



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 24 | Spring 2017

Title	“...to poison and corrupt her soul”: Shelley’s Poetic Designs of Incest in <i>The Cenci</i>
Author	Amadeus Kang-Po Chen
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	24
Issue Date	Spring 2017
Publication Date	29/05/2017
Editors	Anahit Behrooz and Vicki Madden

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

“...to poison and corrupt her soul”: Shelley’s Poetic Designs of Incest in *The Cenci*

Amadeus Kang-Po Chen
The University of Edinburgh

This paper examines Percy Bysshe Shelley’s designs of the father-daughter incest in his tragedy The Cenci. It proposes that Shelley’s deviation from his historical source, concerning Count Cenci’s atrocities and Beatrice’s characterizations, insinuates the idea of incest as the embodiment of a dark poetics that features identity annihilation and assimilation.

The Cenci, A Tragedy, in Five Acts, written in 1819 when Shelley was staying in Rome, is the poet’s dramatization of the notorious Cenci incident in seventeenth-century Italy. The story, according to Shelley, “was a subject not to be mentioned in Italian society without awakening a deep and breathless interest” (*Major Works* 315). Such sensationalism is attributed to the dreadful conflicts between a tyrannical father and his oppressed children. The nobleman Count Cenci harboured deep hatred and wicked lust for his children and committed several atrocities upon them, especially the young and beautiful Beatrice. The atrocities, including physical abuse, confinement, humiliation, and most horrendously, an attempted incestuous rape, led to a violent resort from the children—patricide, as Beatrice and her brothers hired two assassins to strangle the Count in his sleep. When the murder was exposed, Beatrice, along with her stepmother and brothers, was arrested and sent to trial in a decree by Pope Clement VIII himself, who then approved Beatrice’s execution by hanging. Shelley’s play, with which he wishes to “make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart” (*Major Works* 315), generally follows the historical accounts of the incident, but with subtle re-characterizations of Count Cenci and Beatrice that deviate from the source materials. This paper will focus on such deviations that Shelley employs to represent the motif of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci*.

Shelley had strong confidence in *The Cenci*’s critical success and popularity, which can be discerned in his letters.¹ In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock in July 1819, he wrote that the play is “with the greatest degree of popular effect” (*Letters* 102). Shelley also assured his publisher, Charles Ollier, that the play is “of a very popular character (111), “calculated to produce a very popular effect” (116) and “is written for the multitude, and ought to sell well” (174). Despite such self-confidence, Shelley’s choice of subject matter encountered objections from his contemporaries. These objections predominantly resulted from the blasphemy manifested by the Count, and the motifs of incest and patricide. The controversial nature of these elements is reflected in Robert Southey’s dismissal of *The Cenci* as a “detestable story” and “the Atheist’s play” (*Letters* 233), as well as Covent Garden’s refusal to stage the

¹ It is interesting to note that Shelley rarely shows such self-confidence in his own works. For example, Shelley noted that his longest epic poem *Laon and Cythna* (later revised as *The Revolt of Islam*) “is an attempt from which I scarcely dare to expect success” (*Major Works* 130) and that *Prometheus Unbound* “cannot sell beyond twenty copies” (*Letters* 174).

play.² Consequently, the first production of *The Cenci* was delayed until 1886, staged by the Shelley Society at the Grand Theatre of Islington. As the research of Kenneth N. Cameron and Horst Frenz shows, the performance was critically panned with comments such as “blood-curdling, horrible, revolting,” “no flash of genial humour, no gleam of innocent gaiety,” “Stygian darkness,” and “utterly obscene as hardly to bear telling” (1083). The critical reception of its very first production generates the early consensus that *The Cenci* is a closed drama entirely unfit for stage because of its religious and moral depravities.

