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Blood, Blasphemy and Bad Dads: Blasphemy and *The Cenci*

Abstract

The Cenci's themes of incest, sexual violence and religious irreverence invited many contemporary accusations of blasphemy. This article nevertheless contends that blasphemy is also a significant concept within the play *itself*; accusations of blasphemy are perceived as a fraudulent way to shore up seemingly unimpeachable existing, tyrannical political systems. In this way, such charges in the drama are curiously metafictional, not only seeming to anticipate the play's own reception but to reflect on the application of a revolutionary poetics to the politics of Shelley's own time. This article suggests that in its exploration and critique of power, *The Cenci* reveals Shelley's conception of the intersection between, and mutual interdependence of, political, religious and patriarchal tyranny. This article concludes that, for Shelley, it is in unpacking and rejecting the reverence placed on these interlocking sacred systems of authority, what may be labelled as "blaspheming", that is an ultimately necessary part of any successful revolutionary poetics.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's tragedy *The Cenci* (1819) was one of the few relative commercial successes he had during his lifetime. Despite this, it was not produced for the stage—as far as we know at least— until The Shelley Society's private production of 1888, with the first public performance not following until 1922. In 1819, convinced the infamy of his name would pose problems regardless of the contents of the work, Shelley sent the play anonymously to Thomas Harris, the manager of Covent Garden theatre. Harris refused to produce it, although he, in Stuart Curran's words, nevertheless wished to "acknowledge the

unmistakeable talent of the anonymous playwright" signalling he was keen to see any other works that might stand a better chance of making it past the licenser (4). [1] Harris was "morally outraged" by the play and refused to send it to Eliza O'Neil, the actress Shelley had identified to play the part of Beatrice Cenci (Curran 4).[2]

The recognition of *The Cenci*'s evident poetic and dramatic accomplishments, allied to moral repugnance and distaste for the author's principles, was characteristic of the few contemporary reviews of the published play. Even *The Literary Gazette*'s savage review of April 1st 1820, for instance, still acknowledges that "Mr. Shelley is capable of powerful writing" (210).[3] However, much like Shelley's earlier poem *Queen Mab* (1813), *The Cenci* was singled out by Shelley's critics as particular evidence for the poet's atheism and blasphemy, profoundly shaping his immediate and early posthumous reputation. After all, despite conceding his evident poetic genius, *The Literary Gazette*'s review opens by declaring "[o]f all the abominations which intellectual perversion, and poetical atheism, have produced in our times, this tragedy appears to us to be the most abominable" (209). *The Cenci*'s principles are considered *so* appalling in fact that the play is deemed "the production of a fiend, and calculated for the entertainment of devils in hell" (209).

Shelley was therefore right to proceed with caution in his attempts to have the play staged. By 1819 Shelley was frequently associated with atheism, sexual deviancy and political subversion, often at great personal cost. While *Queen Mab* (1813) was not then widely available, having up until then only been published privately and not pirated for a broader audience until 1821, it was still infamous. Following the suicide of his first wife Harriet Westbrook—to whom *Queen Mab* had been dedicated—Shelley subsequently lost an 1817 Chancery case to the Westbrook family that deprived him of the custody of his children. The supposed principles of *Queen Mab* were cited in court as evidence for Shelley's unsuitability as a father, with a bill filed by the Westbrooks' lawyers declaring that the poem

had “blasphemously derided the truth of the Christian Revelation and denied the existence of God as Creator of the Universe” (Medwin 464). Later that same year, Shelley was forced to make alterations to *Laon and Cythna* (1817)—a poem he thought “in the style and for the same object as “Queen Mab”’—before it was ultimately republished as *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) (*PBSL*, I, 557). While it is often remarked that these changes were necessitated by the former poem’s depiction of incest, far more of the revisions in fact pertained to God and religion.[4] Not only that, Shelley’s reputation was such that he later become infamously associated with “the Satanic School” of poetry. Coined by Robert Southey in his preface to *A Vision of Judgement* (1821), writers of this school were ‘characterized by a Satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety’ (Southey, III, 543).

