

## The Harmony of the Horrorscape: A Perspective on *The Cenci*

Daniel Davy

Most of the body of criticism devoted to Shelley's *The Cenci* approaches it as tragedy, and, moreover, as tragedy which is essentially in the Aristotelian mold.<sup>1</sup> Beatrice, the obvious protagonist in the play, goaded by countless outrages at the hands of her father Count Cenci, finally retaliates in kind by murdering her tormentor, and is consequently destroyed. Her capacity to participate in the Count's basic "action" (the pervasive evil which he embodies and represents--killing, blood lust, etc.) constitutes her *hamartia*; the actual murder of the Count constitutes the *peripety* of the play's action which then leads on to Beatrice's fall.<sup>2</sup> The Count, a lurid and sensational figure, is usually relegated to a relatively minor role. Indeed, it is the very size and nature of the "evil" which he represents in the play which results in a downgrading of his significance, for Count Cenci is a figure of truly spectacular malignancy:

All men enjoy revenge; and most exult  
 Over the tortures they can never feel--  
 Flattering their secret peace with others' pain.  
 But I delight in nothing else. I love  
 The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,  
 When this shall be another's, and that mine.  
 And I have no remorse and little fear. . . .  
                   yet, till I killed a foe,  
 And heard his groans, and heard his children's groans,

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Daniel Davy is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Dramatic Art, University of California at Santa Barbara, and is currently completing his dissertation. His essay on Jerzy Grotowski appears in a recent issue of *Essays in Theatre*.

Knew I not what delight was else on earth,  
 Which now delights me little. I the father  
 Look on such pangs as terror ill conceals,  
 The dry fixed eyeball; the pale quivering lip,  
 Which tell me that the spirit weeps within  
 Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ.  
 (I.i.78-84,106-113)

And referring to his daughter, Beatrice:

Might I not drag her by the golden hair?  
 Stamp on her? Keep her sleepless till her brain  
 Be overworn? Tame her with chains and famine? . . .  
 No, tis her stubborn will,  
 Which, by its own consent, shall stoop as low  
 As that which drags it down. . . .  
 Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate,  
 Die in despair, blaspheming. . . .  
 What sufferings? I will drag her, step by step,  
 Through infamies unheard of among men. . . .  
 Her corpse shall be abandoned to the hounds;  
 Her name shall be the terror of the earth;  
 Her spirit shall approach the throne of God  
 Plague-spotted with my curses. I will make  
 Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin.  
 (IV.i.6-12,49-50,80-81,91-95)

Carlos Baker comments on "the sneaking suspicion that Count Cenci is far too evil to be credible," and a considerable amount of the criticism devoted to the play follows a similar strategy of devaluation.<sup>3</sup> This approach to the play thus tends to regard the Count as performing an essentially abstract dramatic function within the structure of the action--he catalyzes and activates a hitherto dormant aspect of Beatrice's character which then leads her to destruction. The Count's *own* character--spectacular, lurid and "(in)credible" as it is, is regarded as of only marginal significance. Such a reading of the play, while no doubt yielding valuable insights in a number of areas, nevertheless seems to me to run a clear risk of essentially overlooking the very source of the play's expressive power. As an alternative approach, I would suggest that we should look at the Count and his world not from the vantage point of the *clarity* of our own highly rationalized perspective (in which the Count might well appear as a kind of cartoon figure), but from the *obscurity* of the world of nineteenth century "dark romanticism," a world which *The Cenci* preeminently embodies. To what degree is the "dark" or "gothic" ambience of the play relevant to an interpretation of its content?

The principal definition--or certainly connotation--for "darkness" in this context is of course "evil"--a role very amply embodied by Count Cenci. That the Count is "evil" is indisputable; what does, however, seem to me open to question is the idea that the obvious villainy of the Count's *actions* exhausts the potentiality of the notion of "darkness" as applied to this character. For the "dark deeds" of Count Cenci represent only the objective aspect of his malignancy; of greater significance--in the context here of the play's "romantic" side--is his persistent and inexorable influence over the subjective sphere, his command over the forces of *imagination* at work throughout the totality of the play's world.<sup>4</sup>

A wonderful explanation, or rather, a kind of metaphor, for exactly what I mean here can be found in an essay by Ann Radcliffe, one of the most prominent of the "gothic" novelists of the early nineteenth century. The essay is structured as a fictional dialogue between two travellers in the English countryside, Messrs. "S" and "W." The discussion turns to the witches of *Macbeth*, and to the then common practice of attempting to "naturalize" these figures in stage presentation. Mr. S is in favor of such an interpretation, but Mr. W dissents:

I, now, have sometimes considered, that it was quite suitable to make Scotch witches on the stage, appear like Scotch women. You must recollect that, in the superstition concerning witches, they lived familiarly upon the earth, mortal sorcerers, and were not always known from mere old women; consequently they must have appeared in the dress of the country where they happened to live, or they would have been more than suspected of witchcraft, which we find was not always the case."

