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Perceptive Power: Shelley, The Cenci, and the Question of Reality

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Perceptive Power: Shelley, The Cenci, and the Question of Reality

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
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English

by

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Abstract

On the heels of an older generation of Romantic poets concerned with the individual's role in creating reality, Percy Shelley defines perception as a mandatory building block for countering an external physical world that is hostile to the individual. Consequently, the question of perception, both how it is defined and how it can be influenced, plays an important role in Shelley's works that focus on political and social change. The question of perception, as it relates to the individual and as it relates to social change, is brought to the forefront in *Prometheus Unbound* and his drama, *The Cenci*.

Introduction

In the midst of writing *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley briefly abandoned his lyrical drama of “beautiful idealisms,” in order to write *The Cenci*, a play that Shelley acknowledges is a “sad depiction” of “reality.” This “sad reality” is the story of a daughter who murders the father who raped her and who is, subsequently, condemned to death. Shelley is transparent about the purpose of *The Cenci*, writing that the drama would be “as a light to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart” (141). However, even with such explicit deflection onto the audience, it is difficult to come to a comfortable understanding of the drama, especially in light of Shelley’s more idealistic poetry and prose.

A survey of the criticism of *The Cenci* reflects an uneasiness about Shelley’s intentions in writing the drama and the work’s connections to his larger ideological positions. Early critics often passed over *The Cenci*, viewing it as a clumsy attempt by Shelley at drama for the stage. However, by the mid-twentieth century, criticism was slowly coming to recognize the play as something more than a failed attempt at theater. Consequently, critics began to analyze *The Cenci* within the context of Shelley’s larger ideological works. Carlos Baker connects *The Cenci* with Shelley’s conversational pieces, *Rosalind and Helen* and *Julian and Maddalo*, writing that its “intention is to display the perhaps inevitable corruption of human saintliness by the conspiracy of social circumstances and the continued operation of a vindictive tyranny” (147). Similarly, Stuart Curran, analyzing the drama in the context of *Prometheus Unbound* and the question of liberation, recognizes the play as a commentary on the failure of Christian society. He writes that *The Cenci* “is a tragedy of Renaissance Christian humanism, of culture that thought it possible to liberate the human mind within a Christian and largely feudal structure” (*Annus* 134). Stuart Sperry, arguing that Beatrice is “a kind of feminine counterpart to

Prometheus transposed to a domestic situation,” claims that Shelley composed the drama so that the audience would feel compassion for Beatrice, and not disapproval (420). Earl Wasserman also defines Beatrice’s murder of her father as a symbolic struggle against all tyrannical forms of despotism. However, he argues that her portrayal is not an occasion for moralistic pronouncements but a vehicle by which the audience attains “self-knowledge,” as Shelley argues in the preface to *The Cenci* (101).

Recent criticism of *The Cenci* has focused less on the drama’s political and social implications and more on how the play comments on the nature of theater and performance. Consequently, where criticism once focused on Beatrice’s choice to employ violence, it has increasingly circled around the question of representation and Beatrice’s questionable anagnorisis. Traditionally, a moment of anagnorisis occurs when a character moves from ignorance to knowledge. And whether this moment appears in *The Cenci*, and if so, what it signifies, has been a source of conflict for recent critics. Blood argues that *The Cenci* embodies a criticism of a play within a play and concludes, because of Beatrice’s lack of anagnorisis, that the drama forces the audience to understand that the subject is a purely grammatical construct. Andrea Henderson also examines *The Cenci* in relation to its theatrical representation, arguing that the “play dramatizes, in canonical Romantic fashion, the hollowness and dangers of an existence rooted in the theatrical and corporeal” (97). Similarly, Margaret Harrison claims that “Beatrice realizes herself in martyrdom to a purely performative universe” (211).

Examining *The Cenci* through the lens of theatre is a fruitful endeavor that opens the text up to further evaluation and discussion. It also addresses a fundamental aspect of *The Cenci*: the drama is a text that is geared especially towards a popular audience. In a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, from the summer of 1819, Shelley writes to his friend regarding his new play, *The*

Cenci, that the drama is “written without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions which characterize my other compositions.” Reasoning, and hoping, that the drama will succeed on the British stage because it is “certainly not inferior to any of the modern plays that have been acted,” he instructs Peacock regarding the play’s performance at Covent Garden (102). Shelley clearly intended for the drama to be performed in front of a popular audience. Reflecting this, the play is far more accessible and far more mimetic than many of his other major works. *The Cenci* is concerned less with Shelley’s “beautiful idealisms,” and more with the ways that individuals act in contemporary society. Moreover, in the preface of *The Cenci*, Shelley states that the drama must not “make the exhibition subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose.” He writes Leigh Hunt that in *The Cenci* he lays “aside the presumptuous attitude of an instructor” (142, 140). And yet, examining *The Cenci* and Beatrice Cenci in the vacuum of social performance and theatre or without a greater understanding of Shelley’s metaphysical beliefs, we lose a critical aspect of the drama. And we miss an opportunity to explore in greater detail Shelley’s understanding of the power of the individual within society to create and influence reality.

The thematic parallels between *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, as well as the dates of composition – Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound* between the late summer of 1818 and the early winter of 1819, while *The Cenci* was completed by the summer of 1819 – make it difficult to analyze Beatrice Cenci without considering her in light of Prometheus, an awe-inspiring figure of passive resistance whom Shelley describes as a “type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature” (207). Whereas Prometheus, as an image of passive resistance, sets in motion his own escape from tyrannical forces and a radical and positive transformation of the world, Beatrice Cenci reacts violently against her oppressive father and dies within the constraints of the

very society that enslaved her in the first place. Reading the works side by side, one gets two very different arguments regarding the control the individual has over her physical, external reality. *The Cenci* questions not the ethical validity of Beatrice's actions but the impetus behind them; by doing so, the drama provides an occasion for the audience to view the role perception plays in creating and maintaining Beatrice's internal identity and material reality. And, within the context of Shelley's understanding of the powerful possibilities of the self, capable of transcending beyond blind corporeal desires, Beatrice's actions expose the dangers of a society that is founded on the denial of an independent will.

The Cenci becomes a richer work considered in the context of *Prometheus Unbound* and of Shelley's conception of the individual, as he or she relates to an external reality. However, as Wasserman points out, despite the similarities between *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, it would be inaccurate to read the two works as a dichotomous whole. *The Cenci* is a work whose purpose is to engender "self-knowledge" in the minds of the reader. And where *Prometheus Unbound* envisions a hero of mythic proportions, *The Cenci* is not meant to "present its heroine to us as a model of the conduct to be avoided" (101). Shelley argues that "no person can be truly dishonored by the act of another" and that "revenge, retaliation" and "atonement, are pernicious mistakes." Shelley is explicit, in the preface at least, that Beatrice, when choosing violence, chooses the wrong course of action. The focus is not on a moralistic analysis of Beatrice's actions. Rather, the drama is concerned with "teaching the human heart...the knowledge of itself" (142).