It is unsurprising then that *The Cenci* would provoke fierce responses from conversative reviewers. Reeve Parker, focusing most specifically on Beatrice’s rape, has nevertheless argued that Shelley still approached the dramatic and thematic concerns of the play with what he terms “delicacy” (Parker 180-221). Indeed, this is borne out when considering Shelley’s particular deviations from his source material; Curran has noted that the “original Count [Cenci] was an atheist. In Shelley’s play he becomes a perversely devout Catholic—which, to be sure, for many an Englishman was little better” (43). Such a modification is not dissimilar to an important revision Shelley made to *Laon and Cythna* in December 1817, where his bigoted “Christian Priest” became an “Iberian Priest” in *The Revolt of Islam* (line 4072). This alteration meant Shelley’s Priest appeared more specifically Catholic—or at least ‘Iberian’—than broadly Christian. As a result, his character aligns with Protestant stereotypes of Catholic bigotry, means he can avoid *directly* criticising the established Church in England and would hopefully be ultimately less shocking to English readers. Count Cenci’s Catholicism functions similarly; although the play is hardly a delicate

one, Shelley's "delicacy" in making his villain Catholic nevertheless allows him to disguise his attacks on Christianity more broadly.

This article, then, focuses particularly on *The Cenci*'s apparent "blasphemy". *The Literary Gazette* twice refers to the play's "blasphemy", and this is further to its "atheism", "obscenity" and "perversion". While its themes of incest, sexual violence and religious irreverence seem to invite contemporary accusations of blasphemy, it is apparent that blasphemy is a significant theme within the play *itself*; variants of the word "blasphemy" appear on at least four separate occasions within the play, and often at dramatically critical moments.[5] Cenci accuses Lucretia of being a "Blaspheming liar" or of telling a "blaspheming lie" in Acts II and IV as she attempts, twice, to defend Beatrice's actions against Cenci's interrogations (II.1, line 161; IV.1, line 74). In Act III, Orsino warns Lucretia to "Blaspheme not" as she contemplates invoking God's vengeance against Cenci's evil, while in Act IV Cenci envisions that his torture and destruction of Beatrice will ultimately leave her to "Die in despair, blaspheming" (III.1, line 181; IV.1, line 50). Aside from these occurrences, the play also includes appeals to religious authorities, as "God" and notions of "the sacred" are weaponised against political enemies. To put it simply, therefore, the play was both perceived to *be* blasphemous and is, at least in part, *about* the charge of blasphemy. Jerrold Hogle has said of *The Cenci* that it is "so comprehensive in what it exposes that it is almost a meta-tragedy in relation to the tradition it furthers and alters" (148). Whether the play is an example of "meta-tragedy" or not, my contention is that the play's treatment of blasphemy is at least meta-*fictional*, in that it partly anticipates and accounts for its own reception. The play identifies the accusation of "blasphemy", and other related religiously-inflected charges, as part of an attempt to establish seemingly unimpeachable tyrannical political systems. In this way, *The Cenci's* conservative critics in our world are identified with the villains in its

own, implicated by their similarly cynical deployment of such language against those who oppose a corrupt religious and political status quo.

This last position is a surprisingly consistent one in Shelley's poetry, prose and letters and is evident in even his earliest writing. Following the sentencing of the nearly 70-year-old publisher Daniel Isaac Eaton for blasphemy in 1811, Shelley wrote to William Godwin on the injustice of Eaton's treatment, noting that his "crime" and punishment is something he had in common with past "blasphemers" like Jesus Christ and Socrates: "still the spirit that pillories & imprisons him, is the same which brought them to an untimely end" (*PBSL*, I, 307-308). Shelley expands on this position in his *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough* (1812)—Ellenborough being the judge in Eaton's trial—before further repurposing some of this material in the notes to *Queen Mab* (1813), particularly the note to "I will beget a Son, and he shall bear / The sins of all the world" (VII, lines 135-136).[6] In short, Shelley not only recognised that "blasphemer" is a charge used to discredit opponents of prevailing authority but that there is a certain irony that further persecutions for the crime are undertaken in the name of one who found himself so accused. As Shelley puts it in *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough*:

> Jesus Christ was crucified because he attempted to supersede the ritual of Moses with something more moral and humane—his very judge made public acknowledgment of his innocence, but a bigoted and ignorant mob demanded the deed of horror. Barabbas, the murderer and traitor, was released. The meek reformer Jesus was immolated to the sanguinary deity of the Jews
>
> […]
>
> *Christianity* is now the established religion; he who attempts to disprove it must behold murderers and traitors take the precedence of him in public opinion, though, if his genius be equal to his courage, and assisted by a peculiar coalition of circumstances, future ages may exalt him to a divinity, and persecute others in his

> name, as he was persecuted in the name of his predecessor in the homage of the world (*Prose*, 77-78).

The depiction of the values of Christ as "more moral and humane" than what preceded it does smack of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, Christ's "blasphemous" rejection of the religious authority of his age led to his crucifixion in the very name of the then dominant "sanguinary deity" that he opposed. As Christianity rose to pre-eminence over the centuries, however, this religion based upon the doctrines of its persecuted founder, soon became itself persecutory.

Shelley's thinking had to some extent moved on between 1811 and 1819. Nevertheless, *The Cenci's* overarching philosophy analogously reflects the chronology described in the note to *Queen Mab*; Count Cenci deploys the charge of "blasphemer" and invokes the authority of the Church to ensure his power and to persecute those, such as Beatrice, who oppose him. Then, Beatrice's naming of a higher power in justification of Count Cenci's assassination identifies her with her father; the play hints that such thinking risks a cycle of violence, where the persecuted becomes the persecutor in perpetuity. This is consistent with Shelley's apparent broader condemnation of violent retribution for even the severest of crimes.[7] As he declares in the play's preface, "[r]evenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better" ("Preface to *The Cenci*" lines 70-71).[8] While the beneficial insights of scholars such as Curran, Hogle, Monica Potkay and, most recently, Julie Camarda differ on how far *The Cenci* ultimately condemns Beatrice, critics nevertheless agree that the play offers a rigorous critique of political power. This is a power that is both reflected in, and shored up by, patriarchal and religious power.

My focus here is specifically on *how* these hierarchies are maintained and, secondly, *how* we are to critique them. The charge of blasphemy becomes a useful discursive weapon

wielded by those in authority. Where blasphemy differs from other religious "crimes" like heresy or apostasy is that it does not, at least in theory, concern a dispute over a single doctrinal or theological issue. Instead, it establishes what ought to be deemed indisputably sacred. By dismissing any criticism or ridicule of power as "blasphemous" is to imbue this authority with a sacred legitimacy. "Blasphemy" may well be the preferred term for this very reason. Many alleged "blasphemers" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were technically more "guilty" of other crimes like the rather antiquated, pre-Enlightenment-sounding "heresy". By labelling it "blasphemy", however, meant that simple deviation from established doctrine—mere disagreement—became elevated to an irreverent attack on "the sacred" or on that which is not, and should not, be up for debate. [9] In *The Cenci*, Count Cenci's position as aristocratic patriarch is conflated with religious and divine authority, extending the boundary of 'the sacred' to more terrestrial spheres. In explaining why the Cenci family's petition to the Pope against their father is likely to be refused, Cardinal Camillo remarks that the Pope

> […] holds it of most dangerous example
> In aught to weaken the paternal power,
> Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own (II.2, lines 54-56).

The "paternal power" that Cenci possesses is a "shadow" of the Pope's own religious and political authority; in challenging this, the Pope would be undermining his own position. This, in turn, essentially imbues Cenci's position with the religious authority, and even the blessing, of the Pope. It is in this way that opposition to the patriarchal tyrant Count Cenci becomes an act of blasphemy, as Cenci himself is at pains to remind his victims.