"You are speaking of old women, and not of witches," said W, laughing, . . . "I am speaking of *the only real witch--the witch of the poet*; and all our notions and feelings connected with terror accord with his. The wild attire, the look *not of this earth*, are essential traits of supernatural agents, working evil in the darkness of mystery." (1st emphasis mine; 2nd emphasis Radcliffe)<sup>5</sup>

Radcliffe's phrase "poet's witch" seems to me very suggestive indeed. For the notion of "poet's witch" mates the creativity and potency associated with the idea of *imagination* with the sinister potentiality inherent in the condition of *darkness*; why, we must ask, the "working of *evil* in the darkness of (this) mystery" if not an avowal of that primordial dread necessarily aroused in the presence of the utterly unknown? Gothic "darkness" here establishes hegemony, not over its traditional terrain of windswept moors and bats in the night, but over and within the *mind* itself--its interiority, its mystery, its potentially unknowable status. An unknown but, paradoxically, not an *alien* presence. Mrs. Radcliffe continues:

Whenever the poet's witch condescends, according to the vulgar notion, to mingle mere ordinary mischief with her malignity, and to become familiar, she is ludicrous, *and loses her power over the imagination*. . . . In nothing has Shakspeare (sic) been more successful than in this . . . that of selecting circumstances of manners and appearance for his supernatural beings, *which, though wild and remote, in the highest degree, from common apprehension, never shock the understanding by incompatibility with themselves*. . . . (147) (my emphasis)

The eldritch imagery of the gothic world holds its "power over the imagination" by virtue of linking the extraordinary with the somehow familiar, and it is precisely this shadowy recognition of the "alien within" which can stimulate the darkest corners of existential dread.

An intriguing echo of Radcliffe's "witch of the poet" can be found in our own time in the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacan, who is himself regarded as a maverick revisionist by orthodox Freudians, asserts in his turn that the various functions associated with the Freudian "unconscious" have become overly and falsely systematized by contemporary "Freudians"; the "unconscious" has been reduced to a closed system of causalities, rendered into a finite and altogether *knowable* phenomenon. In contrast to such a view, Lacan urges a return to the Freud who is himself a "revisionist," the man whose analyses could render meaningful the mystery of the dream, but who foundered before "the navel of the dream," whose deductive powers located--at or near the very center of the psyche--an "infernal opening" which he perceived as ultimately impenetrable.<sup>6</sup> At this primordial and critical locus of the psyche, Lacan himself finds an "ultimately unknown centre," and a "cause . . . that, in the last resort, is unanalysable" (23, 21).

And yet however impenetrable this psychic center may appear from without, or if regarded and scrutinized "objectively," subjectively one is nevertheless "at home" (Lacan 36) within its mysterious depths, which are not, for all of that, any the less mysterious for the self who lives there. The "poet" creates, but can nevertheless find his "creation" at least partially inexplicable. It is this capacity for being both "known" and "unknown," "there" and "not there" as it were, which Lacan finally designates as "neither being nor non-being, but the 'unrealized.'" (30)

It is in my view precisely at this nexus of the psyche, the realm of the "poet's witch" or, as Lacan elsewhere puts it, this "zone of shades," that the drama of *The Cenci* occurs. Here is an arena which is at once a source of power and at the same time an area of acute vulnerability, both notions comprehended in Lacan's term "unrealized": the creative source of any particular "realization" associated with the concept of *imagi:ation* on the one hand, and the notion of impenetrability and mystery--"the look not of this earth"--associated with the condition of psychic *darkness* on the other.

This dark and potent center of the psyche, in its "unrealized" status, remains but a sleeping enigma, a wholly dormant potentiality. "Reality," Lacan tells us, "is in abeyance there, awaiting attention." (56) What kind of attention? Within itself, as a still and sheltered interiority, the self maintains its autonomy; its dark, unpotentiated center carries no sinister implications. But, returning now to our play, what might be the implications or ultimate consequences if such a subject not only found itself within a world which is *itself* wholly "dark," but was also subjected to the incessant and malevolent "attentions" of an agency who functions as both the dominant center of that objective world, as well as its spiritual personification? In order to discover how such dark potentialities might disclose themselves as a dramatic action, we must now turn our attention to a close examination of the play.

"Darkness" and "mystery" are not only generalities which can be applied to the overall ambience of *The Cenci*, but also function as essential ingredients of the "precipitating crisis" of the play, the rape of Beatrice which occurs between Acts two and three. It is significant that the word "rape" is never used in the play, nor is the specific act even euphemistically referred to. The fact that we do not know *what really happened* in this dark interval is to some degree an observance of contemporary sensibilities, but it is also an essential strategy of the play. Given the overall ambience of *The Cenci* and the specific obscurity of the interval between Acts two and three, the labeling of the Count's attack unequivocally as "rape" seems to me potentially misleading. What do we mean by this term? The word has taken on a host of "clinical" connotations; our empathy and sense of outrage with reference to this crime has grown so acute that we have come to associate the word with its only potential remedy--healing, therapy. The aim of our contemporary therapies is to *illuminate*, to provide as comprehensive an understanding as possible so that the hurtful effects of this act can be assimilated and hopefully neutralized. Our use of the concept of "rape," therefore, tends toward the *finite*--it renders it *known*. But the Count's attack on Beatrice, I would suggest, is something more than the latest and greatest of the long series of crimes he has already perpetrated upon her--crimes which have failed in their objective of breaking his daughter's spirit, which remains, as it were, *in the light*. I would suggest that "darkness" is a fundamental constituent of the Count's deed, that his crime was deliberately designed to disallow the possibility of present or future illumination. Beatrice is violated, but she *does not know* exactly what has occurred. And yet, uncannily, she does.