In literary studies of Shelley’s works, a similar negative evaluation can be found in earlier years. In his 1908 monograph, Ernest Sutherland Bates points out two major factors resulting in critics’ neglect of the play. First, the father-daughter incest as a subject matter “is not an attractive or a significant theme for the world to-day;” second, “*The Cenci* is in its style less individually characteristic of the author than is any other of his mature works” (1).³ In later Shelley studies, the incest motif in *The Cenci* started to attract critical attention. Specifically, it has been discussed in terms of the intense contrast between parent-child incest and sibling incest in English Romanticism, as noted by critics such as Richard Cronin and Peter Thorslev.⁴ *The Cenci* undoubtedly embodies the political themes of the old/monarchic-young/revolutionary conflict in the Romantic period. This is explicitly remarked upon by the Pope in Act 2 scene 2, that the Cenci family is at “the great war between the old and the young” (2.2.38). However, Shelley’s designs of the father-daughter incestuous rape do more than support the aforementioned Romantic ideology. As my following analysis will demonstrate, Shelley’s unique rendering of the incest in *The Cenci* extends and deviates from the historical records that provided him with a narrative basis. Such deviation signifies a dark poetics that emphasises the annihilation of social identities and the desire for assimilation and incorporation.

According to Truman Guy Steffan’s study, all seven historical accounts of the Cenci incident—four editions of the anonymous “Relation of the Death of the Cenci Family” in Italian and the two translated and published by Mary Shelley in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*—record Count Cenci’s licentious attempt upon Beatrice. None of them, however, mention the actual fulfilment of this desire. In other words, the historical facts of the Cenci incident are in truth changed significantly in terms of the Count’s incestuous desire for Beatrice and his other atrocities, despite Shelley’s claim that “At all events it is matter-of-fact” (*Letters* 198).⁵ Monica Brezinski Potkay’s study on the sources of *The*

² On 5th April 1820 Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt, mentioning Covent Garden’s refusal: “The very Theatre rejected it with expression of the greatest insolence” (*Letters* 181).

³ Shelley himself is fully aware of the play’s uniqueness within his corpus. In his letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg written in April 1820, he mentioned that *The Cenci* is “studiously written in a style very different from any other compositions” (*Letters* 186). A similar remark can be seen in the letter to Keats in July that the play “was studiously composed in a different style” (221).

⁴ As Richard Cronin points out, for Shelley the latter is “a static ideal of self-subsistence for an ideal of reciprocity” (65), a form of perfect human affection in the poet’s ideal. Peter Thorslev also distinguishes the two incest motifs in English Romanticism; he argues that in Byron and Shelley the former is the representation of political/religious oppression, while the latter “is invariably made sympathetic, is sometimes exonerated, and...definitely idealized” (47). The motif of the aged tyrant preying on his own children, as Thorslev elaborates, is one of the peculiar traits in Romantic period: the past was “parasitic upon the future” and the out-dated “fathers, authorities, and traditions” were “unwilling to grow old gracefully and wither away...even attempting grotesquely to renew their youth by devouring their young or by reproducing upon them” (47).

⁵ We also have to bear in mind that all these sources are not absolutely true about the incident; they are “necessarily distorted because the investigation of the accused and the papal archives had not been open to the public” (Steffan

Cenci also reveals a similar view on this issue: “Shelley largely created the legend of the Cenci incest. He posited as a completed act what earlier writers described as an unsuccessful attempt or series of attempts” (57). That is to say, Shelley handles the father-daughter incest in his sources of the Cenci incident with a three-phase process of representation. First, he actualizes the unaccomplished incestuous rape in his play; second, he renders it off-stage between Act 2 and Act 3, and refrains from naming it in any line of the play; third, he brings it back onto the stage in a highly suggestive poetics. It is the third phase that I intend to discuss extensively.

