

# SHELLEY LAUGHS: COMIC POSSIBILITIES IN 'THE CENCI'

by Christopher Goulding

Whilst Percy Shelley's childhood pranks at Field Place, Syon House, and Eton may occasionally lead commentators to accredit him with some lightness of spirit, analysis of his texts has yet to provoke critics into highlighting any literary evidence of a penchant for comedy. However, enactment of the poet's dramatic writing indicates that on at least one occasion, not only did Shelley's pen take a humourous turn, but that it did so seemingly in order to provide some light relief in one of his darkest works, *The Cenci*.

A dry reading of the text of this rarely-staged play provides little indication of any comic intentions. But put to its intended use as a script for theatrical production, the process of rehearsal with actors reveals the author's unmistakable pursuit of burlesque in two scenes — with the result readily acknowledged by the subsequent laughter of audiences during public performance.<sup>1</sup>

In Scenes IV. ii and IV. iii, we are introduced to the characters Marzio and Olimpio, the two assassins hired by Beatrice Cenci to rid her of her debauched and incestuous father. From their very entrance for a midnight rendezvous with Beatrice and Lucretia beneath the castle ramparts of Petrella, the murderers are revealed by their dialogue and behaviour as a pair of inept, squabbling, and cowardly buffoons. Their obvious reluctance and lack of boldness towards their task forms a comically stark contrast to the fortitude of the young heroine who employs them. 'Your cheeks are pale', notes Marzio of his companion, to which he receives the withering riposte, 'It is the white reflection of your own which you call pale.' (IV. ii.20–22) Unsure of their mettle for such murderous work, Beatrice asks; 'Are you resolved?' The hapless pair can only reply by asking:

OLIMPIO: Is he asleep? (29)  
MARZIO: Is all quiet?

<sup>1</sup> In May 2001, the author directed a production of *The Cenci* at the People's Theatre, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Only after reassurances from the ladies that their intended victim sleeps in a drug-induced stupor is Olimpio able to assert 'We are resolved'. A few lines later, upon being invited by Beatrice to follow her into the castle, they are startled by some imagined threat:

OLIMPIO: Hush! Hark! What note is that? (38)  
MARZIO: Ha! Some one comes!

An exasperated Beatrice chides them as 'conscious-stricken cravens' with 'baby hearts' before urging them to imitate her steps in being; 'light, quick, and bold'. (42) Inside a castle chamber in the next scene, the two women wait impatiently, assuming the murderers to be about their gruesome task. When approaching footsteps are heard and the men reappear, there comes the following ludicrous exchange:

BEATRICE: Is it accomplished? (IV. iii. 7)  
MARZIO: What?  
OLIMPIO: Did you not call?  
BEATRICE: When?  
OLIMPIO: Now.  
BEATRICE: I ask if all is over?

And of course, it is not. Olimpio pleads that he could not bring himself to kill 'an old and sleeping man' with such a 'reverent brow'. Then Marzio, at first making a puerile claim to have been bolder than his accomplice, confesses to his nerve failing after imagining the old man's sleepy muttering to be the ghost of his own dead father speaking to him. An incensed Beatrice denounces them as 'Miserable slaves! . . . Base palterers! Cowards and traitors!' (22–26) Some lines later, abruptly pausing in her tirade against the failed assassins, Beatrice asks herself in sheer frustration; 'Why do I talk?'. There follows a stage direction in which she is described as *Snatching a dagger from one of them and raising it*, and Beatrice then announces 'I must do it!' (32)

The subsequent dialogue strongly lends itself to the suggestion of some theatrical 'business' in which the dagger is grabbed at, first by Olimpio, and then Marzio, in an attempt to prevent Beatrice going off with it, before the weapon is eventually fumbled back into the hands of those supposedly putting it to use;

OLIMPIO: Stop, for God's sake! (34)  
MARZIO: I will go back and kill him.  
OLIMPIO: Give me the weapon, we must do thy will.  
BEATRICE: Take it! Depart! Return!

*Exeunt Olimpio and Marzio*

Then, having been finally shamed into doing their work and leaving the stage with the dagger, the men quickly return only for Marzio to announce deflatingly 'We *strangled him* [my italics] that there might be no blood;' — a remark made even more ridiculously anticlimactic by Beatrice having remarked during their brief absence how 'the jellied blood runs freely' through her veins.

The murder committed at last, the pair are then rewarded with gold and a rich mantle before making their escape.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst Marzio and Olimpio fall well short of being one of the great comic double-acts of dramatic writing, they are nevertheless a rare indication of a desire upon Shelley's part to inject some humour into his work. As his biographers have occasionally noted, the young poet showed some fondness for the comic stage whilst a schoolboy. Medwin notes a day spent truant from Eton in order to see Mrs Jordan in *The Country Girl*, whilst both Hogg and Holmes note the writing of a juvenile play which he sent off to Matthews the comedian.<sup>3</sup> Though his love of visiting the theatre may have waned in later life, Shelley never abandoned dramatic writing, nor altogether, it would seem, a childish taste for stage comedy.

Thus, perhaps this dark Shelleyan tragedy, so widely noted as resonating with sombre echoes of *Macbeth*, *Lear*, and *Othello*, might also carry within it some traces of a lighter influence more reminiscent of the rude mechanicals from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

<sup>2</sup> In the following scene (IV. iv) Olimpio is reported as having died whilst fighting to escape capture. Marzio later reappears in the court scene (V. ii) before being dragged off to die under torture.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 39.

Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Routledge, 1906), p. 24.

Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 23.