The Count's intention was first revealed at the close of Act I, following the tumult generated by the Count's celebration of the death of his sons, and Beatrice's desperate and failed attempt to enlist support from among the hastily departing guests. Only the Count and his daughter remain on stage, but Beatrice is soon to follow the departed guests, lashed off the stage by the following invective:

Thou painted viper!  
 Beast that thou art! Fair and yet terrible!  
 I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame,  
 Now get thee from my sight!  
 (*Exit* BEATRICE) (I.iii.165-168)

It is clear what the term "charm" refers to; what is somewhat strange is the Count's assumption that even this enormity will indeed "tame" his daughter. Is this act, hideous to be sure, of a fundamentally different nature than the abominations already inflicted? Beatrice has been "tortured. . . from her forgotten years": dragged by the hair through the halls of the palace, "trampled" so that the "blood stream(s)" down "pallid cheeks," fed a diet of "ditch water" and "fever-stricken buffaloe," cast naked with "scaly reptiles" into dungeons, forced to witness her gangrene infested brother rotting in his chains, and has been the object of numerous other atrocities only hinted at in the text. As yet "untamed" by this treatment, why the certitude that even this new and probably greatest outrage will do the trick?

But there is a still greater anomaly here. Beatrice's exit is immediately followed by these lines from the Count:

Here Andrea,  
 Fill up this goblet with Greek wine. I said  
 I would not drink this evening; but I must;  
 For, strange to say, I feel my spirits fail  
 With thinking what I have decreed to do.--  
 (I.iii.168-172)

"Strange to say," indeed, rather extraordinary! If the Count really imagines that her rape will "tame" Beatrice, then his sense of the psychological and spiritual agony this crime will cause her to suffer must be very great indeed. Why, then, the "failing spirits" from the man who "exults over torture," "loves the sight of agony," and who "delights in nothing else"? The feeling expressed here is totally atypical, and if we turn from the Count's own reaction to his intended deed to his anticipation of his daughter's reaction, we find additional peculiarities.

The Count makes but a single additional appearance on stage before the rape occurs, entering the action about midway during Act II, scene i. The scene closes with Count Cenci once again alone on stage, voicing the following meditation:

Come darkness! Yet, what is the day to me?  
 And wherefore should I wish for night, who do  
 A deed which shall confound both night and day?  
 'Tis she shall grope through a bewildering mist  
 Of horror: if there be a sun in heaven  
 She shall not dare to look upon its beams:  
 Nor feel its warmth. Let her then wish for night;  
 The act I think shall soon extinguish all  
 For me: I bear a darker deadlier gloom  
 Than the earth's shade, or interlunar air,  
 Or constellations quenched in murkiest cloud,  
 In which I walk secure and unbeheld  
 Towards my purpose.--Would that it were done!  
 (*Exit.*) (II.i.181-93)

Is there not something more here than the Count's anticipation of the intense and natural revulsion he believes his daughter will suffer? The Count invokes darkness, claiming to bear a "darker deadlier gloom than the earth's shade . . .", and so forth. There is nothing surprising in this. But note his assertions with reference to Beatrice. She "shall not dare to look upon (the) sun in heaven," and will "wish for night," just as he does. He anticipates, does he not, not only the natural horror of Beatrice at her victimization, but also *her participation*, at least to some degree, *in his own spiritual condition*. On what grounds does the Count assume that Beatrice, in response to being so vilely treated as an *object*, will begin to participate in the *subjectivity* of her tormentor? The victim and the victimizer would seem to be at opposite psychological poles; for the victim to begin to participate in the *identity* of the victimizer would appear to be a reversal of the natural order of things.<sup>7</sup> And yet is it not just this "natural order" which is so comprehensively violated within the world of the play? The Count's baleful eye falls on all he surveys, but he reserves for his daughter Beatrice, where "natural" affections should be at their peak, the purest culture of his venom. Indeed, the Count's intention here is doubly criminal; he plans not rape alone, but incestuous rape. Does this second aspect of the Count's crime carry any additional implications?

The prohibition against incest is ultimately based, not upon elements which may be only indigenous to individual cultures, but upon the biological imperative of preserving the genetic integrity of the race. To violate this taboo is to threaten, over the long term, the very life of the race. The sexual act is of course fundamentally expressive of life itself; incestuous sexuality introduces a paradoxical element of eventual "death" in the very act of life creation. No such paradox exists, however, in Shelley's midnight landscape; the profound antagonism which this world exhibits toward our own "natural" moral order is perfectly expressed in Count Cenci's intended violation of his own daughter.

And yet consideration of this aspect of the Count's deed does not fully explain the anomalies discussed above. Let us shift our attention from the aberrations of rape and incest to the more general context of the sexual act itself. A world which is ultimately perceived to be governed by beneficent spiritual forces carries, as its earthly corollary, the proposition that "sex equals life." But what does sex equal in the world of *The Cenci*, a world whose spiritual order is governed by something quite different? And specifically, what is the *life* to issue from the Count's paternity, who bears a "darker, deadlier gloom than the earth's shade," and who will presumably *transmit* this essence in the moment of climax? And is it not conceivable that *transmission of spiritual essence* is the very purpose of the act, the essential constituent of the "charm" that will "tame"? There are two additional elements in the text which bear upon this point.