Cenci's power is not only the shadow of the Pope's but that of God himself. The fact that Cenci embodies the sacred authority of God in turn reaffirms God as the ultimate patriarch, which has significant implications for both Shelley's tragedy and his broader philosophy and theology. It is Cenci himself who most relishes in the potency of religiously-inflected accusations against his enemies. There is a certain irony, then, in the fact that he is the obscenest blasphemer of them all. Contemporary reviewers of the play certainly recognised that the words of Cenci are purposefully those of a particularly repellent character, but the play itself was still seen to at least partly condone them.[10] In fact, *The Literary Gazette* saw the character of Cenci as further evidence for both Shelley's, and his play's, depravity, with the article's author even remarking that he is "such a miracle of atrocity, as only this author, we think, could have conceived" (209). Cenci's own 'blasphemy' is nevertheless distinctly "Catholic" and, instead of him risking an *explicit* attack on establishment Anglicanism, Shelley aligns his play with contemporary English anti-Catholicism. Cenci's words and actions fulfil contemporary Protestant stereotypes of Catholic heresy and bigotry. The explicit depiction of Count Cenci as a Catholic monster nevertheless conceals the play's more implicit critique of political and religious power in all its guises.

A crucial and extraordinarily blasphemous scene is the celebratory feast of Act I Scene III, where, having learned of his sons' deaths after earlier wishing for it in prayer to God, Cenci believes himself to be particularly sanctified: "God, / I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform, / By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought". This leads him to declare that, since both deaths occurred "the self-same hour of the same night", […] "Heaven has special care of [him]" (I.3, lines 40-42; 64, 65). While blasphemous with its implication that God is a murderer, the play nevertheless shows us that Cenci is truthful here up to a point; Heaven does indeed take "special care" of tyrants. It is not important whether "Heaven" is a literal,

existing, Christian heaven since it nevertheless functions as an appropriate metaphor for ineffable, seemingly sacred power that protects its own. When Lucretia in Act III speculates as to whether "the lightning / Of God has e'er descended to avenge" evil such as Count Cenci's, Orsino cuts her off, warning her to "Blaspheme not!" (III.3, lines 179-181). While this parallels Cenci's thanking of God for his sons' deaths, it is, of the two, only Lucretia who is deemed blasphemous. This is because her invocation of God is in defiance of a political status quo and, as Orsino goes on to indicate, God is unable to redress terrestrial injustice. The authority of God, then, can only be legitimately wielded by those already in power; Heaven indeed takes "special care" of tyrants in the play.

In his blasphemy, Cenci invokes the "word of God" in affirming that what he says of his sons' deaths is true. When his appalled guests move as if to rise up against his vile tyranny, Cenci challenges them:

> […] Who moves? Who speaks?
>
> [*Turning to the Company*.
>
> 'tis nothing,
>
> Enjoy yourselves. —Beware! For my revenge
>
> Is as the sealed commission of a king,
>
> That kills, and none dare name the murderer (I.3, lines. 95-98).

This warning is enough to quell the potential uprising. It is not simply that Cenci's opponents are threatened with his wrath but that they recognise such threats are given licence and legitimacy by a higher authority. This is an authority that, it is assumed, cannot be called to account. This is how power *works* in the play; while it is ultimately enforced with violence it is crucially legitimised by an assumption that one cannot *speak* against authority. None dare

name the murderer not only because the murderer may kill the nomenclator if they do, but because “naming” him is to go against the invoked “word of God”. Essentially, to even verbally challenge Count Cenci is to provoke God himself.

Beatrice does, however, dare to name the murderer, and beseeches the departing guests to stand up to her father in order to help her, her stepmother Lucretia and her surviving brothers against Count Cenci’s terrible evil. What is striking about Beatrice’s words are not just her appeals to the sacred authority of God and patriarchy, but in recognising their co-dependency:

> I do entreat you, go not, noble guests;
> What although tyranny and impious hate
> Stand sheltered by a father's hoary hair?
> What, if 'tis he who clothed us in these limbs
> Who tortures them, and triumphs? What, if we,
> The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh,
> His children and his wife, whom he is bound
> To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find
> No refuge in this merciless wide world?
> Oh, think what deep wrongs must have blotted out
> First love, then reverence in a child's prone mind
> Till it thus vanquish shame and fear! O, think!
> I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand
> Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke
> Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!
> Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt
> Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears,

> To soften him; and when this could not be,
> I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights,
> And lifted up to God, the father of all,
> Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard
> I have still borne (I.3, lines 99-120).

