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National Trauma and Romantic Illusions in Percy Shelley's *The Cenci*

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Abstract: Percy Shelley responded to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre by declaring the government's response "a bloody murderous oppression." As Shelley's language suggests, this was a seminal event in the socially conscious life of the poet. Thereafter, Shelley devoted much of his writing to delineating the sociopolitical milieu of 1819 in political and confrontational works, including *The Cenci*, a verse drama that I argue portrays the coercive violence implicit in nationalism, or, as I term it, national trauma. In displaying the historical Roman Cenci family in starkly vituperous manner, that is, Shelley reveals his drive to speak to the historical moment, as he creates parallels between the tyranny that the Roman *pater familias* exhibits toward his family and the repression occurring during the time of emergent nationhood in Hanoverian England, which numerous scholars have addressed. While scholars have noted discrete acts of trauma in *The Cenci* and other Romantic works, there has been little sustained criticism from the theoretical point of view of trauma theory, which inhabits the intersections of history, cultural memory, and trauma, and which I explore as national trauma. Through *The Cenci*, Shelley implies that national trauma inheres within British nationhood in the multiple traumas of tyrannical rule, shored up by the nation's cultural memory and history, instantiated in oppressive ancestral order and patrilineage. Viewing *The Cenci* from the perspective of national trauma, however, I conclude that Shelley's revulsion at coercive governance and nationalism loses itself in the contemplation of the beautiful pathos of the effects of national trauma witnessed in Beatrice, as he instead turns to a more traditional national narrative.

Keywords: Percy Shelley; *The Cenci*; trauma; nationalism

Percy Shelley responded to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre by declaring the government's response "a bloody murderous oppression."[1] As Shelley's language suggests, this was a seminal event in the socially conscious life of the poet. Thereafter, Shelley devoted much of his writing to delineating the sociopolitical milieu of 1819 in political and confrontational works, including *The Cenci*, a verse drama that I argue portrays the coercive violence implicit in nationalism, or, as I term it, national trauma. In displaying the historical Roman Cenci family in starkly vituperous manner, that is, Shelley reveals his drive to speak to the historical moment, as he creates parallels between the tyranny that the Roman *pater familias* exhibits toward his family and the repression occurring during the time of emergent nationhood in Hanoverian England, which numerous scholars have addressed.[2] While scholars have noted discrete acts of trauma in *The Cenci* and other Romantic works, there has been little sustained criticism from the theoretical point of view of trauma theory, which inhabits the intersections of history, cultural memory, and trauma, and which I explore as national trauma.[3] Through *The Cenci*, Shelley

1 (Shelley 1964). 6 September 1819.
2 See (Van Kooy 2016; Fenno 2015; Corbett 1996; Behrendt 1989; Bennett and Curran 1996).
3 Tim Fulford, Nigel Leask, and Peter J. Kitson focus on national identity and national consciousness in relation to national trauma, exploring the material and historical conditions and processes of nineteenth-century Britain's nationalism,

implies that national trauma inheres within British nationhood in the multiple traumas of tyrannical rule, shored up by the nation's cultural memory and history, instantiated in oppressive ancestral order and patrilineage. Viewing *The Cenci* from the perspective of national trauma, however, I conclude that Shelley's revulsion at coercive governance and nationalism loses itself in the contemplation of the beautiful pathos of the effects of national trauma witnessed in Beatrice, as he instead turns to a more traditional national narrative.

According to Mark Kipperman, Shelley had a positive view of nationalism, in that, "in Shelley's day, nationalism would seem a generally progressive force, particularly in a period of struggle between constitutionalism and monarchist legitimism or outright tyranny."[4] Framing nationhood as an ambiguous and evolving social category, constituted by historical forces, helps to elucidate the complexity of Shelley's relationship to nationalism.[5] While Shelley "contest[ed] the totalizing claims of empire, of the British-Austrian-Russian Holy Alliance," he viewed "[some elements] of national language and custom [as] covert tools of entrenched power" that can be a "tool of mystification."[6] Joep Leerssen insists that "all nationalism is cultural nationalism," so that cultural history and memory, or cultural custom, which Shelley interrogates, can be said to inaugurate nationhood and national identity.[7] In his writing and letters, Shelley appears most anxious about the British nation's cultural customs of continuity, tradition, rank, and property. Through *The Cenci*, Shelley highlights these tensions within the nineteenth-century nationalist and constitutional reform movements in Britain. In speaking to George III's reign through his depiction of the sixteenth-century papal state within *The Cenci*, Shelley focuses on the problematic nature of the entrenched structures of the Church, the aristocracy and autocratic rule within British national identity to question the viability of British nationalist reform. Even though Shelley believed that the ancient and medieval city-states of southern Europe were "an idealized and distinctly European future, the broad liberal national spirit, especially as defined in the vocabulary of the Enlightenment, that underlay all European civilization" and, as such, revealed the possibility of reform,[8] the Roman papal state appeared to foreclose that possibility.