Near the beginning of the play, in response to the Count's itemization of his delight in atrocities, the Pope's emissary Camillo queries: "Art thou not most miserable?" The Count replies:

Why, miserable?--

No.--I am what your theologians call

Hardened;--which they must be in impudence,

So to revile a man's peculiar taste.

True, I was happier than I am, *while yet*

*Manhood remained* to act the thing I thought;

While lust was sweeter than revenge; and now invention palls:--Ay, we  
must all grow old--

(my emphasis) (I.i.92-99)

The Count's remark here is the only explicit reference to the sexual act in the play, a reference which clearly establishes that his natural ability to engage in sexual activity is a thing of the past. Nevertheless, he obviously succeeds in his act, and his certainty that he will succeed is never in question. In the absence of lost "manhood," what agency or power does the Count call upon in order to "walk secure and unbeheld toward (his) purpose"?

The knowledge that Beatrice has been violated is gradually revealed in Act III, scene i during her impassioned and hysterical outbursts which continue throughout the scene. Toward the end of the scene Beatrice exits with Lucretia; shortly thereafter her brother Giacomo enters, and is informed by Orsino of this latest outrage. Beatrice then returns, and by her response to Giacomo's first line reveals her understanding that Giacomo now "knows" what has occurred:

GIACOMO: My sister, my lost sister!

BEATRICE: Lost indeed!

I see Orsino has talked with you, and



That you conjecture things too horrible  
To speak, yet far less than the truth. (III.i.381-384)

To be raped by one's own father is certainly to be on the receiving end of an act "too horrible to speak," but even this enormity is "far less than the truth." What truth? What secret lies within that "darker gloom (than) constellations quenched in murkiest cloud"?

I would suggest that we consider the possibility that this act, this "charm," conjured from the very depths of the Count's being, and administered no doubt exactly during "that very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world," was conceived and designed as the expression of the very essence of that being: death. "Death," not conceived as the natural end of life, its "defeat" as it were, but as the spiritual condition of life itself, of the Count, and of the world in which he dwells.<sup>8</sup> The Count's sexual potency is, in turn, both derived from and *transmitted* on this spiritual plane; the climax of the act discharges the germ seed, the death seed, of the Count's inner being, which, like the sexual seed, knows and seeks its receptors. Count Cenci, as the quintessential being of the world in which he dwells, has achieved a quintessential expression of the nature of this world in a "sexual" act which expresses death rather than life, and which penetrates not the vulnerable body alone, but the infinitely more vulnerable and intimate sphere of the inner self, the womb of the spirit.

Such an interpretation of the Count's assault on his daughter would explain many of the anomalies previously discussed, and yet also raises as many questions as it answers. Does additional evidence exist which might give credence to such an argument? What are the implications of such an impregnation? What are the consequences from the gestation to follow? And what hardly imaginable and prodigious "birth" might we eventually anticipate?

Beatrice bursts into Act III, scene i in a near hysterical condition, which is not surprising given the nature of the event that has just transpired. Many of the specific images she employs to express her horror are, however, of considerable interest. The first of these functions as a kind of "topic sentence" for much that is to come, and is followed by an interchange with Lucretia and a subsequent long speech which reveal, not only acute psychological distress, but also a far deeper disturbance, an *alteration of the functioning of consciousness itself*:

BEATRICE: (*She enters staggering and speaking wildly*):

Reach me that  
handkerchief!--*My brain is hurt*;  
My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me . . .  
I see but indistinctly . . .

LUCRETIA:

My sweet child,  
 You have no wound; 'tis only a cold dew  
 That starts from your dear brow . . . Alas! Alas!  
 What has befallen?

BEATRICE:

. . . . O, horrible!  
 The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls  
 Spin round! I see a woman weeping there,  
 And standing calm and motionless, whilst I  
 Slide giddily as the world reels . . . My God!  
 The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!  
 The sunshine on the floor is black! The air  
 Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe  
 In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! *There creeps*  
*A clinging, black, contaminating mist*  
*About me . . . 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,*  
 I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues  
 My fingers and my limbs to one another,  
 And eats into my sinews, and dissolves  
 My flesh to a pollution, *poisoning*  
*The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!*  
 (my emphasis) (III.i.1-23)

At this point Beatrice becomes aware of her altered state, and attempts to make sense of it by assuming that she has become mad, but she quickly drops this idea and arrives at that terminus which explains so much in this play, and which will increasingly dominate and grow within the consciousness of Beatrice herself from this point forward:

My God! I never knew what the mad felt  
 Before: for I am mad beyond all doubt!  
 (*More wildly*) No, *I am dead!* (my emphasis) (24-26)

There is a grim logic connecting the sequence of images we have seen thus far in Beatrice's outburst, from "my brain is hurt," through a series of images expressing perceptual derangement, to a "conclusion" that arrives at the apparently bizarre notion that she is "dead" yet clearly not dead, at least in any obvious way. The significance of this progression will become clearer if we examine a similar speech which occurs somewhat later on in the scene. Beatrice finally responds to Lucretia's persistent efforts to obtain a clear explanation of what has occurred:

