is her father's daughter begins to appear from her first words. She commands the priest, Orsino: "Pervert not the truth" (I. iii. 1). The remainder of her speech, ironically, is a rhetorical strategem designed to effect exactly the twisting of truth that she warns against. To gain his sympathy while maintaining her own independence, she introduces amatory diction, and when Orsino responds in kind, she retorts: "speak to me not of love" (I. ii. 14). Exemplifying that Cenci knack for analyzing other minds, she remarks that Orsino's "equivocating vein" does not please her. By this tactic, she subtly encourages a greater commitment by him to disprove the charge. Lest he be offended and abandon her, though, she immediately blames the criticism upon her "misery." In this way, she manages to turn an insult into the means for increasing his sympathy for her plight. Throughout this speech, Beatrice presents herself as a weak and vulnerable girl, easy game for the aggressive Orsino. But she seduces the would-be seducer and ensnares Orsino in the net he has woven for her. When she swears to him a "cold fidelity," her true nature appears. And after she leaves him, Orsino is justifiably troubled and ponders aloud: "I fear / Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze, / Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve / And lay me bare, and make me blush to see / My hidden thoughts" (I. ii. 83-87). No sooner has he expressed these doubts than he recants, proving the power of Beatrice's rhetoric. He chooses to accept her construction of reality and to deny his intuition: "Ah, no! A friendless girl / Who clings to me, as to her only hope" (I. ii. 87-88).

The next scene offers Beatrice another chance to display her deliberative oratorical skills. While her presence before the assembled guests is occasioned by the death of her brothers, she is not overcome with grief. She seizes, instead, upon the opportunity to argue her case against her father. Her opening appeal establishes the affected tone of

the total performance: "I do entreat you, go not, noble guests ..." (I. iii. 99). This obsequiousness is followed by a condemnation of her father that advances her own innocence at the same time. In a brilliant maneuver, she asks her audience: "Oh, think what deep wrongs must have blotted out / First love, then reverence in a child's prone mind / Till it thus vanquish shame and fear" (I. iii. 108-110). Throughout this scene, her hortatory skills are on full display, and near the close of her appearance, she again flatters her audience and says: "Father, never dream / That thou mayest overbear this company" (II. i. 149-150). But this time her insincerity is apparent to everyone because Count Cenci's control of those assembled is well-known. Southerland Bates recognizes the falseness of Beatrice's speeches to the banquet guests, and he terms them "unnatural and artificial."¹² While Bates charges Shelley with a stylistic slip, the remaining speeches of Beatrice will indicate that this artificiality is fully appropriate to her character.

Beatrice's mad speech that follows is spoken "wildly" and "frantically," yet it is a masterpiece of dissimulation. Never was madness so designing. Indeed, her suffering is so great that she can not bear to speak its cause, and so the audience must conclude the worst that it might imagine.¹³ As her performance continues, her self-pity becomes too much for even her patient stepmother to bear, and Lucretia finally scolds: "Hide not in proud impenetrable grief / Thy sufferings from my fear" (III. i. 105-106). But Beatrice chooses not to hear. Instead, in the midst of her ravings — while she can not recognize herself or Lucretia, she claims — she utters the word "parricide." Accidental or cunningly planned, once the idea is in her mind, Beatrice (like her father) is compelled to act the thing, thought. After Orsino appears and is also moved by her grief, Beatrice begins her revenge. Having gained sympathy for her plight, she now seeks collaborators for her plot. This "friendless girl" whom Orsino purportedly manipulates, tells him: "put off, as garments overworn, / Forbearance and respect ... / And all the fit restraints of daily life ..." (III. i. 208-212). With these words, she enlists the aid of family and friends to accomplish her personal retribution against her father.

By the close of this third act, Beatrice has come to usurp divine prerogatives. She refers to her revenge as a "holier plea" and an "atonement." Then she proves that her revenge is not one of passion, but a crime of calculated premeditation; she says: "I have talked with my heart, / And have unravelled my entangled will, / And have at

length determined what is right" (III. i. 219-221). Next she commands her confederates to be "brief and bold." The identification between herself and her father becomes more complete, however, when she uses the same words that the Count had used to describe himself, and she tells the conspirators to "put off ... remorse and fear" (III. i. 208-209).

Just as the opening scenes parallel the two protagonists, so do the closing scenes in which they both appear. In the Count's last scene, he controls the action but is deterred by first Lucretia and then Beatrice. He calls Lucretia a "Vile palterer" and then speaks his famous imprecations against his daughter. Following these curses, Cenci contemplates revenge and becomes excited by the thought. He notes that "My blood is running up and down my veins" (IV. i. 163), yet he says he will sleep a "deep and calm" rest, undisturbed by conscience, before he commits his ultimate retribution. In the subsequent scene, Beatrice similarly controls the action as she directs the parricide she has planned. When the hired assassins first lose their nerve, she refers to them as "Base palterers" and goes on to curse them and her father. She proposes to murder Cenci herself and is excited by the prospect: "the jellied blood / Runs freely through my veins" (IV. iii. 43-44). After a short delay, the assassins return and report that the Count is dead, and Beatrice, undisturbed by conscience, remarks that "I could even sleep / Fearless and calm" (IV. iii. 64-65).