Beatrice recognises how Cenci's behaviour is "sheltered by a father's hoary hair", the implication being that patriarchy grants him particular protection. Indeed, the "hand / Which crushed us to the earth" is described as "sacred", with all apparent evils committed by said hand previously deemed to be justified, wielded only for the ends of "paternal chastisement". Hogle notes here, however, that Beatrice's prayers to the "father of all" is essentially an appeal to the same authoritarian system that tyrannises over her in the first place; in short, an appeal to a father to protect her from a father:

> Herein lies the problem. To challenge such a discourse by being an authorized speaker of it is to discover oneself forced into its deployments, whatever one's intentions may have seemed. Beatrice finds that even a public utterance declaring "father's hoary hair" a "shelter" for lawless "tyranny" […] can express itself only as an appeal to "the father of all" […] or to the princes, cardinals, and chamberlains who gain much of their authority from the widely held assumption that the primal speaker and ultimate auditor of language is male (153).

Nevertheless, at this stage, before the further horrors that are to befall her, Beatrice retains her "faith" in the figure of "the Father", in patriarchy; her own father is simply an example of a corrupt evil individual within a system whose culpability for Count Cenci's actions she does

not yet recognise. This thinking is replicated in a later scene when Giacomo, one of Cenci's surviving sons, says of his father in conversation with the Prelate Orsino "For he who is our murderous persecutor / Is shielded by a father's holy name" (II.2, lines 72-73). Orsino responds

> Words are but holy as the deeds they cover:
> A priest who has forsworn the God he serves;
> A judge who makes truth weep at his decree;
> A friend who should weave counsel, as I now,
> But as the mantle of some selfish guile;
> A father who is all a tyrant seems,
> Were the prophaner for his sacred name (II.2, lines 74-81).

Although Orsino recognises that such "holy names" give cover to tyrants like Cenci, there is again still faith in the system; Cenci is simply an appalling anomaly within it, "prophaning" that which *should* be holy.

This conflation of God with terrestrial patriarchy also affirms an association between the sacred and the familial, with familial love seeming—at first—to serve the ends of authority. In other words, authority essentially exploits sentimental blood ties to reinforce its power. This is at stake in the *Macbeth*-inspired Act IV Scene II, when Beatrice's assassins Marzio and Olimpio report on their initial failure to kill Cenci. Marzio, the bolder of the two, describes how he was unable to murder the sleeping Count, as he fancied Cenci's sleep talking was "the ghost / Of [his] dead father speaking through his lips" (IV.2, lines. 20-21). Beatrice's admonishing response to Marzio and Olimpio is crucial in illustrating how Beatrice comes to resemble her father and is something to which I will return. For now, though, through Beatrice's words in the play, Shelley is adept at deconstructing this

sentimental/political conflation and turns it on its head. Beatrice's entreaty to the departing guests following Cenci's blasphemy may remind us of the protection offered up by the name of the father but also, crucially, reminds us of a father's *own* familial duty. Cenci's ill-treatment of his family—including Beatrice's later assault—is deemed all the more horrific precisely *because* they are blood relations. Also, Beatrice's lines referring to "he who clothed us in these limbs" and her family as being of Cenci's "own flesh" are strikingly ambiguous. Not only do they remind us of a father, but of the God who made man in his own image. Familial sentiment, then, is equally used to interrogate power as it is to shore it up. Count Cenci here is a "bad dad" like the God-like Victor Frankenstein, the Jupiter of *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) or the God, from Satan's perspective at least, that we observe in the early books of *Paradise Lost*. In being reminded therefore how appalling it is that a father should so tyrannise over his family, we are also reminded of the tyranny of a vengeful God who initially infused us with life.