What are the words which you would have me speak?  
 I, who can feign no image in my mind  
 Of that which has transformed me: I, whose thought  
 Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up  
 In its own formless horror: of all words,  
 That minister to mortal intercourse,  
 Which wouldst thou hear? For there is none to tell  
 My misery: if another ever knew  
 Aught like to it, she died as I will die,  
 And left it, as I must, without a name.  
 Death! Death! (III.i.107-117)

Here we see a progression of thought which establishes a relationship markedly similar to the earlier speech, from a "premise" of "transformation," to the strange "conclusion" of the reiterated exclamation "Death!" In this case, however, the relationship is linked by a phrase which offers a significant clue into the specific nature of Beatrice's malaise: "I, whose thought/ Is like a ghost, shrouded and folded up . . ." Her "death" occurs on the level of "thought"--consciousness--but takes a "ghost" like form, an apt metaphor for the condition of death in life implied in the earlier speech. But the note of finality sounded by the above is misleading, for the speech does not end in "death," but goes on to inquire into the nature and condition of whatever reality might lie beyond: "Death! Death! Our law and our religion call thee/ A punishment and a reward . . . Oh, which/ Have I deserved?" The above lines express in abstract, capsule form the fundamental moral conflict implicit throughout the play, with "law," "religion," and "reward" on the one side, and "death" and "punishment" on the other. Beatrice's psychological crisis is analogous to a sudden drop in barometric pressure; the resultant near vacuum polarizes the value-content of consciousness into the two extremes of good or evil, white or black; no gray area remains. As the play has progressed it has become abundantly clear that it is Beatrice who exemplifies the forces of "good" or "light," and the Count who embodies the power of "evil" or "darkness," etc. It is therefore somewhat astonishing that Beatrice should conclude her outburst with "Oh, which have I deserved?" Would not this despairing conclusion indicate that Beatrice has lost her moral "ground" in the values she formerly embodied, and stands, now, she knows not where? And let us now recall the Count's enigmatic prophecy in Act II, that Beatrice will come to avoid the "sun," and "wish for night." Beatrice seems to have indeed lost her moorings in the "light," and although not yet "wishing" for darkness, she is perhaps halfway there--pregnant, as she is, with death.

Beatrice's confusion over her own identity and values is acute, but only temporary. She quickly determines upon a course of action, and it is notable that the forbearance which has always characterized her response in the past to great adversity is now contemptuously dismissed. What is to be done?

Orsino: "You will endure it then?" Beatrice: "Endure?--Orsino, it seems your counsel is small profit." No, ". . . something must be done . . . something which shall make/ The thing that I have suffered but a shadow/ In the dread lightning which avenges it." This "something" very quickly evolves into the plot to murder the Count, a deed, only hinted at by the others, which is first openly articulated by Beatrice herself. This plot, and the murder that follows from it, would appear to present a significant problem for my own thesis in this essay. I have suggested that the Count's assault on his daughter was designed to result in her spiritual destruction, and yet we find that the direct consequence of this act is the Count's own death. Given such an outcome, could we not accurately say that the Count is akin to a would be modern "terrorist" who, fatally miscarrying in the preparation of his bomb, roasts in his own fire?

Although it may appear that his plan results in ultimate failure, it is nevertheless true that the Count does succeed in commanding Beatrice's full attention in a new and unique way. "Turning the other cheek" in response to evil is, in a sense, a refusal to acknowledge it; it is a denial of the potency, or indeed of the very reality of evil. It is a strategy in response to evil conceived independently of the direct influence of evil. Beatrice's new posture of violent retaliation, however, is directly attributable to the actions and *will* of Count Cenci.

The stage is therefore apparently set for a direct clash of wills as Act IV begins. The Count has avoided the first attempt on his life while en route to the Castle of Petrella, and a second plan is immediately devised. Beatrice is not, however, the only character who appears to be planning something. The following interchange between the Count and Lucretia occurs early in Act IV:

CENCI:

For Beatrice worse terrors are in store  
To bend her to my will.

LUCRETIA:

Oh! to what will?  
What cruel sufferings more than she has known  
Canst thou inflict?

CENCI:

. . . .  
What sufferings? I will drag her, step by step,  
Through infamies unheard of among men:  
She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon  
Of public scorn, for acts blazoned abroad,  
One among which shall be . . . What? Canst thou guess?  
(IV.i.75-84)

Lucretia's point would appear to be well taken. What more, indeed, can the Count inflict upon his daughter that he has not already attempted? The

general critical view is that the Count now intends additional sexual assaults upon Beatrice, an interpretation which seems to be reinforced by a speech later in the scene which occurs during a brief interval when the Count is alone on stage:

CENCI:

I do not feel as if I were a man,  
 But like a fiend appointed to chastise  
 The offences of some unremembered world.  
 My blood is running up and down my veins;  
 A fearful pleasure makes it prick and tingle:  
 I feel a giddy sickness of strange awe;  
 My heart is beating with an expectation  
 Of horrid joy. (IV.i.160-167)

There can be little doubt that the Count is anticipating *something* here, and the imagery and intensity of expression of the above speech strongly suggests some climactic and terminal event. And yet it is this very sense of some impending enormity that makes the speech appear disproportionate to an expression of anticipation of a second rape attempt. The Count has already tasted of this forbidden fruit; surely it is only the first violation that is capable of evoking, in both the victim and the victimizer, that unique sense of horror which would give legitimacy to the above expression. An additional objection is raised by my own thesis in this essay. I have suggested that the Count's attack on Beatrice was carried out in order to impregnate his daughter with his own spiritual essence. The seed has been sown, and, as I have tried to show, taken root and grown in his daughter's mind and spirit. If this is indeed the case, additional assaults are unnecessary and redundant. The Count need now only wait for his original deed to come to fruition, and indeed, "waiting" seems an accurate description of the Count's basic activity throughout the scene. What decisive action does the Count take following the above speech? He goes to sleep!