Beatrice's murder of Cenci eliminates one source of evil only to create another. Her corruption now supplants her father's, and her hubris rivals his when she announces: "I am as universal as the light; / Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm / As the world's centre. Consequence, to me, / Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock / But shakes it not" (IV. iv. 48-52). With the arrival of the papal legate and the possibility of the murder's detection, Beatrice advises Lucretia: "Be bold," and then counsels her how to proceed: "We can blind / Suspicion with such cheap astonishment / Or overbear it with such guiltless pride ..." (IV. iv. 43-45). This radical dissociation of sensibility recommended by Beatrice is precisely the antithesis of poetry as defined by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*. There he explains that language and thought are harmoniously synthesized when the imagination is at work, but when language is divorced from thought, only malignancy and obscenity result.¹⁴ From this point forward, Beatrice's speeches reflect this dissociation of sensibility. They are models

of rhetorical dissimulation, twisted truth, specious reasoning, and blatant lies that equal the cunning stratagems of Iago or Dryden's Achitophel. She manipulates ethos, logos, and pathos to persuade the tribunal of her innocence. Perjuring herself, she says: "Hear me, great God! I swear, most innocent" (V. ii. 152). Then she tricks Camillo into condemning himself, provokes the death of Marzio, and even berates her mother and brother by calling them "ignoble hearts." In the midst of all these self-serving ploys, Beatrice unwittingly describes her own situation when she warns her judges: "Worse than a bloody hand is a hard heart" (V. ii. 133). And she has, undoubtedly, become hard-hearted and resourceful. So adroit is she at feigning innocence and wielding spurious logic, indeed, that she almost eludes conviction. Only the more human weakness of her confederates gives her away, and they confess their part in the scheme. Good Giacomo then urges Beatrice: "For pity's sake say thou are guilty now" (V. iii. 54), to which Lucretia adds, "Speak the truth." Beatrice, nevertheless, remains unmoved.

By the close of the drama, the relationship between Beatrice and Count Cenci is remarkably similar to the relationship between God and Satan that Shelley described in his essay "On the Devil and Devils," probably written in the same year. Cenci's actions seem to be analogous to those Shelley attributes to God, and Beatrice's actions to those of Satan: "He [God] turned his [Satan's] good to evil, and, by virtue of his [God's] omnipotence, inspired him [Satan] with such impulses as, in spite of his better nature, irresistibly determined him to act what he most abhorred and to be a minister to those designs and schemes of which he was the chief and the original victim."¹⁵ That Shelley conceived of Beatrice as an equivalent to Satan finds corroboration in two of his prefaces. In the forward to *Prometheus Unbound*, he warns that "the character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry" (p. 133), in the "Preface" to *The Cenci*, he applies the same words to describe the reaction of men to Beatrice: "It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice" (p. 240). Although Cenci instigates the evil, Beatrice falls into the pit because she is unable to *imagine* an alternative.

Beatrice's final identification with Satan helps to explain the one revision Shelley made to the original Cenci manuscript source that did not "increase the ideal, and diminish the horror of the events" (p. 239). The historical account of the Cenci family tragedy ends on an uncom-

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promisingly high moral note. It records how Beatrice repented her crime before her execution: "Lucretia ... with gentle exhortations induced her daughter-in-law to enter the chapel with her." Together, the account goes on to relate, they spent their last days "reciting psalms and litanies and other prayers, with so much fervour that it will appear that they were assisted by the peculiar grace of God."¹⁶ But Shelley's version contains no such penitence. Beatrice, instead, dies fulfilling the Count's final curse, that "Beatrice shall ... Die in despair, blaspheming" (IV. i. 49-50). Therefore, when Lucretia anticipates Paradise and entreats her daughter-in-law to "trust in God's sweet love, / The tender promises of Christ" (V. iv. 25-26), Beatrice retorts: "your words strike chill: / How tedious, false and cold seem all things" (V. iv. 80-81).

The Satanic identification of Beatrice is one explanation for her failure to repent her parricide. But there is another explanation which more fully substantiates the thesis of *this* analysis. Beatrice, from this point of view, is unable to attain salvation because such a response depends upon faith, and faith is an imaginative act unavailable to such an unimaginative character. At the close of the drama, therefore, it is fitting that Beatrice views the world in starkly realistic terms. She laments: "So young to go / Under the obscure, rotting, wormy ground" (V. iv. 49-50). When she considers man, it is not his spiritual essence that comes to mind, but "cold, cruel, and formal man" (V. iv. 108). Beatrice is captive to her senses; faith is beyond her ability. And when faced with death, she perceives it only in terms of the material world and exclaims: "How fearful! to be nothing" (V. iv. 55). Worse than death is "hope," she concludes, and denies herself an imaginative escape. Her final observation concerning death proves her failure to accept the possibility of an afterlife and her ultimate despair: "rock me to the sleep from which none wake" (V. iv. 115-118). Beatrice admits "my heart is cold"; she then dispassionately binds back her hair for the beheading. Even at the final moment, she is preoccupied with material rather than spiritual concerns.

