

**A STUDY OF
SHELLEY'S
DRAMA THE CENCI**

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ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

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I

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

"The Cenci" has long been recognized as one of Shelley's most important works, and by some has even been considered the greatest of all. Yet of definite criticism or thorough analysis it has received far less than "Queen Mab," "Alastor," "Prometheus Unbound," "Epipsychidion," or "Adonais." Aside from the interesting but bigoted contemporary criticism, and the almost equally prejudiced newspaper reviews of the performance by the Shelley Society in 1886, we are confined for our information to a single monograph dealing mainly with the drama's relations to its source,¹ and to scattered paragraphs here and there in biographies and essays. Even these paragraphs often seem more perfunctory than in the case of Shelley's other works, as if the writers had merely glanced at "The Cenci" en route from the more congenial fields in the "Prometheus" to those in the "Epipsychidion."

For this comparative neglect of the play by Shelley students there are several reasons. Its subject-matter, incest, is not an attractive or a significant theme for the world to-day; and the interest of Byron and Shelley in the topic inevitably seems to us morbid and unhealthy. This in itself may have been sufficient to prevent many critics from making a careful examination of the play. More important still is the fact that "The Cenci" is in its style less individually characteristic of the author than is any other of his mature works. In this regard one writer has asserted: "Were the tragedy now first discovered in manuscript, and did we only know that it was written by someone who was alive in 1819, Shelley is one of the last persons to whom, from the internal evidence of his other poems, it would be assigned."² Had this writer been asked to what other contemporary poet it would rather have been assigned, he might have found it difficult to reply, but his

¹ Wilhelm Wagner *Shelley's 'The Cenci,'* Rostock 1903.

² George Stillman Hillard, *Six Months in Italy*, London 1853, ii. 335-36.

statement is only an exaggeration, not a perversion, of the truth. The lyrical ecstasy and the rapturous melody, the profuse imagery and the impassioned description, which give Shelley's poetry its greatest individual charm, are all moderated and restrained in "The Cenci" to accord with the dramatic purpose. The metaphysical pantheism of Shelley, which to his more enthusiastic followers makes his poetry a source of religious inspiration, is hardly apparent, and the political socialism so prominent elsewhere is here quite absent. Under these circumstances it is perhaps no wonder that "The Cenci" has received less attention than its importance and intrinsic merits deserve.

Its importance consists chiefly in the light which it throws upon the total nature of Shelley's genius. In the first place, ✓ "The Cenci" is of especial interest as one of the poet's few attempts to handle a historical subject. The question at once arises, Does the treatment confirm or modify the impression, gained from Shelley's biography, of his general inability to estimate correctly the significance of past history? How far, if at all, does it show evidence of what we may call "historical-mindedness"? In the second place, and much more to be emphasized, is the importance derived from the fact that "The Cenci" was Shelley's one completed attempt in regular drama. The question as to how far he succeeded in this is full of meaning for our estimate of his poetic power and potentiality, and it is one not to be answered by sweeping generalization, but by a detailed examination of the relation of "The Cenci" to the chief factors involved in dramatic composition. What of the structure, and of the influences which determined it? What of the characters, and of the reasons which led Shelley to treat them as he has done? What of the style, and of its suitability to dramatic needs? What of the meter, and of the means by which Shelley, master of rhythm and melody as he was, here obtained the metrical effects which he desired? Finally, what are we to say of the play as a whole, of its relative literary and dramatic value, and of its significance in our understanding of Shelley as man and as poet? These are the chief problems of which an attempted solution is set forth in the following pages.

II

COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION OF "THE CENCI"

Shelley was probably the most rapid writer among all the great English poets, with the exception of Shakespeare and Byron. In the composition of "The Cenci" he surpassed even his own normal rate of speed. While the "Revolt of Islam" and the first three acts of "Prometheus Unbound" had occupied five and six months respectively, the time spent in the actual composition of "The Cenci" was only two months,¹ although its general theme, to be sure, had been in the poet's mind for a considerably longer period.

Soon after Shelley's first arrival in Italy an Italian manuscript account of the wrongs of Beatrice Cenci, called a "Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci," came temporarily into his hands at Leghorn. On May 25, 1818,² a little before their departure for the Baths of Lucca, Mrs. Shelley made a copy of this manuscript, and, then or later, she or Shelley³ translated it into English. The poet at once perceived the fitness of the subject for tragedy and urged it upon his wife, who, however, distrusted her own powers, and declined the task. The mere story evidently did not have sufficient fascination for Shelley at this time to inspire his own imagination to the point of writing, and the subject seems to have slipped into the background of his consciousness until the following

¹ Shelley to Peacock, Aug. 22 (?), 1819 (Peacock, *Works*, III. 465).

² Mrs. Shelley's note to *The Cenci* in her 1839 editions gives Rome, 1819, as the place and time of Shelley's first acquaintance with the manuscript, but the contemporary evidence of her journal gives the earlier date (Dowden, *Life of Shelley*, II. 277).