This association is at the forefront of both the play's and Shelley's broader critique of Christian atonement. Monica Potkay reads the incest in the play—an addition Shelley introduced to the Cenci myth himself—as provocatively allegorical of key Christian doctrine, particularly that of the Trinity and atonement, terming the incest "a literalization of Trinitarian parental love" (59). In a similar fashion, Cenci's blasphemous toast declared towards the end of the feast is a grotesque communion in burlesque, and a striking literalization of the violence of the doctrine of the atonement through Christ's sacrifice.[11] Swirling wine in a bowl Cenci remarks

> Could I believe thou wert [my sons'] mingled blood,
> Then would I taste thee like a sacrament,
> And pledge with thee the mighty Devil in Hell;

> Who, if a father's curses, as men say,
> Climb with swift wings after their children's souls,
> And drag them from the very throne of Heaven,
> Now triumphs in my triumph! (I.3, lines 81-87).

Cenci's vampiric blood drinking, and his declaration that a "father's curses" possess the power to drag his children's souls to Hell means he resembles not only Milton's Satan, but also the "sanguinary Deity' of the Old Testament, as previously seen in *A Letter to Lord Ellenborough* and the notes to *Queen Mab.* God, it must be remembered, sacrificed not just a man, but his own son to atone for the original sin of Adam. Cenci in fact purposefully refers to original sin in the play, declaring himself "Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so" (I.3, line 12).

The play's questioning of original sin and the atonement by Christ become not only matters of theological speculation, but are another example of tyrannical patriarchy, the tyranny of the father over his child. This specific sort of anti-atonement sentiment is also observed much more directly by Lucifer in Lord Byron's play *Cain*: *A Mystery* (1821). While it is speculative to suggest that Shelley partly influenced this—though Byron had certainly read *The Cenci*—it was nevertheless true that both writers shared accusations for blasphemy. Several of these lines, in fact, did not appear in *Cain*'s first edition for this reason, as Lucifer, in a blasphemous address to Cain, derides God as a miserable being who creates only to destroy:

> …*He*! so wretched in his height,
> So restless in his wretchedness, must still
> Create, and re-create—perhaps he'll make
> One day a Son unto himself—as he

Gave you a father—and if he so doth,

Mark me! That Son will be a Sacrifice (*BCPW*, VI; I.1, lines 161-166).

This destructive God is also a tyrannical patriarch, prepared to create and then destroy his own son in sacrifice. It is easy to see the resemblance to Shelley's Cenci, the "sanguinary" deity swirling the "blood" of his sons amid thoughts of their deaths. The influence of *The Cenci* on Byron—and its blasphemous pledge in particular—can also be observed in his play *Sardanapalus* (1821), published in the same volume as *Cain.* While the nature of it is somewhat different, *Sardanapalus* similarly includes a blasphemous toast, where the hedonistic Sardanapalus pledges his wine to the Greek God Bacchus rather than to the Gods of his own country (*BCPW*, VI; I.2, lines 163-199). This parody of communion is lighter than the blood swirling of Shelley's play—Sardanapalus is no villain after all—but it nevertheless indicates the two authors' shared scepticism towards any doctrine of "blood for blood".

In the world of *The Cenci*, atonement for sin is indeed just blood for blood repackaged; that "blood" connotes both violence and blood-lineage is why it becomes a repeated image in the play. Both Giacomo and Beatrice lament that their evil father's blood is in their veins. The most important instance of this is Beatrice's speech in the scene following her father's assault:

But now! — Oh blood, which art my father's blood,

Circling through these contaminated veins,

If thou, poured forth on the polluted earth,

Could wash away the crime, and punishment

By which I suffer — no, that cannot be!

Many might doubt there were a God above

Who sees and permits evil, and so die:

That faith no agony shall obscure in me (III.1, lines 95-102).

Stuart Curran suggests that the "father's blood" referred to here is euphemistic of Beatrice's father's semen (116). The semen/bloodline conflation certainly seems plausible in the context of incestuous rape and makes it possible to draw quite disparate Biblical allusions. The first of these is to Christ; the blood to be "poured forth on the polluted earth" points to Christ's blood on Calvary or Golgotha, with Beatrice lamenting that this sacrifice could not ever atone for, or wash away, the crime to which she has been subjected. While this encourages us to view Beatrice as Christ-like, interpreting this "blood" instead as semen brings to mind Onan from Genesis 38. Onan, whose story gave us the word Onanism, was slain by God having "spilled [his semen] on the ground" after sleeping with his dead brother's wife (38.9). This subtle double allusion, to both Onan and Christ, not only draws unflattering comparisons between theological sexual politics and Shelley's incestuous tragedy, but also reminds us that the Christian God is multifaceted; he is not only the loving, forgiving, self-sacrificing Christ of the New Testament, but the vengeful and violent God of the Old.

