118 at thy shout] to thy shouts *Examiner (April)*

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EARLY DETECTIVE DRAMA IN PERCY SHELLEY'S *THE CENCI*

IT has been widely noted by historians of detective fiction that William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* provides us with one of the earliest known examples of the genre.[1] However, it has gone unremarked that his son-in-law, Percy Bysshe Shelley, penned what was probably the first example of ratiocinative forensic detection being presented in a work of drama.

In Shelley's play *The Cenci* (IV.iii), the debauched and incestuous Count Cenci is murdered in his castle at Petrella by Marzio and Olimpio, an incompetent pair of assassins hired by Cenci's daughter Beatrice.[2] She is assisted in making these arrangements by her lover Orsino and her step-mother Lucretia. The assassins, having been too squeamish to use their daggers on Cenci, strangle him and throw the body from his chamber window to make it look as if he had fallen. Then, after being paid in gold by Beatrice, they leave.

In the following scene, Savella, the Pope's legate, unexpectedly arrives at the castle on a mission to see Count Cenci (IV.iv). The murder is quickly discovered, and Savella initiates an investigation;

> SAVELLA (To his followers)
> Go search the castle round, sound the alarm;
> Look to the gates that none escape!

After searching the castle and finding the body, Savella then proceeds to question those members of the Cenci family present; Beatrice, her brother Bernardo, and Lucretia. He first establishes that Lucretia alone holds keys to Count Cenci's apartments with a cry of 'Ha! Is it so?' His attention is then turned to Bernardo, who is asked 'Can you name any who had an interest in his death?' When Bernardo replies in the negative, pleading that only Beatrice, Lucretia and himself had been present in the castle, Savella remarks;

> 'Tis strange! There were clear marks of violence.
> I found the old man's body in the moonlight,
> Hanging beneath the window of his chamber,
> Among the branches of a pine: he could not
> Have fallen there, for all his limbs lay heaped
> And effortless; 'tis true there was no blood

A troop of guards then enter with the assassin Marzio, who has been captured in the woods outside the castle. Taking a note found in his possession, Savella asks Beatrice 'Knowest thou this writing, lady?' She recognizes it as that of her lover, Orsino, but denies any knowledge of it. When Savella turns to Lucretia, who has become agitated during these exchanges, she lets it slip out that 'A gulf of obscure hatred' had existed between father and daughter. Savella turns back to Beatrice, demanding of her,

> It is so?
> Is it true, Lady, that they father did
> Such outrages as to awaken in thee
> Unfilial hate?

Finding their answers and the progress of his interrogation unsatisfactory, Savella then announces:

> There is a deed demanding question done,
> Thou hast a secret which will answer not.
> . . .
> I do arrest all present in the name
> Of the Pope's holiness.

Beatrice, her brother, and step-mother are then taken to Rome for trial, after which Beatrice and Lucretia are found guilty and executed.

Shelley's sources for the detective nature of this episode in the play very probably owe something to his father-in-law's novel. However, it is likely that some influence on this aspect of the play was also due to Dr James Lind MD FRS (1736–1812), who had been the poet's mentor whilst he was a schoolboy at Eton.[3] Lind had studied medicine at Edinburgh University at a time when that institution was emerging as a European leader in the field of forensic medicine and medical jurisprudence.[4]

[1] William Godwin, *Things as They Are; or, Caleb Williams* (London, 1794), I, ch.xii.

[2] Shelley's play was written in 1819 but, due to its blasphemous content, remained unperformed until 1886.

[3] Lind's friendship with the young Shelley has been widely noted by numerous biographers and commentators. This James Lind should not be confused with his more famous cousin and namesake, James Lind MD (1716–94), 'the father of nautical medicine', whose *Treatise on Scurvy* (1753) is a medical classic.

[4] *Legal Medicine in History*, ed. Michael Clark and Catherine Crawford (Cambridge, 1994), 8–9 and 145–52.

One of Lind's tutors at Edinburgh had been the renowned physician and chemist William Cullen (1710–90), who had published pamphlets on related subjects.[5] Lind himself had written on the importance of forensic medicine, noting that:

> It also enables the physician or surgeon when called upon by a court of justice to determine with certainty whether death has been occasioned from a natural cause, or from violence; hence he becomes the means of acquitting the innocent, and of condemning the guilty . . .[6]

In his creation of the character Savella, Shelley demonstrates the use by an investigating figure of authority of skills in observation, interrogation, and deductive reasoning to reveal the suspicious nature of a death, a motive for a presumed murder being committed, and the identity of likely suspects. As such, these scenes deserve recognition not only as an early example of detective drama, but also as a foray by Shelley into a genre with which he had not hitherto been associated.

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[5] William Cullen, *A Letter to Lord Cathcart, president of the Board of Police in Scotland, concerning the recovery of persons drowned, and seemingly dead . . .* (Edinburgh, 1776).

[6] James Lind MD FRS, *Sketch for a Medical Education* (Windsor, 1800), 2.

SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*, THE ORGANIZATION OF MATTER, AND THE SPARK OF LIFE

IN the early 1990s Marilyn Butler drew renewed attention to the relationship between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and contemporary radical science.[1] Butler pointed to the controversy between those who proposed that organized matter could, in certain circumstances, spontaneously cause life (and that therefore matter was active) and those who did not, and the temporary victory of the latter (the transcendentalists) in the years before Darwin. This debate is dramatized in Britain from 1814 to 1819 in the dispute between the surgeons John Abernethy (1764–1831) and William Lawrence (1783–1867). Abernethy argued the transcendentalist case that life was injected into organized matter from above, and that it resembled electricity. For Abernethy, building on the opaque speculations of John Hunter's vitalist physiology and Sir Humphry Davy's demonstrations that electrical charges caused chemical reactions in apparently inert matter, the 'principle of life' was added to organized matter and was responsible for the otherwise inexplicable quality of irritability apparent in muscle fibres. Although he stated he did not know what the 'principle of life' was, he could make a conjecture. Abernethy claimed:

> that irritability is the effect of some subtle, mobile, invisible substance, superadded to the evident structure of muscles, or other forms of vegetable and animal matter, as magnetism is to iron, and as electricity is to various substances with which it may be connected.[2]

Abernethy's case was consistent with hierarchical animation from above in theology (God) and politics (monarchical) as much as in biology.[3] Lawrence argued, the immanent cause in language which made strikingly clear its bottom-up democratic political implications, and materialist theological implications. The antagonism of Lawrence and Abernethy attracted considerable public attention, a rash of tracts and counter-tracts and substantial articles in the leading reviews and encyclopaedias, all of which have been fully described elsewhere.[4] The scientific controversy ran in parallel to a series of complex literary manifestations of the

[1] Marilyn Butler, 'Introduction', to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (Oxford, 1994).

[2] John Abernethy, *An Enquiry into the Probability and Rationality of Mr. Hunter's Theory of Life* (London: Hurst, 1814), 39.

[3] Adrian Desmond, *The Politics of Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London* (Chicago, 1989); L. S. Jacyna, 'Immanence or Transcendence: theories of life and organization in Britain, 1790–1835', *Isis*, lxxiv (1983), 311–29; Francesa Rigotti, 'Biology and Society in the Age of Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xlvii (1986), 215–33.

[4] See June Goodfield-Toulmin, 'Some aspects of English physiology, 1780–1840', *Journal of the History of Biology*, ii (1969), 283–320; Oswei Temkin, 'Basic science, medicine and the Romantic era', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, xxxvii (1963), 97–129.