The critical disagreement over Beatrice's true identity, though important, is overshadowed by a more disconcerting problem: Why does Shelley permit such confusion to occur when he repeatedly notes that drama is supposed to instruct the human heart? One possibility is that the potential for misinterpretation is intentional and exists to advance the play's instruction. In short, Shelley hopes that the reader

will first try to justify Beatrice's actions, realize the error of his logic, and transfer his trust, instead, to his more reliable emotional responses. Should the reader fail to reevaluate his first, reasoned response, Shelley adds a warning in the "Preface" about the "anatomizing" casuistry of those readers who would defend the actions of Beatrice. The final interpretation of *The Cenci*, therefore, depends upon the same duality of reason and imagination as that which controls the play's plot and characters. Just as within the dramatic situation, the participants are duped by their reason and consequently destroyed, likewise a reader will also be duped if he acquiesces to Beatrice's faulty logic or the self-serving observations of her confederates. Reason is fallible; only the heart rings true. Parricide and despair are not exculpatory. The wholesale destruction of a family is beyond defense.

In his recent study *The Unacknowledged Legislator*, P. M. S. Dawson calls attention to this participatory drama and notes: "*The Cenci* poses the story of Beatrice as a problem, and impels the audience to an examination of their own reactions to work out its solution, rather than imposing authorial design."¹⁷ In his "Preface" to the play, Shelley implies much the same thing when he observes that "the highest moral purpose" of drama is the "teaching of the human heart, through its own sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself ..." (p. 240). The larger world of *The Cenci* includes its audience, and only when the reader realizes that he is rationalizing that which is beyond rationalization is the dramatic experience completed. It is this action which Shelley refers to in *A Defence of Poetry* when he writes that "tragedies ... are as mirrors in which the spectator beholds himself" (p. 490). The reader undergoes a similar deception by his calculating faculty as does Beatrice. On the stage and in the audience, by example and through experience, Shelley teaches the error of faith in reason.

NOTES

¹ *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), p. 491. All future references to Shelley's poetry and prose are from this source unless noted otherwise.

² "Notes" to *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary Shelley (Philadelphia, 1839), p. 182.

³ *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, 2nd ed. (London, 1828), p. 368.

⁴ Flagg, "Shelley and Aristotle: Elements of the Poetics in Shelley's Theory of Poetry," *SIR* 9 (1970), 66; Gottlieb, "Cosmic Allegory in *The Cenci*," *Aligarh Journal of English Studies*, 3 (1978), 32.

⁵ Leslie G. Burgevin, *The Mount Holyoke (Mass.) News*, quoted in Bert O. States, "Addendum: The Stage History of Shelley's *The Cenci*," *PMLA*, 72 (1957), 638.

⁶ Newman Ivey White, *Shelley* (New York, 1940), 2:139; Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton, 1948), p. 148; Floyd Stovall, *Desire and Restraint in Shelley* (Durham, 1931), p. 250; Melvin Watson, "Shelley and Tragedy: The Case of Beatrice Cenci," *KSJ*, 7 (1958), 14; Robert F. Whitman, "Beatrice's 'Pernicious Mistake' in *The Cenci*," *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 253.

⁷ Rieger, *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York, 1967); Reiman, *Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York, 1969); Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, Md., 1971).

⁸ Evert, "Coadjutors of Evil: A Romantic and Modern Theory of Evil," *Romantic and Modern: Revaluations of Literary Tradition*, ed. George Bornstein (Pittsburgh, 1977), p. 41; Lemoncelli, "Cenci as Corrupt Dramatic Poet," *ELN*, 16 (1978), 112.

⁹ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford [England], 1964), 2:219.

¹⁰ Lemoncelli, in his excellent article, uses the discussion of drama in *A Defence of Poetry* to establish Count Cenci as a possible analogue of the corrupt poet figure.

¹¹ *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), p. 409.

¹² *A Study of Shelley's Drama "The Cenci"* (New York, 1908), p. 88.

¹³ So successful is Beatrice in hiding the cause of her grief that some critics doubt she was ravished. Milton Wilson in *Shelley's Later Poetry* (New York, 1959), for instance, suggests that Shelley "has left it ambiguous whether the Count's plot was successful or not" (p. 85).

¹⁴ See *A Defence of Poetry*, *passim*.

¹⁵ *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque, 1954), p. 270.

¹⁶ "Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci," Appendix, *Shelley's Works in Verse and Prose*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman (London 1876-1880), 2:401.

¹⁷ (Oxford, [England], 1980), p. 216.

They gladly handle ambulance calls, but a person who has access to the ambulance phone number will find it faster to call direct just because the location and directions have to be relayed twice.

No one expects an emergency, but it certainly is comforting to know these