Tyranny: Historical and Psychological

Both *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* are primarily concerned with individuals who struggle to find freedom in a world that oppresses them mentally and physically. As Stuart Curran argues, the subject of both works is “liberation” and, therefore, they “are accordingly dominated by images of imprisonment” (121). The concept of liberation, of freedom, was a loaded term during the early nineteenth century, especially to the Romantic poets. And following the French Revolution, an exploration of tyranny or freedom could be conceived as a political action, immediately invoking a decade of social upheaval and destruction. However, the question of an individual’s power and rights was not limited to the political realm. Carl Woodring notes that the Romantics were immersed in an age in which the potentiality of the individual was being realized:

The poets grew up in an environment of democratic ideas: the natural goodness of man as opposed to the doctrine of original sin, natural rights derived from natural law, the universality of individual freedom and equality, social contract, mixed government in an ideal commonwealth, tolerance for every sect and individual...and the greatest good for the greatest number. (33)

Freedom and equality were not just political terms; they were the basis for new social arguments about human nature and individuality in general. New ideas regarding the power and possibility of freedom and democracy reflected new ideas regarding the power of the individual. However, with the failure of the French Revolution solidified by the end of the eighteenth century, a movement which saw a country move from one definition of tyranny to another, those eager for change had to reassess the possibility of an individual’s power to transform a world of tyranny into a world of equality. If the French Revolution showed the failure of man to truly transform

his political and social world into a scene of “liberté, égalité, fraternité,” the Romantics, had to reconsider whether man could realize the ideal in the actual, physical world. They had to question if man could find freedom and liberty *within* the structure of society and government.

Both *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* were written almost thirty years after the beginning of the French Revolution. Yet England, as well as the rest of the world, was still feeling the aftershocks of the political revolution. Shelley, keeping abreast of England’s domestic troubles from Italy, was well aware of the political concerns that still plagued his birth country – the concern over freedom of speech and the fundamental questions of democracy that necessarily spring up in a world where an upper class is struggling to maintain its traditional forms of power. In this climate, both Shelley’s lyrical drama of “beautiful idealisms” and his drama of “sad reality” were born. And in the way the works handle the question of tyranny and violence it is hard not to see a response to the failed French Revolution or the turmoil in England in both. However, expanding outward from a specific moment, *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* are concerned with something more than one specific historical moment of tyranny; they are concerned with the psychological construction of inequality and destruction.

At its most basic level, *Prometheus Unbound* is the story of the struggle between one man, Prometheus, and one ruler, Jupiter, who serves as a metaphorical emblem of all forms of tyranny. Physically, Prometheus has been bound to a rock by Jupiter. Men, under his reign, have become “slaves” from whom Jupiter exacts “knee-worship, prayer, and praise” (I.6). However, Jupiter, as King of the Earth, and as the ultimate expression of tyranny, is not representative of an individual tyrant’s rule over a helpless civilization. Rather, Jupiter symbolizes all historical forms of tyranny. The furies that later attack Prometheus plague him with images of man under the reign of Jupiter. Beginning with an image of Jesus crucified, the furies’ present a history that

repeats itself with the way that, as William Godwin noted, “man destroys man.” Moving forward in time, the French Revolution is depicted as a movement that starts with “freedom” and “a legioned band of linked brothers/ whom Love calls children” and transforms into “death and sin,” because “Blood, like new wine bubbles within” until “Despair Smothers/ The struggling world – which slaves and tyrants win” (I.570-76). The world of Jupiter, the world of tyranny, is quite simply a world where inequality reigns. “Slaves and tyrants” only ever win. Individuals might switch between these roles, but the distinctions never fade away.

While in *Prometheus Unbound* Jupiter symbolizes a material tyranny, he, as an image of inequality and destruction, is also a shadow of human creation. His identity is inherently intertwined with humanity; a portion of his power derives not from what he has taken from his slaves, but from what the world has given him. Earl Wasserman argues that “Shelley has represented in Jupiter all tyrannical evils...But since tyrannic power is only an efficient fiction constituted of the minds’ willful abdication of its own will, Jupiter has no real and independent existence” (256). The question of the psychological construction of tyranny is developed throughout *Prometheus Unbound*, and it is clear from the first act that the reign of Jupiter is defined by the actions of men. When the furies chronologically describe the images of mankind turning to violence, they exclaim that “Blood, like new wine, bubbles within/ Till Despairs smothers/ The struggling world” (1. 575-76). Tyranny is a reflection of human desolation and destruction. “Blood,” the furies tell Prometheus, “bubbles within” the individual, not Jupiter. It is this despair that “smothers” the “struggling world.” Panthea’s words reinforce the furies’ sentiments that this destruction is manmade. Spying their torture of Prometheus, she tells her sister that she sees the Earth “peopled/ with thick shapes of human death/ All horrible, all

wrought by human hands” (1. 587-88). Even though men are “slaves” to Jupiter, it is men themselves, who perpetuating violence, create and maintain Jupiter’s reign.

The Cenci, by its very nature, is a work that forces its audience to address the physical nature of tyranny, whereas *Prometheus Unbound*, a lyrical drama that is meant to be read, exists on the cerebral plane. Consequently, the threats of Jupiter and tyranny are largely psychological. Jupiter has very little actual, physical interaction with the individuals he has enslaved. This is mainly because, as Wasserman notes, Jupiter is negatively defined by the actions of men. This is also because the purpose of *Prometheus Unbound* is to “familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence” (209). Where *Prometheus Unbound* is a psychological drama geared towards the inner workings of the mind, *The Cenci* focuses on a representation of human relationships and emotion. Its audience is invited to understand and appreciate the physical nature of the world depicted and the physical being of its participants. Andrea Henderson notes that in *The Cenci* Shelley intends to “accent the real and external rather than the visionary and internal aspect of human character and experience” (99). Beatrice, as a women living in a patriarchal society, is emblematic of an individual mentally *and* physically enslaved by the society in which she lives.