Shelley’s suggestive poetics in the third phase is based on his innovations of the Count’s atrocities that deviate from the historical accounts. Most sources record Count Cenci’s vicious treatment of his wife and children. In one of the sources that perhaps Shelley relies on the most—Mary Shelley’s translation of the “Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci,” included in the 1839 edition of Shelley’s poetical works edited by Edward Moxon and the reprinted 1876 edition by Buxton Forman—the Count’s deeds are detailed. Count Cenci, as Mary’s text goes, “shut her up alone in an apartment of the palace, where himself brought her food, so that no one might approach her; and imprisoned her in this manner for several months, often inflicting on her blows with a stick” (*Poetical Works* 161). The source does not contain any physical or verbal abuse towards Beatrice’s other brothers, except that the Count rejoices in hearing the accidental deaths of Rocco and Cristoforo (Cristofano in *The Cenci*), “saying that nothing would exceed his pleasure if all children died,” and “as a further sign of his hatred, he refused to pay the smallest sum towards the funeral expenses of his murdered son” (*Poetical Works* 161). Shelley also omits two common facts shared by all the historical documents: Count Cenci’s crimes of sodomy and promiscuity with other women (Steffan 606). Such a change functions to remove distractions from his focus on the father-daughter incest. Deviating from his sources, Shelley revises the Count’s original misdeeds in *The Cenci*, in order to bring the off-stage incest motif back onto the stage.

In Act 1 scene 3, after being defied openly by Beatrice, the Count foreshadows the incest motif as a means to subjugate her: “I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame” that “must be done; it shall be done, I swear!” (1.3.178). The motif of incest is insinuated here with the word “done,” which, as suggested by Zachery Leader and Michael O’Neill, is inspired by Shakespeare’s frequent usages of the word to indicate regicide in *Macbeth* (*Major Works* 756). Essentially, both conducts aim to break hierarchal relationships between conventional social identities. In other words, both present the terror of destroying identifications with selfhood and normalcy. After the prefiguration in Act I, Shelley introduces the incest motif suggestively in the beginning of Act 2 when Beatrice storms into her stepmother Lucretia’s room in agitation, recounting the Count’s mental and physical violence imposed upon her and her youngest brother Bernardo in the past:

Oh! He has trampled me

Under his feet, and made the blood stream down

601). “The historical facts” I refer to here are probably not the authentic history, but the “facts” that Shelley believes and asserts to accurately represent in his play.

My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all
 Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh
 Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,
 And we have eaten.—He had made me look
 On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust
 Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,
 And I have never yet despaired—but now!
 What would I say? Ah! no, 'tis nothing new. (2.1.64-72)

In Beatrice's lines, Shelley's detailed depiction of Count Cenci's abhorrent abuse of Beatrice and Bernardo extends far beyond the scope of all sources including Mary's translation of the "Relation." The significance of this invention lies in its position as the corresponding comparison with the unnameable incestuous crime in Beatrice's lines.

Instead of "blows with a stick" in the "Relation," the violence is aggravated to "tramples" on Beatrice's face, and furthermore, it shifts from external force to internal corruption with "Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh," bordering on the transgression between purity and uncleanness. As Maggie Kilgour proposes in her study on the cultural significance of cannibalism, eating is essentially an act of incorporation, an act concerning the boundary between the inside and the outside, somatically speaking (4). Absorbing proper food fortifies the boundary, while consuming unclean food weakens and even breaches it. Therefore, Shelley's innovation of contaminated food in Beatrice's speech vastly deviates from every source of the Cenci incident and has subtle meanings. Viewed through Mary Douglas's anthropological lens, "Ditch water" and "fever-stricken flesh" are not of common uncleanness. They are not like dirt, rubbish, or excrement, whose inedible otherness is so obvious that it is easy to exclude them. They still maintain certain propensities of food proper, and it is exactly such "half-identity" (Douglas 197) that destabilizes the boundary and deactivates Beatrice's ability to repel the contaminated and to resist her father's latent will to pollute her from the somatically inside.⁶