While it is unclear whether God's punishment of Onan was due to him disobeying the commands of his father Judah or for practicing *coitus interruptus,* Onan nevertheless did not heed God's command of Genesis 1.28 that man "be fruitful, and multiply".[12] There is a blasphemous echo of this very passage in Cenci's appalling request following the rape of Beatrice, one of Cenci's many appeals to God that He curse his offspring. Addressing Nature rather than God directly, Cenci says

Quick Nature! I adjure thee by thy God,
That thou be fruitful in her, and increase
And multiply, fulfilling His command,

> And my deep imprecation! — 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, — (IV.1, lines 142-155).

Cenci wishes that any offspring from his incestuous assault should resemble Beatrice. That she should suffer from noting this resemblance is striking; one would have assumed that such a malicious, evil rapist like Cenci would desire that any child should resemble him most particularly. Yet, in wishing that it be a "hideous likeness of herself […] mixed with what she most abhors", Cenci is relishing that Beatrice—and not *just* their child—should become like him; that is, hateful towards her own flesh and blood and hated in turn. The "thing she most abhors" may ultimately refer, then, to Count Cenci, to their child or even be an example of Beatrice's own self-hatred. In this perverse way, Cenci predicts that a vengeful Beatrice will become his double.

In fact, Beatrice comes to be identified quite alarmingly with the violence and violent rhetoric of her father. When Cenci accuses Lucretia of blasphemy and of being an equivocator when she tries to retract her implication that Beatrice may be plotting his death he says "Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God,/ Be thy soul choked with that

blaspheming lie!" (IV.1, lines 72-73). Soon after, when the assassins Olimpio and Marzio first get cold feet and initially fail to kill Cenci in his sleep, Beatrice blasts their cowardice:

> Miserable slaves!
> Where, if ye dare not kill a sleeping man,
> Found ye the boldness to return to me
> With such a deed undone? Base palterers!
> Cowards and traitors! Why, the very conscience
> Which ye would sell for gold and for revenge
> Is an equivocation: it sleeps over
> A thousand daily acts disgracing men;
> And when a deed where mercy insults heaven— (IV.3, lines 22-30).

Beatrice's language here—"base palterer" and "equivocation"—not only echoes that of her father, but she also, like her father, similarly invokes the authority of Heaven for her words and deeds. Moreover, and in quite a stunning reversal of earlier in the play, Beatrice claims that the assassins' violent actions are divinely ordained, declaring that in their ultimate murder of Cenci, they acted as "a weapon in the hand of God" (IV.3, line 54). In this sense, Beatrice invokes the same "sacred" authority and justification as Cenci himself. This is the violent end result of what Hogle sees as Beatrice's major difficulty at the start of the play, in that, in order to counter her father's patriarchal tyranny, she believes she must appeal to God—the "father of all"—or the very political authorities that ensure, and are shored up by, her father's position.

Beatrice learns too late that her father's death does not end the tyranny of his rule. On the cusp of madness in Act V, Beatrice likens her haunting by the dead Cenci's vengeful spirit—real or imagined—to the omnipotent authority of God:

For was he not alone omnipotent
On Earth, and ever present? Even though dead,
Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
Scorn, pain, despair? Who ever yet returned
To teach the laws of death's untrodden realm?
Unjust perhaps as those which drive us now,
O, whither, whither? (V.4, lines 68-74).

Killing Cenci, then, removing this individual tyrant or "bad dad", does not in itself resolve political tyranny or authoritarian patriarchy. Beatrice's final realisation shortly after this, again, tragically belated, is that her faith in the divine and benevolent authority of God was misplaced. Awaiting execution, Lucretia and Beatrice discuss their fate. Even now, at this late stage, we do not have any declaration of atheism; rather, Beatrice's "faith" is one of resigned desperation:

Lucretia Trust in God's sweet love,
The tender promises of Christ: ere night
Think we shall be in Paradise.