³ The translation has been usually attributed to Shelley, but his own statement to Peacock is simply, "I send you a translation of the Italian manuscript on which my play is founded" (Shelley to Peacock, August 22 (?), 1819). Robert Browning thought he remembered having heard somewhere that the translation was by Mrs. Shelley (Browning, *Works*, Camberwell ed., ix. 305).

spring at Rome. Here he found a universal acquaintance with the story, and everywhere the same interest and sympathy with the unfortunate heroine. This convinced him that the plot already possessed that inestimable dramatic advantage, common to the Greek and some Elizabethan plays, of previous existence in the popular consciousness as a source of tragic emotion.

But the real inspiration for his work seems to have come from the supposed portrait¹ of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni in the Barberini² palace. At that time there was no doubt entertained as to the authenticity of the picture, painted, according to tradition, in prison the day before the execution. From Shelley's description in the preface to his drama it is easy to see how his imagination was fired:

"The portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace is admirable as a work of art; it was made by Guido during her confinement in prison. But it is most interesting as a just representation of one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature. There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features; she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched; the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suf-

¹The authenticity of the picture was disproved by A. Bertolotti in his "Francesco Cenci e la sua famiglia" in 1879. He found that the first payment made to Guido Reni for painting in Rome was dated 1608, nine years after Beatrice's execution, and that there was no reason to believe that he had ever painted there before that year. Catalogues of the Barberini Palace in 1604 and 1623 made no mention of any picture of Beatrice Cenci. The *Edinburgh Review*, in a discussion of Bertolotti's book, pointed out the further fact that the same head appears in other pictures by Guido,—in the Orsini Palace, in the Rospigliosi Palace, and in the chapel attached to the Church of St. Gregory (*Edinburgh Review*, cxlix. 33-34). But it is possible that the painting is by some imitator of Guido's style.

²Shelley and Mrs. Shelley both speak of the portrait as in the Colonna Palace, but it is at present in the Barberini, and was seen there as early as 1823 by Henri Beyle. There is no record of its ever having been in the Colonna Palace.

fering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which, united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow, are inexpressibly pathetic. Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another; her nature was simple and profound. The crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world."

It is worth while to compare with this description one by another great writer equally sensitive to the charm of the picture, but differing from Shelley in his interpretation. Hawthorne, in the seventh chapter of "The Marble Faun" represents his heroine, Hilda, to have painted a copy of Guido's Beatrice, which he thus describes: "The picture represented simply a female head; a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, enveloped in white drapery, from beneath which strayed a lock or two of what seemed a rich, though hidden luxuriance of auburn hair. The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape. There was a little redness about the eyes, very slightly indicated, so that you would question whether or no the girl had been weeping. The whole face was quiet; there was no distortion or disturbance of any single feature; nor was it easy to see why the expression was not cheerful, or why a single touch of the artist's pencil should not brighten it into joyousness. But, in fact, it was the very saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition. It was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity, and set her in a far-off region, the remoteness of which—while yet her face is so close before us—makes us shiver as at a spectre."

Between these two descriptions there are to be noted slight

differences of observation, in regard to the exact color of the hair, its arrangement, and the evidences of weeping;—but the radical divergence lies in the interpretation. Hawthorne notices chiefly the situation, and the isolation of Beatrice from normal human life; Shelley feels rather the nobility of her character, and regards her as an example of excellence for human life. This view, more ideal and less true to the circumstances, was, as we shall see, fundamental in Shelley's handling of the character.

The hold which the story had now taken upon the poet was increased by a visit which he and his wife paid about this time to the ruins of the Cenci Palace.¹ His mind was now moved to the point of creation, and he saw in these rather squalid buildings the solemn and fitting scene of tragedy. In his preface he describes them thus:

“The Cenci Palace is of great extent; and, though in part modernized, there yet remains a vast and gloomy pile of feudal architecture in the same state as during the dreadful scenes which are the subject of this tragedy. The Palace is situated in an obscure corner of Rome, near the quarter of the Jews, and from the upper windows you see the immense ruins of Mount Palatine half hidden under their profuse overgrowth of trees. There is a court in one part of the Palace (perhaps that in which Cenci built the Chapel to St. Thomas), supported by granite columns and adorned with antique friezes of fine workmanship, and built up, according to the ancient Italian fashion, with balcony over balcony of openwork. One of the gates of the Palace formed of immense stones and leading through a passage, dark and lofty and opening into gloomy subterranean chambers, struck me particularly.”

How these same buildings appear to the ordinary man who carries no unborn drama in his mind may be seen from the following description by one James Henry Dixon:² “I have just been visiting the principal scene of Shelley's tragedy, ‘Beatrice Cenci.’ I had some little difficulty in finding the place; but, at last, after walking through several narrow, tor-

¹ Dowden, *Life*, ii. 277.

² *American Biblioplist*, vii. 165, June 1875.