It must be late; mine eyes grow weary dim  
 With unaccustomed heaviness of sleep.  
 Conscience! Oh, thou most insolent of lies!  
 They say that sleep, that healing dew of Heaven,  
 Steeps not in balm the foldings of the brain  
 Which thinks thee an imposter. I will go  
 First to belie thee with an hour of rest,  
 Which will be deep and calm, I feel . . .  
 (IV.i.175-182)

He sleeps; he waits, but for what? The Count's last action in the play seems a purely passive one--he retires to sleep and is then murdered in his bedchamber by Marzio and Olimpio. There is, however, a slight delay in carrying out the killing. The murderers fail in their first attempt, unaccountably getting "cold feet" at the very bedside of the sleeping Count. They return to Beatrice with the deed undone, she urges them on again, and they immediately return and carry out the murder. This very brief delay seems inconsequential, and we must wonder at its dramatic function. The Count is murdered in the second attempt almost immediately after the failure of the first attempt. Why not simply dispatch him the first time and thereby tighten the dramatic structure of the play? Perhaps an answer is to be found in Beatrice's response to the initial failure:

Miserable slaves!  
 Where, if ye dare not kill a sleeping man,  
 Found ye the boldness to return to me  
 With such a deed undone? Base palterers!  
 Cowards and traitors! . . .  
 Why do I talk? (*Snatching a dagger from one of them and raising it.*)  
     Hadst thou a tongue to say,  
 'She murdered her own father!'--I must do it!  
 But never dream ye shall outlive him long!  
 (IV.iii.22-33)

If we compare the scathing and vituperative language employed by Beatrice here to many of the Count's characteristic earlier speeches, we will find little to distinguish between them. And let us examine Marzio's explanation for his failure to kill the Count the first time:

And now my knife  
 Touched the loose wrinkled throat, when the old man  
 Stirred in his sleep, and said, 'God! hear, O, hear  
 A father's curse! What, art Thou not our Father?'  
 And then he laughed. I knew it was the ghost  
 Of my dead father speaking through his lips,  
 And could not kill him. (IV.iii.16-22)

Let us consider the possibility that the Count is consciously manipulating this moment with the objective of bringing about Beatrice's raging response, which serves as a final "quickenings" of her inner transformation. And let us now consider the Count's concluding statement in his first speech in Act IV:

No, 'tis her stubborn will  
Which by its own consent shall stoop as low  
As that which drags it down. (IV.i.10-12)

What must Beatrice do in order to "stoop as low" as Count Cenci, and whose "will" are we talking about here? And let us also consider the implications of another earlier remark of the Count, an enigmatic taunt spoken in response to Lucretia's pathetic effort to persuade the Count to desist in his persecution of Beatrice, as he is old and will soon die and come to judgement: "My death may be/ Rapid, her destiny outspeeds it" (IV.i.27-28). And let us, finally, also consider the implications of the Count's last words in the play, spoken immediately after his announced intention to seek sleep, "deep and calm . . . and then . . .

O, multitudinous Hell, the fiends will shake  
Thine arches with the laughter of their joy!  
There shall be lamentation heard in Heaven  
As o'er an angel fallen; and upon Earth  
All good shall droop and sicken, and ill things  
Shall with a spirit of unnatural life  
Stir and be quickened . . . even as I am now.  
(IV.i.183-189)

What is Count Cenci's plan? What is his *will*? To put the question in his own words, "Canst thou guess?"

John Murphy refers to the Count as an embodiment of "perfect evil,"<sup>9</sup> a characterization which would be difficult to dispute. The Count's evil is indeed so great, so "perfect," as to appear transcendent--as I have argued, the Count and his world exist in a sphere beyond our own natural order, while at the same time remaining eerily and darkly connected to it. It is the very perfection of the Count's evil, the purity of his *will to darkness*, which leads us now to the conclusion that his design throughout has been leading consciously to this moment--to play the role of *murder victim* under the bloody hands of his daughter, Beatrice. Such an act reverses the moral relationship between killer and victim while at the same time keeping it intact. Suicide, homicide--the Count's final embrace with his daughter establishes a perfect union of moral and spiritual darkness, an intimacy far greater than the obscure act of incest which generated and preceded it. Let us recall the Count's strange irresolution at the end of Act I when he first determined upon this course of action ("For strange to say, I feel my spirits fail/ With thinking what I have decreed to do."). Even Count Cenci hesitates before plunging into the ultimate darkness, but only momentarily; for let us also recall his cold and confident assertion in the following scene, "The act I think shall soon extinguish all/ For me. . . ."