Beatrice. 'Tis past!
Whatever comes my heart shall sink no more.
And yet, I know not why, your words strike chill:
How tedious, false and cold seem all things. I

Have met with much injustice in this world;
No difference has been made by God or man,
Or any power moulding my wretched lot,
'Twixt good or evil, as regarded me.
I am cut off from the only world I know,
From light, and life, and love, in youth's sweet prime.
You do well telling me to trust in God,
I hope I do trust in him. In whom else
Can any trust? And yet my heart is cold (V.4, lines 75-89).

No power or systems of authority could in themselves "mould" Beatrice to "good or ill" and her happiness on earth should never have been dependent on them. In fact, all her faith has done is lead her to her death; the "only world" she knows is to end and her belief in "paradise" and the afterlife all but gone.

The play therefore presents a world in which all authority deemed to be fixed and indisputable, whether political, religious or patriarchal, should be rightly questioned and approached irreverently. Beatrice's doomed appeals to God—whom she still reveres—ultimately perpetuate the same structures of violence to which she was subject. To question this God and reject his authority, to blaspheme, is an essential component of Shelleyan non-violence. This necessitates recognising that the very charge of "blasphemy" is a term ultimately void of meaning, determined and wielded by those whose very power you seek to question. The question of (non)violence, however, is less important than dismantling the mechanisms by which power *works* for Shelley; the violent removal of tyrants does nothing in itself to destroy overarching systems of power. Instead, it is necessary to reject claims for

the unimpeachably sacred or holy status of different forms of authority. It follows, therefore, that true revolutionaries—and revolutionary writers—are necessarily "blasphemers".

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[1] Reeve Parker considers Shelley's "delicacy" when promoting the play within the literary and personal context of Shelley's scandalous reputation at the time. See *Romantic Tragedies*, 182-183.

[2] For a detailed account of Shelley's identification of Beatrice with Eliza O'Neill, see Armstrong.

[3] The fact that the review quotes from the play extensively is testament to the reviewer's admiration, albeit grudging, for the poetic beauty of its lines.

[4] See Whickman, "*Laon and Cythna* and *The Revolt of Islam*: Revisions as Transition".

[5] II.1, line161; III.1, line 181; IV.1, line 50 & IV.1, line 74.

[6] Extended consideration of *The Cenci* is a significant omission from Whickman, *Blasphemy and Politics*. The present article hopes to go some way towards correcting this. For a more detailed discussion of Shelley's position on the charge of blasphemy than the summary I offer here, see 7-10 and 150-55.

[7] This is the standard critical appraisal, although see Camarda for a more nuanced reading of Shelleyan "non-violence",466.

[8] It is possible that the "Beatrice" Shelley is referring to here is the historical Beatrice Cenci rather than *his* Beatrice Cenci; Shelley's reference to her as, or as not, a "tragic character" does not discount this possibility, and instead helps illustrate how the historical figure served Shelley for an appropriate model (*Poems*, II, 731). It might be splitting hairs, but this ambiguity does allow for readings of *Shelley's* Beatrice that are less condemnatory. Parker is comfortable with considering this a reference to the "historical Beatrice" (185).

[9] For a more detailed discussion of blasphemy see Whickman, *Blasphemy and Politics*, 4-10

[10] In this vein, Lord Byron later expressed exasperation for the accusations of blasphemy levelled at his play *Cain* (1821) which he believed were partly due to the words of his Lucifer. In a letter of February 1822 to John Murray he wrote "I could not make Lucifer expound the Thirty-nine Articles, nor talk as the Divines do: that would never have suited his purpose" (*BLJ,* IX, 215).

[11] For a more extensive account of Shelley's broader treatment of Jesus Christ and atonement see Whickman, *Blasphemy and Politics*, 137-180; Ryan, 193-223; Shelley, Bryan, 56-74; Fuller, 211-223.

[12] The full verse reads "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."