The Cenci is set in the world of fifteenth-century Italy and the drama depicts a society defined by multiple layers of tyranny. In such a society, tyranny operates through patrimony, both as it exists domestically and as it exists within a Catholic theocracy. On the domestic scale, Beatrice’s father, Count Cenci, is a type of Jupiter figure, an image of patrimonial tyranny taken to grotesque heights. The Count, like Jupiter, embodies power that is unchecked and unmitigated. The first lines of the play exemplify his over-arching power when Cardinal Camillo informs him that the “matter of the murder is hushed up/ If you consent to yield his Holiness/

Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate” (1.1.1-3). This is a dance the Count and the Church have performed before; the Count’s lust and violence are ignored by the Church in exchange for a healthy “donation” to the papacy. Camillo later informs Beatrice’s brother, Giacomo, of the Pope’s refusal to interfere on his behalf in the Count’s domestic matters. The pope informs his cardinal that “in the great war between the old and young/ I, who have white hairs and a tottering body/ Will keep at least a blameless neutrality” (2.2.37-40). The Church will not invade the Count’s sphere of power and neither will Roman society, a fact that is driven home during the Banquet scene in which Beatrice’s cries for help go unheeded. Even more horrifying is the reality that the invisible and divine world seems to uphold the Count’s actions. During his banquet, the Count informs his guests that he has just learned that his sons, whom he earlier wished dead, were found killed “all in the self-same hour of the same night/ Which shews that Heaven has special care of me” (1.3.64-65).

The Count’s unchecked actions and complete power allow him to physically and mentally destroy those around him. His desire for violence reveals his “love” for “the sight of agony” (1.1.81-82). However, it also reflects his hunger to maintain power and control. While torture is an end game in and of itself, the Count also desires to be omnipotent. Sean Dempsey compares the Count to a tyrant and argues that his “compulsive need for closure and self-certainty manifest itself as a willingness to eliminate anything that threatens his sense of wholeness” (885). Therefore, when Beatrice threatens the Count publicly at his Banquet to celebrate his sons’ deaths, he knows just the “charm” to make her “meek and tame” (2.1.167). His rape of Beatrice, in addition to satisfying his unchecked bloodlust, reinforces his supremacy. If Beatrice loses her selfhood because of the Count’s actions, she will no longer be able to challenge his ubiquitous reign.

Wasserman notes that the “Count’s torture of his children represents not only a domestic but a political and religious tyranny as well, the three modes being implicated in each other” (86). That is just as in *Prometheus Unbound*, where Jupiter symbolizes a society of individuals bent on destruction, the Count is a reflection of a Roman society that is predicated on a destructive patrimony. During the banquet scene, Beatrice asks the guests gathered at her father’s home what if “tyranny, and impious hate” were “sheltered by a father’s hoary hair.” The Count, the tyrant, is disguised as Beatrice’s father. If he is a tyrant, Beatrice questions what that means for “his children and his wife, whom he is bound / To love and shelter?” If a father is a tyrant, does that mean his children could “find / No refuge in this merciless wide world?” (1.3.100-7). In response to Beatrice’s impassioned plea, the guests at the banquet argue amongst themselves, pondering what action they could possibly take. Beatrice’s words prove true: they are too afraid to oppose the all-powerful Count Cenci. More than one man answers, “I would second any one” (1.3.143). But no man actually takes the initiative to stand against the Count. This Roman male society supports and reflects the Count’s power, and as the Count reminds them, they have to “think of their own daughters - or perhaps / of their own throats” before they come to Beatrice’s aid (1.3.130-31). Their domestic and social power derives from the same type of patriarchal relationship that exists between the Count and Beatrice.

The layers of patriarchy do not end with Roman society because, as Shelley makes explicit in *The Cenci*, the church, both in its philosophical foundations and in its practical application, mirrors the structure of Roman political and patriarchal society. Responding to Giacomo’s pleas questioning if the Pope will protect his “innocent sister,” Camillo answers,

I see not how he could refuse it – yet
He holds it of most dangerous example
In aught to weaken the paternal power

Being as 'twere, the shadow of his own. (2.2.53-55)

The pope, like the father in the home, stands at the head of his community of believers. If a child could question his father's authority, it would follow that a child could question any authority. Understanding this danger, the pope avoids the Count's domestic disputes, fearing the threat of a diminished authority. And yet Shelley, not content to simply criticize Catholicism in its practice, extends the conceit of the debilitating effects of patrimony even further to encompass the ideological foundations of Christianity. As Beatrice will later come to understand, a will under the power of a superhuman god is never free. In the Christian faith, God the father is the omnipotent authority, and his believers are subservient to his rule. The Church mirrors this structure, government followed almost simultaneously, and the family, as the building blocks of each, mirrors them both. Each is reflected in the Count's sadistic tyranny over his children and in the destruction of his daughter.

The Count's rape of Beatrice, coming after she publicly opposes him, is a deliberate act intended to reinforce and to maintain his power. Beatrice's response is one guided both by revenge and by a desire to liberate herself from the oppressive bonds of a patriarchal society. Harry White argues that in *The Cenci* Shelley transforms the Beatrice of his manuscript source, a rebellious figure seeking self-protection, into a woman motivated solely by revenge. In doing so, he claims that the play "dramatizes the evils of vengeance and not the difficulties inherent in Shelley's notions of forbearance, forgiveness, and passive resistance" (37). However, White's argument overlooks the larger structure of the drama and the impetus behind the count's actions. The Count's rape of Beatrice is politically motivated, and Beatrice's response is rooted in the oppressive society in which she lives. Just as Jupiter sends his furies to plague Prometheus so that he will submit to his rule, the Count rapes his daughter hoping to crush her will. Beatrice, by

taking action against her father, takes action against a society that continually violates her selfhood and denies her a right to an independent will. Consequently, Beatrice's action is motivated by a desire to be free of an oppressive force and to fight back against tyranny.

Beatrice exists in a world that is predicated on the hierarchical structure between father and child, and, as such, there is no avenue for escape from oppression. The church will not aid her in fear that it will hurt its own authority. Society will not aid her because it, like Count Cenci, recognizes her role as secondary and subservient. Every avenue, every form of relief has been blocked. This is Beatrice's external reality. After the rape, Beatrice tells her stepmother, "Some such thing is to be endured or done" (3.1.93). However, she does not endure; she does not forbear. She chooses the second option and strikes back with an external and violent action. This is one of the crucial differences between Beatrice and Prometheus. Prometheus does endure. And it is through this powerful passive resistance that the hero can transcend, and then, transform his physical, external reality.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus achieves liberation and equality, for himself and for the world, not through force, but through passive resistance. While the concept of passive resistance is elevated to the level of "beautiful idealisms" in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley handles its power in a much more immediate sense in *The Mask of Anarchy*, a poem written in the fall of 1819 in response to the Peterloo Massacre. In the poem, Earth, addressing the "Men of England," urges her audience to stand resolute against an oppressive ruling class:

And if the tyrants dare
Let them ride among you there,
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew-
What they like, that let them do

With folded arms and steady eyes,
And little fear, and less surprise
Look upon them as they slay
Till their rage has died away. (340-347)

Clearly, in *The Mask of Anarchy*, Shelley is advocating for the tactics of passive resistance. However, as White argues, the issues inherent in passive resistance are naturally tested in Shelley's drama of "sad reality." Rather than arguing that *The Cenci* is a concession to the limitations of passive resistance, White claims that Shelley sidesteps the issue altogether. He asserts that Shelley avoids the problem of "whether violence is justified in fighting oppression" (37). But, the issue of the justification of violence is not the most pressing issue in either Shelley's principle of passive resistance or in *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*. Instead, the pressing question concerns the impetus for violence and the psychological impulse that drives inequality. In *The Cenci*, as in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley demonstrates that the fight against tyranny begins, first and foremost, in the mind of the individual. Prometheus, embodying the power of the autonomous will, does not resort to violence because he learns to redefine the nature of oppression and freedom. Conversely, Beatrice, defined solely and explicitly by her external world, is unable to gain access to this level of self-consciousness, and, thus, turns to an outward show of force.

The Mind: Dualism, Materialism, and Perception

Stuart Sperry argues that critics falsely define Prometheus as a willful figure who actively transforms himself and the world around him. Instead, he claims that the doctrine of Necessity is built into the framework of *Prometheus Unbound*, complicating the relationship between a free

will and an external force which is working behind the scenes (251). Sperry argues, defining Prometheus as a constancy, that an amoral Necessity is the “greater force” behind the transformative change in the lyrical drama. It is undeniable that Shelley explored the doctrine of Necessity throughout his career, evidence of which is seen in many of his earlier poems, including *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam*. As the lyrical drama makes clear, Prometheus does not act alone. Lurking throughout the drama, Demogorgon, as an emblem of Necessity, helps orchestrate the change that takes place on Earth. Additionally, Love must succeed the reign of Jupiter, and Asia must ultimately be reunited with Prometheus so that tyranny can transform into harmony and equality.

Where then, amidst these autonomous and communal forces of love and Necessity, is the power of the individual? Carlos Baker argues that “the obvious question raised by [*Prometheus Unbound*] is one of the oldest in philosophic literature: How far is man able to control his own destiny?” (114). This question takes on added significance when one considers the political and social background in which Shelley wrote. Where the French Revolution made many question the power of man to truly find freedom and equality through action, the Romantics reconsidered if man could find the ideal on this earth and, if so, under what conditions. Despite this cynicism towards the ability to individually transform the world from the inside out, it would be a mistake to give precedence to any doctrine of Necessity over Shelley’s conception of the individual will. To argue that the transformation of Prometheus’s material world derives solely from an external source of power would be to ignore the emphasis Shelley places on the power of the individual mind to influence material reality through perception.

It is difficult to comprehend Shelley’s understanding of the mind and the power of the individual without placing him in context with the older generation of Romantic poets. Marilyn

Butler argues that the older and younger generations of Romantic poets differed significantly in terms of their definition of the individual's relationship with the world. Claiming that the older generation of poets embodied a more "Romantic personality," she argues that this personality "acts out in life his neurotic gloom; he is frustrated and alienated from society" and, therefore, "in his art he proposes an alternative world as a surrogate" (126). Recognizing this as a broad generalization, it is possible to see a difference between the ideologies of the younger and older generation of Romantic poets. Blake certainly advocates for the viability of the creation of an alternative world. Coleridge, taking comfort in Christianity, can retreat to dreams of a better future while Wordsworth escapes to an individual, spiritualized vision of nature. However, Shelley is far less eager to retreat into the mind and far more concerned with a transformation that speaks to society *as a whole* and to a change that affects the real, physical, and social world. Therefore, Butler argues that if Wordsworth and Coleridge come to embrace a type of writing that is "reflective, autobiographical" and "religious," than the younger generation of Romantics were "extrovert not introvert, and pagan not Christian" (124).

As Butler notes, the older generation's embrace of introspective and religious mediations is, in many ways, a reflection of their own belief in the power of the individual to retreat into realities that are dependent solely upon the mind. But Shelley is reluctant to accept an understanding of the mind that privileges its creative powers. Throughout his poetry and prose, Shelley denies a worldview that understands the individual as being born into a world created by a Judeo-Christian God. In the essay *On Life*, titled posthumously by Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley asks: "What is the cause of life? That is how was it produced. What agencies distinct from life have acted or act upon life" (506). Here, as throughout the remainder of his prose and poetry, Shelley shies away from giving a comprehensive and complete answer to his own question

concerning the ultimate cause of existence. Undeniably, this can be attributed to Shelley's skeptical view of reality; the cause of the universe is a mystery that plagues him throughout his life. However, it is clear that Shelley does not believe that religion is the ultimate cause of human existence.

Shelley's condemnation of religion is multi-faceted, one that stems not just from an understanding of the Church's corruption and hypocrisy, but from an understanding of the foundations of belief. In *The Necessity of Atheism*, written while Shelley was still at university, the young poet wrote, following an argument influenced by John Locke, that "it is evident that we have not sufficient testimony, or rather that testimony is insufficient to prove the being of a God" (Clark 39). From an early age it is clear that Shelley understood religion to be something which must be created by the mind of man. Because there is no proof for God's existence, it is only through faith that one creates and understands God. Years later, when considering his question of the ultimate cause of the universe in *On Life*, Shelley writes that "generations of mankind have wearily busied themselves in inventing the answer to this question; and the result has been, -- Religion" (508). It is not unimportant that Shelley uses the verb "invention" in this context; he still believed that religion was a concept that was invented by humanity.

Shelley's understanding of the foundation of religion and his denial of its validity is necessarily tied to his own belief in the powers and limitations of the human mind. Writing against the possibility that human existence is predicated on Religion, Shelley claims "that the basis of all things cannot be, as the popular philosophy alledges, mind is sufficiently evident." Shelley argues, "mind, as far as we have any experience of its properties, and beyond that experience how vain is argument, cannot create, it can only perceive" (508). The perceiving power of the mind is arguably one of the most important concepts found in Shelley's prose

writings, and it is one that resurfaces repeatedly. Writing to Leigh Hunt, in September 1819, the year in which Shelley was composing both *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, Shelley comments on the Lake poet Charles Lloyd. Observing Lloyd's marginalia, which he found in his copy of a book by Berkeley, Shelley remarks that he was especially struck by one of Lloyd's notes: "Mind cannot create, it can only perceive." For Shelley, this maxim was "the assertion of a doctrine which even then" he "had long been persuaded, and on which [he] had founded much of [his] persuasions regarding the imagined cause of the universe" (123). Additionally, in an undated fragment later titled *Speculations on Metaphysics*, Shelley once again clarifies what he believes are the unique limits and powers of human cognition and understanding: "beyond the limits of perception and thought nothing can exist" (Clark 183).