And yet even following this climactic moment the Count's charm continues to work.

If the murder of the Count seems to pose a problem for my own thesis, the "trial" which follows it poses a problem for those who regard Beatrice as a tragic figure in the traditional or Aristotelian sense outlined earlier. Her passionate assertions of innocence seem suspiciously near an effort to evade moral responsibility for her actions; if so construed, her character becomes tainted with expediency, a potentially disastrous deflation of her stature as a tragic figure. Critics have attempted to deflect such an interpretation by attributing to Beatrice the sincere conviction that she has sustained or affirmed a moral purity by killing the Count, in ridding the world of his evil.

In considering this issue, we take up again the larger problem of Beatrice's role and significance in the play. If Beatrice is to maintain her stature as a tragic heroine, we must accept her genuine conviction of innocence; or, a weaker alternative, we may simply excuse her weakness at this point because of the enormity of that with which she must contend.

But suppose we consider a third alternative: what if we were to interpret her tremendous emphasis on her innocence as incipient hysteria? What if the "no, no, no!" of her passionate denials were functioning as a psychological *displacement* of a "no, no, no" directed at something else? And what if that "something else" was Beatrice's appalled realization that her *conscious* mind and spirit were giving way, were in the initial stages of intimate penetration by the black, reptilian vapor of the spirit of Count Cenci, what then?

In her essay cited earlier, Anne Radcliffe spoke of the sense of uncanny familiarity with which we dimly perceive the apparitions of darkness. Such an awareness creates and sustains a deep and unbreakable tension along a shadowy continuum of knowing and not knowing, or "unknowing." With reference to this dynamic, Radcliffe makes an interesting distinction between the esthetic functions of "terror" and "horror":

They must be men of very cold imaginations . . . with whom certainty is more terrible than surmise. Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them . . . where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?. . . Obscurity leaves something for the mind to exaggerate.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Beatrice, indices of the summit of the state of terror can be observed in the climactic spasms of wild rage which constitute a final reaction against this force as an *object*, the *other*, in this case of course Count Cenci. Within as well as without there is still division, for the swollen incubus of the Count's progeny has heretofore exerted its pressure only indirectly,



*unconsciously*. With the murder of the Count, however, the birth struggle has begun, and the darkness within now threatens and demands entry into the light, into the lengthening shadows of the conscious mind. The tragedy of Beatrice has reached critical mass.

The final scene of the play finds Beatrice and her remaining family imprisoned in the dungeons of the Church. The trial and its histrionics are over, Giacomo and Lucretia have confessed, the Pope has denied their final appeal, and their fate is certain. It is over. It is the moment of tragic stillness before the very end; the energies of conflict have played themselves out, and the dramatic gives way to the lyric. It is the time for introspection, the time, finally, *to know who you are*. But in the case of Beatrice, do we witness the birth of this tragic self, a "realized higher beauty" as one critic puts it,<sup>11</sup> or the birth of something quite different?

BEATRICE: (*wildly*)

Oh

My God! Can it be possible I have  
 To die so suddenly? So young to go  
 Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!  
 To be nailed down into a narrow place;  
 To see no more sweet sunshine; hear no more  
 Blithe voice of living thing; must not again  
 Upon familiar thoughts, sad, yet thus lost--  
 How fearful! To be nothing! Or to be . . .  
 What? Oh, where am I? Let me not go mad!  
 Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts! If there should be/  
 No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world;  
 The wide, gray, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!  
 If all things then should be . . . my father's spirit,  
 His eye, his voice, his touch surrounding me;  
 The atmosphere and breath of my dead life!  
 If sometimes, as a shape more like himself,  
 Even the form which tortured me on earth,  
 Masked in gray hairs and wrinkles, he should come  
 And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix  
 His eyes on mine, and drag me down, down, down!  
 For was he not alone omnipotent  
 On Earth, and ever present? Even though dead,  
 Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,  
 And work for me and mine still the same ruin,  
 Scorn, pain, despair? Who ever yet returned  
 To teach the laws of Death's untrodden realm?  
 Unjust perhaps as those which drive us now,  
 Oh, whither, whither?<sup>12</sup> (V.iv.47-75)

Othello "turns out the light" of his temporal existence, but in doing so climbs onto a previously unattained and higher plateau of spiritual self knowledge; he illuminates and realizes his identity and destiny. I would argue that the tragedy of *The Cenci* takes Beatrice in an opposite direction; she attains not the realized self, but, in Lacan's words, the unrealized; she does not ascend, but rather descends--"down, down, down"--into the toxic mist of a terminally darkening imagination, the "unconscious" considered as a purely sinister potential.

In the preceding pages I have tried to show that *The Cenci* can be interpreted as something more than a traditional Aristotelian tragedy which has been trimmed and dressed in the clothing of "dark" romanticism. As I have argued, *The Cenci* is a tragedy which incorporates this ethos in fundamental ways, a play which explores the deepest and darkest instincts of the gothic sensibility. It is a meditation on the night, a tragedy of oblivion which gives form and life to absence within the presence of self. Count Cenci is a monster beyond the monstrous, a force which drives the mind from pity and fear to terror and horror and finally beyond, transcending the relativity of his own category in the scale of good and evil. The Count's ability to compel and fascinate the imagination is derived from what is ultimately his transcendental status--he commands the imagination because he *becomes* the imagination; he becomes, not the God of the night, but simply, the God.