The bodily suffering inflicted on Bernardo by the Count—"the rust / Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs"—can also be interpreted from this perspective. Instead of direct physical violence, such as beating or whipping recorded in all sources of the Cenci incident, Shelley takes artistic liberty to add Bernardo's "gangrene," a specific kind of pathological wound that, etymologically speaking, means "social and moral evil," as shown in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Shelley is probably more aware of how the word is defined contemporarily in *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson: "a stoppage of circulation followed by putrefaction" and its synonymous relations with other words such as "corruption" and "mortification" (Johnson 1804). The "gangrene" suffered by Bernardo, along with the "Ditch water" and "fever-stricken flesh" consumed by him and Beatrice, have

⁶ For Douglas's discussion on the significance of the unclean objects and their ambiguous "half-identities" in religious rites, see Chapter 9 of *Purity and Danger* (Routledge, 2002), p. 173-195.

latent meanings in Shelley's design of Count Cenci's atrocities against his children that deviates from his source materials. Both suggest that the Count's dark intention is to corrupt his children (especially Beatrice) from within, seeking to actualize an internal evil "becoming" in their minds. Moreover, both are dramatic devices for Shelley to insinuate the unnameable, "obscene/off-stage" incestuous desire of the Count, as they are "nothing new" for Beatrice after the incestuous rape. Working in this way, Shelley's unique rewriting of the Cenci children's sufferings serves to lay bare the nature of father-daughter incest in a highly suggestive manner; that is, the Count's incestuous desire is a further attempt of internal corruption, an extended manoeuvre to alter irreversibly Beatrice from the inside, to "Let her then wish for the night" (2.1.187). What he desires through the act of incest that dissolves all social boundaries is a complete incorporation of Beatrice and the creation of an alter ego in her mind, as his speeches in Act 4 will attest to.

Another innovation in Count Cenci's ill treatment of his children that functions to intensify the momentum of unspeakable incest is the deprivation of his eldest son Giacomo. In Act 2 scene 2, Giacomo discloses this misdeed of his father:

'Tis hard for a firm man to bear: but I
 Have a dear wife, a lady of high birth,
 Whose dowry in ill hour I lent my father
 Without a bond or witness to the deed:
 And children, who inherit her fine senses,
 The fairest creatures in the breathing world;
 And she and they reproach me not. (2.2.18-24)

At this stage, the effect of Count Cenci's deliberate holding of Giacomo's dowry has not yet appeared. Though suffering in poverty, his wife and children still love him and believe in him. The hidden significance of Shelley's design here is manifested in Act 3 scene 1, where such love and faith are annihilated by the Count, who fictionalizes a story in front of Giacomo's wife that he squanders the dowry himself in "secret riot" (3.1.320). After his wife tells their children about the tale invented by the Count, they are all convinced that their father causes their lack of subsistence. Consequently, all filial affection is corrupted to despair and potentially, wrath and hatred: "Give us clothes, father! Give us better food! / What you in one night squander were enough / For months!" (3.1.328-30). What the Count accomplishes here is not mere playful malice, but another extended variation of the "internal corruption" that shares the same nature as Beatrice's and Bernardo's sufferings discussed above. Moreover, it indicates the Count's ultimate intent to assimilate Giacomo by duplicating between him and his family the antagonism between the Count himself and his children. That is, he intends to make Giacomo the very paternal tyrant hated by his own family and by himself. Apparently, he succeeds in doing so, as Giacomo further laments: "I looked, and saw that home was hell. / And to that hell will I return no more" (3.1.330-31). All these unique abuses imposed by the Count upon Beatrice, Bernardo, and Giacomo—contaminated food, gangrene, and provocation of Giacomo's family feud—are Shelley's

poetic inventions to replace the ordinary physical violence and licentiousness recorded in the source materials, in order to insinuate the off-stage incest as another means for the Count to convert, corrupt, and assimilate Beatrice from within.