The idea of perception, and the question of its powerful place in the creation of reality, was not a novel concept by the time Shelley was writing to Hunt in the summer of 1819. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke examined the connection between perception and epistemology. Debating the inherent qualities of man, Locke argues against the claim that individuals are born with innate ideas. Instead, he claims that the mind is like a white sheet of paper and that ideas are, therefore, born *only* in experience. Locke writes that it is "our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds" that create the thoughts that populate the human mind (104). Critically, for Locke, the mind is passive in this operation. However, his position on the power of perception is necessarily bounded by his belief in a superhuman God; and, as such, Locke believes that the mind is born into a physical reality created by an independent source. He argues, therefore, that "however managed by art and skill" the power of an individual's mind "reaches no further than to compound and divide the materials that are made to his hand" (120).

Locke's definition of perception and material reality understands man and matter as two separate entities. Man cannot influence the physical world; he can only perceive it. This idea is reinforced by Locke's belief in a Judeo-Christian worldview. Locke argues that "if we can find out how far the understanding can extend its view" than "we may learn to content ourselves with what is attainable by us in this state" (45). Because Locke recognizes existence as predicated on God, he believes in a necessary separation between the individual and his physical, external world. Not seeking unity with the present world, because man will only find unity after death, the individual comes to accept his limitations as a creating power in the world. Therefore, man is always at odds with physical matter. More importantly, there is no necessary reason to combine the two. Corporeality is predicated on the fact that there is a separation between the internal desires of man and his physical external world.

While the older generation of Romantics often shared with Locke a preoccupation with the power of perception to create knowledge, they did not understand reality as founded on an inherent dualism between mind and matter. Therefore, William Wordsworth, in "Tintern Abbey," captures the power of the human mind to find a deeper unity between the internal and the external through the perception of nature. Reflecting on the English countryside, the speaker remarks that even "in lonely rooms, and mid the din/of towns and cities" that "these forms of beauty have been to me/ as is a landscape to a blind man's eye" (23-27). However, more critically, the speaker cries that "to them I may have owed another gift/ of aspect more sublime." For, shifting through his memories of being amongst nature, the poet finds "the weary weight/ of all this unintelligible world/ is lighten'd" so that the body becomes "a living soul" (37, 40-47).

In *Tintern Abbey*, the poet's life is predicated on, and created from, the images of nature that he perceives. The power of perception that informs the individual's life is one that

understands the unity between the internal and the external. Looking at nature, reflecting on these perceptions, the poet feels that the “corporeal frame” is “suspended” so that he becomes a “living soul” (44-47). The mind and the body evaporate into their physical surroundings. And, as the poem progresses, the unity between man and nature evolves into a unity between man and a higher, spiritual presence. Contemplating the change between his youthful understanding of nature and his more mature vision, the poet acknowledges that he still finds sustenance in feeling in nature,

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the minds of man. (94-101).

The individual, finding unity with his natural surroundings, is able to experience an expansion of consciousness. The speaker exclaims that “Nature” can “so inform/ the mind that is within us” and so “impress” it “with quietness and beauty” that “the dreary intercourse of daily life” will not “disturb/ our cheerful faith that all which we behold/ Is full of blessings” (126-135). By meditating on nature, man is able to destroy some of the limitations of “daily life.” He is able to access “lofty thoughts” and higher truths and to transcend the limitations of the body, thus becoming a “living soul.”

Like Wordsworth, William Blake understands the power of perception to be one that reconciles an internal desire of the mind with material reality. However, contrasting with Wordsworth, Blake does not argue that man must perceive, or remember, his natural surroundings in order to access a higher state of being. Rather, he focuses on the powerful

possibilities of imagination. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the voice narrating the satirical text argues that once “the doors of perception were cleansed” so that “everything would appear to man as it is” then the “whole creation” will be “consumed, and appear infinite, and holy whereas it now appears finite & corrupt” (pl. 14). Unlike Locke, who argues that our ideas can only be derived from actual experience, Blake argues that the mind is not restricted by experience that is derived from the five senses. Rather, in *There is No Natural Religion*, Blake exclaims that “mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover” (b, 1). Northrop Frye notes that for Blake, “the eye does not see: the eye is a lens for the mind to look through.” Frye argues that “perception, then is not something we do with our senses; it is a mental act.” Man is no longer a passive recipient of visual images, influenced solely by an external world. Instead, man, as “Poetic Genius,” is able to influence reality. As Frye notes, for Blake, “man perceiving is a former or imaginer, so that ‘imagination’ is the regular term used by Blake to denote man as an active and perceiving being” (19). Perception, then, is an even more powerful force in Blake than in Wordsworth because it has a power independent of external influence.

Shelley’s conception of the power of the individual, denying the mind’s ability to create, often diverges from the older Romantic’s conception of the individual, who finds refuge in an alternative world. While Shelley denies the power of the mind to create an alternative reality, his understanding of perception, unlike Locke’s, is not founded on a dualism of mind versus matter. Nor does it imagine that perception is passive. Rather, it reflects a Romantic desire for unity between a transcendent internal longing and the external, material world. In *On Life*, Shelley writes against “the shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, its fatal consequences in morals, and their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things” (506).

Wasserman notes that Shelley was threatened by “the popular philosophy” of dualism “because from a Lockean dualism of mind and matter it is possible to deduce a Creator Mind that governs its creation” (132). And as Shelley did not believe that the mind had the power to create an independent superhuman God, he could not understand reality as being founded upon a separation between the internal mind and external matter.

Critically, Shelley’s rejection of dualism does not signal his acceptance of materialism. Unable to admit that man is simply matter, Shelley is incapable of imagining a metaphysical reality that denies the existence of man’s spiritual life. In “On Life” Shelley explains his divergence from materialism, writing that there is an inherent transcendental nature in man that rejects an “alliance with transience and decay.” He claims that “whatever may be his true and final destination there is a spirit within” man “at enmity with nothingness and dissolution” (506). This belief in the divine nature of man is reflected in Shelley’s understanding of the power of perception. While Shelley did not necessarily privilege the creating power of the mind, it is clear that his understanding of perception, unlike Locke’s, was founded upon the belief that the mind is active and not passive. And as with Wordsworth and Blake, Shelley’s definition of an active perceiver is one who is capable of accessing a higher truth.