*Santa Barbara, California*

## Notes

1. Although the play carries no specific label, Shelley referred to it on more than one occasion as "my tragedy" in his correspondence [Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Complete Works*, 10 vols., ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (New York: Gordian, 1965) vol. 10: 61, 165], and also referred to Beatrice as a "tragic character" in the preface to the play: Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci*, ed. Roland A. Duerksen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) 7. All subsequent references to the play will refer to this edition and will be included in parentheses after each quotation.

2. The really significant notion here is the idea of *hamartia*, which many critics take up as an essential ingredient in an interpretation of the play as a *tragedy of character*: ". . . [A]lthough Cenci himself may have failed to contaminate her, his act causes her to contaminate herself. She murders Cenci and by her 'pernicious mistake' (Shelley's translation of *hamartia*) becomes a tragic character." Milton Wilson, *Shelley's Later Poetry: A Study of His Prophetic Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 1957) 87.

"But he was not now seeking to prove an ethical point--he was writing a tragedy. The tragic flaw in Beatrice, in Shelley's mind, was the crack in the armor of her righteousness." Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric Of A Vision* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1948) 148.

"Since we know that she is a tragic character. . . the heroine must have a tragic flaw, which, of course, always grows out of pride. With Beatrice, the flaw (lies) . . . in her failure to understand what true innocence is." John V. Murphy, *The Dark Angel: Gothic Elements in Shelley's Works* (Cranbury, N. J.: Associated University Presses, 1975) 172.

3. Baker 147. Both Robert Whitman and D. Harrington-Lueker conceive the Count, not as a living dramatic character, but as more or less an abstraction symbolizing evil--a "symbol of tyranny" as Whitman puts it, and "more the objectification of evil than a character in his own right. . . ." in Harrington-Lueker's terms. Robert Whitman, "Beatrice's 'Pernicious Mistake' in

*The Cenci*," *PMLA* 74:3 (June, 1959): 250; D. Harrington-Lueker, "Imagination vs. Introspection: *The Cenci* and *Macbeth*," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 32 (1983): 179. Charles Adams echoes this evaluation: "Barnard has characterized Jupiter in *Prometheus Unbound* as being the sum of evil, including unjust laws and false religion. . . . Such a character, exactly, is Count Cenci. . . . Instead of being the story of Beatrice versus Count Cenci, this is the story of Beatrice versus evil—or, if you wish, versus tyranny, a typical Shelley theme." Charles L. Adams, "The Structure of *The Cenci*," *Drama Survey* 4:2 (1965): 145.

4. It is notable that, even on the level of its apparent "objectivity," the "world" of *The Cenci* bears a striking resemblance to the mind of the Count. Consider, for example, the relatively petty but nevertheless sinister machinations of Orsino (which function as a kind of sub-set to the more spectacular activities of the Count), the corruption of the Church (which operates as both the temporal and spiritual authority governing the play's world), and even the operation of metaphysical "fate" (exemplified by the fact that the family is almost immediately arrested for the Count's murder by the very authorities who were en route to arrest the Count for his crimes). This "objective" reflection of the inner, spiritual condition of Count Cenci carries, as I will argue, a very far reaching significance.

5. Anne Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," *New Monthly Magazine* VII (1826): 146-47.

6. Quoted in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1973; New York: Norton, 1981) 23, 30. The phrase "infernal opening" is Lacan's summary of Freud.

7. I am not referring to sado-masochism here, a known, "natural" syndrome, but to a case in which a victim of sadism, who is neither sadist nor masochist, begins to participate in that state of consciousness which gives rise to sadistic activity.

8. The closest approximation of this condition in our own world is found in someone suffering from cancer, a disease which paradoxically violates the ground of its own existence, thereby creating a condition of "indwelling agony" as its natural state of being.

9. Murphy 173.

10. Radcliffe 149-150.

11. Benjamin P. Kurtz argues that Beatrice experiences a genuine, indeed an elevated, Aristotelian *catharsis* at play's end, that she is "purified in suffering," and that "the death of Beatrice becomes tragic in the full sense of the term: not meanly painful, but nobly and necessarily . . . painful, because of the very constitution of things. . . . Death has been subdued to a moral struggle that culminates in a realized higher beauty: the beauty of a tragic magnanimity." *The Pursuit of Death: A Study of Shelley's Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1933) 192, 200-201.

12. Although in her next speech, in response to Lucretia's entreaty to "Trust in God's sweet love," (75) Beatrice immediately disclaims the above—"Tis past!/ Whatever comes my heart shall sink no more" (77-78)—these words are in turn followed by, "And yet, I know not why, your words strike chill" (79), and the speech concludes with, "You do well telling me to trust in God,/ I hope I do trust in Him. In whom else/ Can any trust? And yet my heart is cold." (87-89) Cold comfort indeed is the God of *The Cenci*; rather than the light and warmth of divinity, the repeated emphasis on spiritual "chill, cold," etc. seems far more suggestive of the growing encroachment of Radcliffe's "horror"—that which "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates" the "faculties" of mind and spirit.

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