In Act 4 scene 1, Count Cenci confirms such an intent and lays bare the motivation of his incestuous desire for Beatrice, which is to “poison and corrupt her soul” and force her to “if there be skill in hate / Die in despair” (4.1.45, 49-50). He also plans to hurl Bernardo, another victim whose youth (as with Beatrice’s sex and beauty) represents the innocent soul unstained, into “The sepulcher of hope, where evil thoughts / Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb” (52-53). Again, here Shelley accentuates the nature of father-daughter incest as a form of violent identification and incorporation by annihilating the victims’ previous social identities. Furthermore, in the face of Lucretia, the Count even dwells on the abhorrent possibility of Beatrice giving birth to a child as the wicked fruit of the incest:

...May it be
 A hideous likeness of herself, that as
 From a distorting mirror, she may see
 Her image mixed with what she most abhors,
 Smiling upon her from her nursing breast.
 And that the child may from its infancy
 Grow, day by day, more wicked and deformed,
 Turning her mother’s love to misery:
 And that both she and it may live until
 It shall repay her care and pain with hate,
 Or what may else be more unnatural,
 So he may hunt her through the clamorous scoffs
 Of the loud world to a dishonourable grave. (4.1.144-157)

The hidden intention of the Count here parallels his manipulation of Giacomo’s family. If Beatrice gives birth to a child of incest, it will resemble both herself and her father; the natural bond of mother and son will compel Beatrice to love and care for it, but its origin and its resemblance to her violator will force her to abhor it. In this situation, the boundaries between self and other, love and hate, are all dissolved into manic chaos. Another duplication of irreversible antagonism between two familial generations is completed. It, as in the case of Giacomo, will displace Beatrice’s position from an innocent victim to a patriarchal (though female) victimizer like her father. The last three lines quoted above about “what may else be more unnatural” and “a dishonourable grave” even prefigure another incestuous violation, only this time Beatrice is raped by her own son, paralleling Milton’s design of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*, as is highlighted in Potkay’s research (59). In all historical sources the only account

about Count Cenci's fancy in this regard is that he "tried to persuade the poor girl, by an enormous heresy, that children born of the commerce of a father with a daughter were all saints," as recorded by Mary Shelley in her translation.⁷ It is thus striking that Shelley converts this original motivation, which seems to be a seductive account of mere lechery, to such an intensely terrible will to recreate endlessly patriarchal tyrants and family antagonism.

In the analysis so far, I have elaborated how Shelley's characterization of Count Cenci varies vastly from the sources he had in hand, and how such deviation brings the off-stage father-daughter incest back onto stage, suggestively serving as the embodiment of an alternative poetics of corruption and assimilation. Whether the Count's attempt to corrupt and assimilate Beatrice is successful is thus another critical question. In the Preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley records how his imagination and sentiments are evoked by Beatrice's portrait in the Colonna Palace: "she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness" and "the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish" (*Major Works* 318). It can be observed that Shelley seeks to accomplish a dramatic representation of the portrait that so impressed him.⁸ If Shelley wishes to establish Beatrice as a heroine epitomizing the positive poetics of love and sympathy based on imagination and sensibility (a theorization of the nature of poetry established in the later *A Defence of the Poetry*), it is crucial to note that such an attempt must fail if the alternative poetics of assimilation represented by the Count succeeds. I would attempt to settle this critical issue by examining the subtle interactions between Beatrice and the two assassins Olimpio and Marzio, whom she hires to murder the Count.

In Act 4 scene 2 when Beatrice is assigning the murderous task, the two assassins are startled by a sudden and unknown noise, for which Beatrice scolds them fiercely: "Ye conscience-stricken cravens, rock to rest / Your baby hearts" (4.2.39-40). In scene 3, Olimpio and Marzio retreat from the Count's chamber with the murder left undone, because the former "dare not kill an old and sleeping man" (4.3.9) and the latter sees his own father's image on the Count and "could not kill him" (4.3.22). Beatrice is again infuriated and calls them "Miserable slaves," "Base palterers" and "Cowards and traitors." "*Snatching a dagger from one of them and raising it,*" she then dismisses words for actions ("Why do I talk?") and reduces the two men to inactive talkers instead of doers with a ferocious threat: "Hadst thou a tongue to say, / 'She murdered her own father,' I must do it! / But never dream ye shall outlive him long!" (4.3.31-33). Beatrice's lines and actions here bear a striking resemblance with Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's tragedy, which also explores the nature and psychological state of hierarchy-subverting crime. The "conscience-stricken cravens" and "baby hearts" are reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's comment on her husband's unresolved ambition, "It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness," in Act 1 scene 5. Furthermore, in her action of *snatching* a dagger from one of the assassins, we almost