However, it can be difficult to understand the extent to which Shelley understood the perceiving mind to be independent of a physical, external reality. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth argues that the mind, influenced by the spiritual presence of nature, is able in turn to influence its physical reality. For Blake, perception and imagination alone, independent of any external source, can directly transform an external reality in the individual’s quest to achieve an ideal state. But Shelley, far more skeptical by nature, is less explicit as to the mind’s independence of its external influences. And, in many ways, the contrast between *The Cenci* and *Prometheus*

Unbound reflects Shelley's skepticism about proclaiming either that the mind is wholly dependent or wholly independent of its physical, external reality.

Despite this uncertainty, Shelley does at times define the mind, in its ability to perceive a higher truth, as independent from material reality. In Shelley's early poem *Queen Mab*, the mind becomes one of the central subjects in the battle against a material world that is often defined by tyranny and inequality. Shelley writes that "the omnipotence of mind / which from its dark mine drags the gem of truth," will "decorate its paradise of peace" (236-238). Therefore, in *Queen Mab*, Shelley argues that there is an inherent internal force that recognizes a greater truth or a greater ideal. This is a conclusion that is echoed in Shelley's poem "Mont Blanc." Describing the sheer force of the "Power," which Mont Blanc symbolizes, and the inability of humans to act against or to access such a force, Shelley seems to be defining a mind that cannot contend with an unknowable external energy that is shaping and defining the world. However, he ends the poem with a rhetorical question: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea/ if to the human mind's imaginings/ silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-44). "Mont Blanc" implies an understanding of material reality that is dependent on the human imagination, one that is almost Blakean in its scope and power.

The Independent Will

In *Prometheus Unbound*, the conception of the mind, capable of perceiving a higher truth independent of a contrary external reality, that evolves throughout Shelley's earlier works becomes crystallized in this character of "moral excellence" (209). Therefore, Prometheus's power derives not from his ability to endure all suffering for a seemingly infinite amount of time nor from passive resistance alone. Rather, Prometheus's power initially comes from his decision

to let go of his all-consuming hate towards Jupiter, through a powerful change of perception. Within the first seventy-three lines of the epic, Prometheus has, in mid-speech, gone from wishing to “trample” the “cruel King” to stating “Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee... I speak in grief not exultation, for I hate no more” (I.48-53). It is a quick jump, and one, as Stuart Sperry points out, that seemingly comes from no explicit causal premise (243). One second Prometheus is raging against his circumstances, crying out to the world, “No change, no pause, no hope! – Yet I endure” (I.24). And the next moment he simply, and anti-climatically, does change. The hatred and revenge he feels turns into pity, and he reaches out to the phantoms of the earth in order to recall the curse that he once laid at Jupiter’s feet.

Stuart Sperry argues, in claiming that Prometheus is not a willful figure, that an external force largely transforms the world of *Prometheus Unbound*. Earth, influenced by the laws of Necessity, moves towards a cycle of peace and harmony and its inhabitants are swept along with the inevitable change. Consequently, the will of the individual is generally valueless within the larger structure of change. And yet, within the formal construction of *Prometheus Unbound*, the universal move towards peace and equality takes place only after Prometheus is able to perceive a higher ideal and only after Prometheus, through his own free will, is able to revoke the curse on Jupiter. While Prometheus does not embody the mind’s ability to independently *create* a new world, he does embody the mind’s ability to *perceive* an ideal state of being and to willfully act out those perceptions within his physical and external world.

And yet, while Prometheus embodies an individual who is capable of accessing a higher truth independent of an external source, the hero is also emblematic of a being who possesses an independent will, uncorrupted by self-seeking desires. At the beginning of *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus is blinded by a desire for revenge, a desire that does not serve a higher ideal. Rather,

revenge is a reflection of his tortured material reality and the mindless impulses of the body. This struggle between noble truths and blind impulses is made explicit in *Julian and Maddalo*, where Shelley creates two powerful dichotomies that display different theories about the power of the self to create inner peace and purpose. Maddalo, Shelley's sketch of Byron, argues that the soul, "Hung in a heaven illumined tower, must toll / our thoughts and our desires to meet below/ Round the rent heart and pray – as madmen do." The individual has no power over their actions or their impulses. They are animals, moved only by desire. Moreover, "they know not" why they are slaves to their heart or for what purpose (124-27). They only know they cannot escape its controlling force over their lives. Julian, the figure of Shelley within the poem, counters Maddalo by arguing that the individual, like a child, could be "happy, high, majestic" but for "our will/ That thus enchains us to permitted ill" (170-74). The crux lies in deciding the power of the human will. Either the individual is a slave to impulses and desires that they cannot understand, and an external reality that presses against them, or they have an autonomous independent power that allows them to transcend blind corporeal cravings.

When Prometheus decides to recall his curse, he is embodying the power of the mind to access these higher mental truths and, subsequently, to allow these ideals to transform his perception of reality. He is moving past a revenge that is blind and self-seeking and moving towards a truth that is transcendent; it does not answer to the body but to the spirit. And by denying a myopic and self-serving desire, Prometheus is able to redefine his own identity, and consequently, his relationship with his physical material world. Quickly after Prometheus recalls his curse on Jupiter, Mercury is sent to torture the hero in order to learn his secrets. Prometheus replies, "Submission, thou does know, I cannot try." Instead, he claims, "I wait / Enduring thus the retributive hour / which since we spake is even nearer now." Prometheus is still fighting for

freedom, but he is redefining that fight. Justice is not revenge or retaliation but is “pity” (I.395-404).

After Prometheus denies his stance of hatred and violence, evil remains; passive resistance will not bring about the fall of tyranny. In order to provoke Prometheus into submitting, Jupiter sends forth the furies to torture him. The furies embody all the evil of Prometheus’s material world, including the horrors of Christianity and the failures of the Revolution. Taunting Prometheus, they tell him they “will live through” him “one by one / Like animal life.” And though they admit they do not “obscure” the soul, they taunt they “will dwell / Beside it like a vain loud multitude” (I. 483-86). Prometheus does not deny this prognosis of evil. Rather, he tells the furies, “Why, ye are thus now / Yet I am king over myself, and rule / The torturing and conflicting throngs within” (I.492-94). Having relinquished his hate for Jupiter, Prometheus is no longer reacting against an external, physical threat. He is now fighting the internal battle with his own corporeal and limited desires. This is Prometheus’s true moment of victory. It is not that by giving up his desire for retaliation that Prometheus has taken the easier route towards freedom. It is simply that the fight for freedom has been redefined. The better world, the higher ideal, does not arrive after one defeats the external source of evil. Instead, it arrives when one defeats an internal desire that is blind to transcendent possibilities.

