

REVIEW OF *THE CENCI*

PERFORMED AT THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE, NEWCASTLE

by *Scott Masson*

A few patrons of the arts in the North-East were fortunate enough to see Shelley's rarely performed play *The Cenci* between 22–26 May staged at the People's Theatre in Newcastle. However, they may have left, like I did, feeling somewhat ambivalent about their experience. In short, it was a good amateur production, if not altogether satisfactory for that. My ambivalence watches the play's historical reception. For a piece that doubtless represents Shelley's strongest bid to receive public acclamation, his success was at best limited. It was, on the one hand, the only one of Shelley's published works to have gone into a second edition during his lifetime; on the other hand, despite the fact that the poet toned down the uglier aspects of the play's historical events, it was banned from public performance until its presentation before The Shelley Society in 1886, which contained such literary luminaries as Robert Browning, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. This recent viewing leads one to wonder whether its initial censorship may not have been a blessing in disguise. Censorship can add allure to a work of art, bringing a sense of intrigue that excites the public's curiosity, particularly that of its avant-garde. It may have worked so with critics, who in recent years have interpreted the play variously as an example of Shelley's anti-authoritarianism, as a prophesy of incipient Italian nationalism or, more straightforwardly, as an attack on organised religion.

Yet attention to the play's relative lack of attention need not necessarily act as a corrective to a work's obscurity. So it is with this play. For while *The Cenci* is doubtless a dramatic work, it maintains a sense characteristic of Shelley's writing of being a vehicle for generic, amoral ideas firmly resistant to the particular conventions of genre. In this play, it expresses itself in characters who would attract our sympathies through their suffering were it but for the fact that they work to lose it through their own questionable words and deeds. Thus while we are presented with a landscape of social decrepitude, we remain without a hint of moral authority to pronounce it decrepit — not even a chorus to provide social commentary. The effect of such a practice seems to be this: the very fact that, as Shelley explained to Peacock, the play was effectively written in order to defy 'any courtesy of

language (that) can be termed moral or immoral' gains it a sort of Pyrrhic victory over its grim matter. For with this victory over morality, Shelley effectively deprives the play of its power to convey tragedy. The playwright's achievement of amorality renders the execrable actions, which he certainly depicts with powerful language, impotent to move the audience as moral agents. The audience leaves the play with a sense of savage torpor, of having witnessed events of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The play's deficiencies were, as I said, happily not matched by the production's. The production team, led by director Christopher Goulding, should be congratulated. On an unusually warm night, it was not difficult to imagine oneself in Rome or Petrella. The costumes were of the period; the lighting and music fitting to the scene. The direction was smooth and the scene changes professional. A few of its actors deserve particular mention. Count Cenci himself, played by Paul O'Shea, possessed the sort of intimidating stage-presence to convey his character's malevolence. Beatrice, played by Felicity Clausen-Sternwald, was of a similar calibre but exhibited the somewhat broader range of emotion her character permitted. The two assassins, Marzio and Olympio, played by Martin Collins and John Parrack respectively, provided the respite of a few brief instances of humour which would also have added to the play's pathos had they been more in evidence. It was not so much that it was a bad play. Rather, in an age less obviously hierarchical and more morally ambivalent than Shelley's, the poet's practice, rather than shocking the audience forced it to question what a play ought to do and what it could not. Shelley himself might have been surprised but not altogether displeased with the effect — though he might have remained ambivalent.