⁷ The record of this specific heresy spoken by the Count can be found in Mary's translation of "The Relation" in the edition of Shelley's poetical works published by Reeves and Turner in 1886. It also appears in the Buxton Forman's edition in 1876, but originally Mary omits it in the 1839 edition, as her footnote explains: "The details here are too horrible, and unfit for publication" (*Poetical Works* 161). For more detailed information, see Steffan's essay, p. 602-603.

⁸ Mary E. Finn also argues that Shelley's "verbal rendering of an art object" of Beatrice's portrait is to "invent and establish a composite verbal portrait of Beatrice Cenci that will prevail as authoritative" (178).

see Lady Macbeth taking over the regicidal dagger from her husband, who dares not enter again the chamber where the murdered Duncan lies. Moreover, as Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill point out, Beatrice's dismissal of the assassins' conscience as "an equivocation" that "sleeps over / A thousand daily acts disgracing men; / And when a deed where mercy insults heaven..." (4.3.28-29) alludes to the Porter's lines about the "equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale" in Act 2 scene 3 of *Macbeth* (*Major Works* 758). The ambiguous nature of conscience, raised here by Beatrice to chastise the two assassins' hesitation, signifies the ironic fact that conscience works only in the favourable conditions for a moral subject. By being determined to commit patricide as a vengeful resort, Beatrice has cast off the restraints of moral conventions and come to realize, perhaps unconsciously, the inconsistency of human conscience. However, her understanding here ironically echoes her father's in Act 4 scene 1, where Count Cenci also claims that "Conscience! Oh, thou most insolent of lies! (4.1.177).

When the murder of the Count is about to be exposed to Savella the Legate, who, even more ironically, has come to announce the Count's arrest, Beatrice responds to Lucretia's fear in a jubilant and almost disdainful tone, saying that they can easily fool the authority with "cheap astonishment" and "guiltless pride" (4.4.44-45). Moreover, she cares nothing for the consequence:

...The deed is done,
 And what may follow now regards not me.
 I am as universal as the light;
 Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
 As the world's centre. (4.4.46-50)

Leader and O'Neill note, but do not analyse in depth, the similar lines in Act 3 scene 4 of *Macbeth*, when Macbeth is informed of the death of Banquo and the escape of Fleance. After learning about Banquo's death, Macbeth feels "Whole as the marble, founded as the rock; / As broad and general as the casting air" (3.4.21-22). With this Shakespearean allusion, Shelley again latently juxtaposes Beatrice with the regicidal antagonist. Both indulge in the transcendental ecstasy of murders accomplished, which make them feel they are united with the cosmological order—"the light," "the earth-surrounding air," and "the world's centre" in Beatrice's case, and "the marble," "the rock," and "the casting air" in Macbeth's—and become the sovereign of their own existence. For F. R. Leavis, Shelley's frequent resonances with Shakespeare in *The Cenci* are what confirm "the vague, generalizing externality of Shelley's rendering" (226). Patricia Hodgart also deems them flaws that cause confusion and intrusiveness in the play, which is otherwise admirable and well-managed (130). However, with the analysis above, I reveal the dramatic function of the Beatrice-Macbeth correspondence adopted by Shelley. By allusively equalling Beatrice with the regicidal—and to a symbolic extent, also patricidal—Macbeth/Lady Macbeth, Shelley deprives Beatrice of her moral ground and suggests that her justice is no more than another crime as the one committed by Macbeth/Lady Macbeth, which is based on superstition and ambition. I would, therefore, argue that Shelley utilises these poetical parallels between *The Cenci* and *Macbeth* to certify Count