By denying revenge, Prometheus gains a new perspective, and simultaneously is able to define his own identity independent from an external, material source. In the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley writes that “The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Satan.” And yet, he argues that Prometheus is a “more poetical character than Satan” because “he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire of personal aggrandizement, which in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere

with the interest” (206-7). If we conceive of Prometheus and Satan as figures fighting for freedom against a seemingly omniscient tyrant, we can understand Shelley’s reluctance to equate Satan with his hero of “beautiful idealisms.” In *Paradise Lost*, Satan’s whole self is defined by his active opposition to God. His will is forever bent toward fighting an external foe. Milton’s Satan says to his fallen fellow conspirator on first waking in Hell, “What though the field be lost / All is not lost; the unconquerable will/ and study of revenge, immortal hate” (I.105-07). The *unconquerable* will, Satan says. He views his will as the struggle between himself and God. If he relents, or concedes, then he is ultimately conceding his will, his self. However, this is not Prometheus’s struggle. Prometheus’s actions at the beginning of Shelley’s lyrical drama transform the fight between internal desires and the external forces of tyranny. The individual is not defined by the struggle between the self and contrary external forces, but between blind corporeal desire and a higher transcendent truth.

This is the struggle that defines Prometheus. In the fight between himself and a hostile world, Prometheus is capable of transforming his world from the inside out, by accessing a higher mental truth and, subsequently, willfully redefining himself. Eventually, he will reunite with Asia and their love will recreate the world as a new, peaceful era. But, the process of freedom starts with Prometheus struggling to reestablish an identity that reflects an internal control over his own will, and not a myopic desire for revenge. However, Beatrice never accesses this level of understanding as to the true nature of revenge. Nor, it could be argued, does she access an understanding of herself, of her own nature, that is independent from pre-existing notions of “truth.”

One of the most striking aspects about Beatrice in the “sad reality” of *The Cenci* is that she is never alone. It is more than simply that she is never portrayed in a scene without any other

characters. Within the drama, Beatrice never once has a sustained and substantial soliloquy. Certain male characters, most notably Orsino, Giacomo, and the Count, all have soliloquies. They are presented in moments alone, working through and with their own thoughts. However, Shelley constructs his heroine around the conversations she has with other people; she is always reacting to her external, physical reality, never existing in any independent solitary sense. We could argue that Beatrice's lack of inner depth is a reflection of a male writer incapable of presenting a realized female figure. But this argument does not stand up against Shelley's own depictions of female characters in other works, notably Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*. Rather, Beatrice's lack of any autonomous self is an effect of the external world in which she lives and is emblematic of her inability to understand the foundations of reality.

Like Prometheus, Beatrice exists in a patriarchal world that is, in all respects, hostile. Similarly, she is a type of Promethean figure, enduring the tyranny of her evil father. She is a sympathetic figure, noble in her desire to stand against her father and to shelter her step-mother and siblings. Rather than simply practicing passive resistance, Beatrice has worked herself to exhaustion in order to transform her relationship with her father. She argues that she has "borne much...excused much, doubted: and when no doubt/ remained" she "sought by patience, love and tears/ to soften him." After all her efforts failed, she "lifted up to God, the father of all/ Passionate prayers" (1.3.112-20). But, when this too fails, she turns to those around her for help. In the first scene of the drama, Beatrice tells Orsino, "Ah, wretched that I am! Where shall I turn?" (1.2.29-30). It is the first moment that the audience learns that she is in danger, and, simultaneously, the first moment that she defines her relationship with her contrary physical world. Reflecting her formal role within the drama, as a character that is defined by her relationships with other character, Beatrice does not look inward for escape. Instead, she

continually looks outside of herself for an answer to the problems that plague her. She goes on to tell her father's guests at her banquet, "Two yet remain... whom if ye save not/ ye may soon share such merriment again/ as fathers make over their children's graves" (1.3. 122-25). Each time Beatrice appeals to forces outside herself for help. Each time the external world fails her.

This is one of the crucial differences between Prometheus and Beatrice. Prometheus looks internally to understand the difference between corporeal desire and higher truths. The answer to Prometheus' desire for peace is not found outside himself, but within. In this respect, Prometheus is similar to an earlier hero of Shelley's found in the poem, *Alastor; Or, the Spirit of Solitude*. In *Alastor*, the young, unnamed poet, touched by a higher "Power," is plagued by visions of an ideal love, and of an ideal state of being, independent of an external reality. In the preface, Shelley writes that the poet turns away from the "magnificence and beauty of the external world" and into his mind. It is there that he creates, or finds, the "vision in which... his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture" (72-73). This is not to say that the poet is not influenced by the external world; the narrator informs us that in his youth he traveled the wide world, and exploring "ruined temples" and the "memorials/ of the world's youth" he "gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind/ Flashed like strong inspiration" (114-126). However, critically, the younger poet has an internal drive that propels him towards the desire for meaning and for inspiration. The narrator argues that from his youth, the poet, "Nature's most secret steps/ He like her shadows has pursued" (81-82). It is not that nature first impresses on him a desire for the ideal. Rather, the poet's internal desires and temperament naturally lead him to look for answers to his own questions in the external world. When they fail to reflect his own internal hunger, he finds them in his own mind.

Reflecting Shelley's aversion for dualism, *Alastor* subtly cautions against an idealism that is divorced from the reality of our physical being. In the preface to the poem, Shelley writes that "the poet's self-centered seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin." And yet, Shelley is also quick to caution that the Poet's folly, in neglecting reality for the ideal, is nothing compared to the folly of men who "dare to abjure" the "Power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences." These men, denying a "Power" that awakens humanity to the possibility of more, "[rejoice] neither in human joy nor mourn with human grief," and therefore, their existence is a far worse type of madness than that of the poet of *Alastor* (73). Therefore, Shelley is arguing for an understanding of a type of "Power" that exists independent of the mind or matter. This "Power" is one that whispers to the individual that there might be something more; it reflects those ideas of beauty and truth that one finds in the mind of the individual.

The young poet in *Alastor* and Prometheus hear the faint murmurings of a "Power" which hints at transcendent truths that rise above fleeting corporeal desires. In doing so, they look inward to discover an ideal reflected in their mind and independent of their external, material reality. However, Beatrice can never ascend to this level of consciousness. After the rape, Beatrice's identity has dissolved and become distorted. Rather than looking inward in order to regain her will or to access a higher truth, Beatrice continues to look to an external source. Because she believes in an external God, a God that exists separate from the individual, Beatrice can never perceive that authority is solely a psychological construct, and not a metaphysical fact. And believing in the reality of a religion that is founded on the tenets of patriarchy, Beatrice is incapable of understanding herself as a source of authority.

Until the moment of Beatrice's rape, the opposition between Beatrice and the negative effects of patriarchy remain intact. While she appeals to a corrupted outside world for help, Beatrice is not a direct actor in creating a world predicated on fear and violence. Her rape, by her father, is the crucial reckoning between Beatrice's inherently pure inner state and the physical evils of the world. It is important to recognize that, on one level, the rape is quite simply a horrible injustice done to a guiltless woman. It is reality at its most heartbreaking, at its most incomprehensible. However, on a metaphorical level, the rape of Beatrice is a visceral and horrifying embodiment of the power and evil made possible by systems of tyranny. And through Beatrice's rape by the Count, Shelley makes clear the ways in which evil actions corrupt the spirit of the people who sustain them. After the rape, Beatrice states that she feels a "clinging, black, contaminating mist" around her, "poisoning/ The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life" (3.1.178, 223). Evil invades her soul; it is impossible for Beatrice to resist it. Like the furies who "exist like animal life" within Prometheus and live "beside" his soul "like a vain loud multitude," the Count's rape is an attack on Beatrice's soul, mind, and heart. And in response to this hostile violation, Beatrice cries out, "Oh what am I/ What name, what place, what memory shall be mine" (3.1.745). The Count's actions have effectively vanquished Beatrice's selfhood.

However, in the fight between evil and selfhood, Beatrice's fight to regain her identity, God ultimately stands between herself and a greater understanding of reality. Before Beatrice announces to Orsino and Lucretia that they must murder the Count, she tells them, "I have prayed/ To God, and I have talked with my own heart/ And have unravelled my entangled will" (3.1.218-20). Understanding that the ideal is concentrated in a future state and in an extra-human God, Beatrice cannot imagine that she herself has the power to access higher truths independent from an external source. Therefore, when Beatrice is raped by her father, she believes according

to religious doctrine, that her body has been corrupted. Beatrice, praying to God, notes that she cannot allow her body to become “the unworthy temple of thy spirit” by allowing “what thou abhorrest” to “mock thee unavenged” (3.1.129-31). Beatrice’s belief in God requires her to understand that evil forces and good forces are ultimately separate entities existing independent of the self. The self does not create good or evil. Rather, the individual reacts against them. Beatrice cannot rise above the reality of her world because she does not recognize the power of the individual to access, independent of an external non-human frame, higher ideals.

After the Count has been murdered, and after Beatrice and her family have been tried and found guilty, Lucretia reminds Beatrice that there might still be hope, that the Pope could still pardon them. Lucretia notes the very thought “gushes to my heart/ Like the warm blood” (5.4.95-96). In response, Beatrice replies, “Worse than despair/ Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope.” She tells Lucretia to “plead...with famine, or wind-walking Pestilence/ Blind lightening, or the deaf sea” but not to plead “with man!” (5.4. 97-107). This is where Beatrice stands moments before she is executed. It is a profoundly anti-humanist statement, reflecting a belief in the failure of human possibility. The material world is more powerful than the self. However, more importantly, Beatrice’s statement devalues the power of hope, which is the creating power in the world of *Prometheus Unbound*.

After Prometheus has struggled with the furies and has been comforted by the spirits, he claims, “I feel/most vain all hope but love” (I. 807-08). Sperry argues that Prometheus does not “survive through the power of faith,” which is predicated on “certainty” (249). Rather, Prometheus, as an autonomous self, can only rely on hope. He has no certainties because he does not rely on any external source of knowledge. But Beatrice, in her struggle for freedom, has relied on faith. Wasserman notes that Beatrice’s despair of faith is symbolic of the despair “that

followed the failure of the French Revolution....that misinterprets the human potential, holds the human character in contempt, and renders melioration impossible” (99). Beatrice has misinterpreted her own “human potential.” Within the confines of her world, she can never imagine the power of an autonomous self.

Roger Blood argues that part of the difficulty in understanding *The Cenci* lies in the questionable anagnorisis of Beatrice’s character. Traditionally, an anagnorisis is defined as a dramatic realization of one’s true character. And yet, in *The Cenci*, Beatrice’s moment, or moments of anagnorisis, are conflicting and limited. Blood writes that “the crux of the play, therefore, is not contained entirely within the traditional problem in tragedy of the relation of character to action, but resides in the quandary of loss, rather than growth of self-consciousness on the part of the central character” (563). Part of this loss of self-consciousness is reflected in the trial scene, where Beatrice denies patricide. As critics have demonstrated, this denial of patricide can be understood as Beatrice’s denial of the Count as her father. An even more disturbing instance of the loss of character occurs right before Beatrice is murdered. Reflecting on her immanent death, Beatrice cries out, questioning her future state and the state of reality:

If there should be
No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world
The wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world!
If all things then should be...my father’s spirit. (57-60).

Beatrice’s inner life reflects the physical, material reality in which she lives. Examining the true nature of patriarchy, as it exists both in her relationship with God and her father, she does not have the imagination to envision higher ideals. Nor does she have the recourse to understand that she can independently perceive a higher truth, untainted by a corrupt society. Her anagnorisis is negative because while it allows Beatrice to perceive that she has been deluded as to the reality

of the world, she is still not able to perceive an alternative. And if life is not regulated by a superhuman God, she is incapable of imagining, on her own authority, an alternative to evil.

The limited nature of Beatrice's anagnorisis is fundamental to both her character and to the question of liberation and tyranny in *The Cenci*. If Shelley denied a mind that could independently create a new reality, he did give credence to a mind that could perceive a higher state of being. "All things," Shelley writes in *A Defense of Poetry*, "exist as they are perceived" (533). The power of perception, as in Blake and Wordsworth, is foundational. And, just as reality is predicated on perception, so is the self. Wassermann argues that Shelley, by rejecting both materialism and dualism, "aligned himself on metaphysical questions not merely with empiricism but with the extreme skeptical form of it that might be called phenomenalism." For Shelley, Wasserman notes, "awareness, not matter, is the stuff of which existences are formed, and their radical base is self-consciousness" (139). The crucial difference between Prometheus and Beatrice Cenci is not a question of physical force, but rather one of perception. Prometheus is able to perceive a better reality, a higher truth, and therefore lives in a world in which man is capable of change and in which transformation is possible. However, Beatrice, by the end of the drama, holds man in self-contempt. Unable to imagine an alternative to revenge or retaliation, and incapable of understanding her own authority, Beatrice dies a prisoner to the system that enslaved her. While Shelly might ask us to feel compassion for a woman who could not control the world in which she was born, *The Cenci* asks its audience to consider the implications of a world in which the self, unable to stand on its own authority, is incapable of accessing a better reality.

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