Cenci's success in corrupting and assimilating Beatrice through his atrocities, especially the incestuous rape.⁹

Beatrice's self-defence in the trial in Act 5 is yet another example of Shelley's deviation from his source materials, and a further confirmation of Beatrice's latent identification with the Count. The confrontation between Beatrice and Marzio is recorded in Mary's translation: "Marzio, overcome and moved by the presence of mind and courage of Beatrice, retracted all that he had deposed at Naples, and rather than again confess, obstinately died under his torments" (*Poetical Works* 162). In its counterpart in Act 5 scene 2 of *The Cenci*, Marzio's initial confession is moved from Naples to Rome in the presence of Beatrice. When Marzio discloses how Beatrice "did urge with menaces and bribes / To kill your father" (5.2.24-25) to the Judge, Beatrice "*advances towards him*" and glares at him. Marzio, instead of being "moved by the presence of mind and courage" as Mary's text describes, is terrified by Beatrice's silent threat: "O, dart / The terrible resentment of those eyes / On the dead earth!" (29-31). Echoing her furious reaction to Marzio's and Olimpio's fear and hesitation to carry out the murder with a curse that "never dream ye shall outlive him long!" (4.3.33), in her self-righteousness Beatrice has unconsciously possessed her father's despotic disposition, forbidding the tortured man to tell her crime with threats.

To deal with Marzio's confession, Beatrice's following self-defence consists of three parts: first, a criticism of the jurisdiction relying on torture to extract confession that the judges already have in mind (5.2.39-43); second, an argument that she would be too imprudent and foolish to let Marzio—"this man, this bloody knife / With my own name engraven on the heft, / Lying unsheathed amid a world of foes, / For my own death" (98-101)—stay alive, if she was the one behind the murder; third, a lengthy appeal to Marzio that his confession would ruin her, "Who was most pure and innocent on earth" (138), and the reputation of "our ancient house, and stainless fame" (146). The first part against the torture-based jurisdiction is a correct observation of the legal/religious system that Shelley might aim to criticize, but ironically, in Beatrice's case the confession extracted from the tortured Marzio is the very truth that she does plot her father's death. The second part only implies that she regrets not simply killing Marzio to silence him forever right after the Count's death. The third part, urging Marzio to renounce his confession, merely demonstrates her overt self-righteousness and complete disregard for the broken man before her eyes. If Shelley intends to represent the image of Beatrice, the one that so impresses him with "the patience of gentleness" and the "permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility" at the Colonna Palace, his endeavour is considerably undermined in this climactic confrontation with Marzio.

Proud, cruel and self-righteous towards her unquestionable "innocence," the Beatrice in this scene is potentially a variation of her father, who is likewise proud, cruel, and self-righteous towards the evils he has done. After Beatrice's semi-sophist self-defence, Shelley concludes the scene following the original account that Marzio is moved by Beatrice's courage, declaring that "I alone am guilty" (5.2.159) and "She is the most innocent!" (165). However, from Marzio's perspective, what he sees here

⁹ For the discussion of other resonances between *The Cenci* and *Macbeth*, see D. Harrington-Lueker's 1983 essay "Imagination versus Introspection: *The Cenci* and *Macbeth*" in *Keats-Shelley Journal*.

is a woman who uses him to accomplish her murderous goal and now throws all the guilt upon him in a self-aggrandizing manner, forsaking him like a worthless pawn. Shelley's sudden return to the source materials renders Marzio's renunciation of his testimony and self-sacrifice a forced twist that borders on absurdity. Concerning Beatrice's moral issue, Mary E. Finn is probably correct in arguing, "The thoughts Beatrice entertains and to beget and especially to defend the act of murder are constructed and disciplined by the kind of casuistic ethic that belongs to the theological-legal tradition that has allowed Cenci to prosper" (186). Though Shelley also recognizes that "Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes" in the Preface (*Major Works* 316), Beatrice fails as a moral and aesthetic being not because she commits patricide as an act of vengeance, but because her self-defence afterwards deprives her of the nobility that a tragic heroine ought to possess.

In this paper, I have explored Shelley's composition of *The Cenci* in relation to his source materials and other literary works. With his rewriting of the Count's atrocities, Shelley brings the off-stage father-daughter incest back onto the stage, as a motif of inner corruption and utter assimilation. Shelley's frequent allusions to *Macbeth* testify the effect of the Count's dark intent and Beatrice's unconscious identification with her villainous father. In the climactic trial scene, Shelley further degrades the character of Beatrice in her confrontation with Marzio, rendering her both morally and aesthetically problematic. The obscene/off-scene motif of incest in *The Cenci* is beyond a dramatic device to justify Beatrice's later patricide, as argued by critics such as Barbara Groseclose (226). It also differs distinctly from the incest in the Gothic tradition. Count Cenci's incestuous desire for Beatrice is not like Manfred's sexual attempt on Isabella in *The Castle of Otranto*, also a form of father-daughter incest, which signifies the obsession of heritage and lines of succession, nor does it serve as a reader-stimulating twist to aggravate the fallen antagonist's sin as in *The Monk*. The incest motif in *The Cenci* is a unique artistic representation in English Romanticism, which generally focuses on and idealizes sibling incest. Reinforced by Shelley's innovations of other atrocities with symbolic meanings, the indirect but powerful representations of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci* attest to the poet's latent inclination to an alternative poetics of negativity empowered by hatred and violent eroticism, rather than the positive poetics based on love and sympathy—espoused by Shelley in other major works—that Beatrice fails to represent in this play.

Works Cited

- Bates, Ernest Sutherland. *A Study of Shelley's Drama The Cenci*. New York: Columbia UP, 1908. Print.
- Cameron, Kenneth N. and Horst Frenz. "The Stage History of Shelley's the Cenci." *PMLA* 60.4 (1945): 1080-1105. Web. 2 Feb. 2017.
- Cronin, Richard. "Shelleyan Incest and the Romantic Legacy." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 45 (1996): 61-76. Web. 2. Feb. 2017.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Groseclose, Barbara. "The Incest Motif in Shelley's The Cenci." *Comparative Drama* 19.3 (1985): 222-239. Web. 31 Oct. 2015.
- Hodgard, Patricia. *A Preface to Shelley*. London: Longman, 1985. Print.
- Johnson, Samuel. *A Dictionary of the English Language, Vol. 1* Dublin: 1775. *The Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. Edinburgh U. 2 Feb. 2017.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *From Communion to Cannibalism: an Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. New York: Princeton UP, 1990. Print.
- Leavis, F. R. *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry*. Harmondworth: Penguin, 1972. Print.
- Potkay, Monica Brzezinski. "Incest as Theology in Shelley's The Cenci." *The Wordsworth Circle* 35.2 (2004): 57-65. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Robert S. Miola. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. Print.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. F. L. Jones, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964. Print.
- . *The Major Works*. Eds. Zachery Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- . *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Mary Shelley, vol. 2, London: E. Moxon, 1839. Print.
- Steffan, Trumann Guy. "Seven Accounts of the Cenci and Shelley's Drama." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 9.4 (Autumn, 1969): 601-618. Web. 2 Feb. 2017.
- Thotslev, Peter. "Incest as Romantic Symbol." *Comparative Literature Studies* 2.1 (1965): 41-58. Web. 2 Nov. 2015.

Author Biography

Amadeus Kang-Po Chen is a PhD student in English literature at the University of Edinburgh. He obtained a Master's degree in English literature from National Chengchi University, Taiwan. His current research focuses on the erotic subjectivity in English Romanticism by examining the works of Blake, Shelley, and Keats.