The Cenci thus can indeed be viewed as what Stuart Curran calls a "revolutionary document," one that explores societal injustice and oppression even if "no viable legitimized options for action exist."[9] Importantly, it is not only that Shelley responds to the political conditions of his time, but also how he responds that makes the case for reading *The Cenci* as an instance marking national trauma, especially when taking the view that national trauma expresses itself "not only in large public events like the Holocaust," in E. Ann Kaplan's words, but also in what Stef Craps describes as "everyday crises," such as the cumulative effects of systemic oppression of the disenfranchised.[10] For Craps, this grinding subjugation exposes the quotidian nature of trauma in the lives of the disempowered, or, in Lauren Berlant's words, the "banalizing consequences of repetition" of trauma.[11] Current thought in trauma theory led by Kaplan, Craps, Berlant, and Judith Butler speaks to the heterogeneous and various accounts of trauma. In contrast to earlier trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth (Caruth 1995),

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imperialism, and colonialism. The recent work of Saree Makdisi, Mary Favret, Thomas Pfau and essays edited by Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh more fully address issues of agency, performativity, and identity in relation to traumatic national events.

See (Fulford 2005; Leask 1992; Kitson 2007; Makdisi 1998; Favret 2009; Pfau 2005; Lynch 1996).

In "Remembering Beatrice Remembering Sexual Crime and Silence in Shelley's *The Cenci*," Colleen Fenno traces Beatrice's reaction as that of a victim of trauma.

4 (Kipperman 1996, p. 51).

5 See (Trumpener 1997) for a discussion of Romantic nationalism that builds on Benedict Anderson's work on nationalism. (Anderson 1983.)

6 (Kipperman 1996, p. 58).

7 (Leerssen 2006, p. 125). According to Leerssen, "Every nation owed its identity, the very fact that it existed as something separate from other nations, to its own essence" (*National Thought in Europe* 111).

8 (Kipperman 1996, p. 52).

9 (Curran 1970, p. 214).

10 (Kaplan 2005, p. 5; Craps 2013, p. 54).

11 (Berlant 2001).

who focus on the universal psychoanalytical etiology of trauma, these more current theorists on trauma question the universal validity of definitions of trauma marked by a Eurocentric, monocultural bias that marginalize or ignore the traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority groups.[12] That is, the belief in transhistorical concepts of trauma denies that trauma is rooted in a "particular historical and geographical context," according to Craps.[13] *The Cenci* itself plays large public events against everyday crises in the narrative by displaying the tyranny Cenci exhibits as well as its references to the current English government's oppressiveness. Thus, Count Cenci's concern over spies and demand for absolute obeisance, for example, evoke the repressive Six Acts of King George III's reign passed in response to the Peterloo rebellion. In similar evocative manner, the defiance exhibited by Beatrice toward her father's horrific acts aimed at crushing her condemnation of his rule is aligned with the revolutionary fervor Shelley explores in both *Prometheus Unbound* and the fragment "On the Medusa."[14] Conversely, Lord Cenci's continued torture of Beatrice and her downfall in the end disclose the impact of "everyday trauma," or historical and structural persecution of the oppressed, such as that of the poor in nineteenth-century England.

Shelley, moreover, in "elevat[ing] history to the level and status of myth" by transcending the historical moment within *The Cenci*, unveils what Craps characterizes as the cultural and historical contingency of this national trauma, or its underpinning in cultural and historical memory.[15] In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley had famously declared the work of historians Hume and Gibbon below that of literary luminaries like Dante and Shakespeare because, for him, historical accounts merely "catalogue detached facts," but poetry provides an "interpenetration of a diviner nature."[16] Beatrice's loss of speech and, more particularly, her disavowal of her memory in the face of the ineffability of her father's tyranny evoke the issues of identity and lineage, signposting the oppressive force of patrilineage within the mythos of the papal state, and, by comparison, Britain. In such manner, Shelley broadens the prospect of the historical moment to encompass cultural memory, and he does so to reveal the nation's origin in unspeakable trauma.

Shelley's forceful critique of British nationhood is submerged in the drama's denouement, however, as Beatrice appears to eschew a national presence and submit to her fate. For some feminist scholars, *The Cenci*'s sociopolitical attack "reced[es] at the act of parricide" to exploit the frightening figure of the rebellious woman, or more disturbingly, to make a "spectacle" of Beatrice's body and to retreat from revolutionary politics.[17] That is, I argue that Shelley's fetishization of the beautiful tragedy of Beatrice's punishment for her rebellion against her father, originating in his viewing of the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, purportedly drawn while she was in prison, ultimately dominates his drama. More specifically, Shelley reveals a problematic "pleasure-in-pain" in the sublimity of Beatrice's trauma, discounting the sociopolitical significance of this trauma.[18] That is, the tragedy's denouement presents Beatrice as an embodiment of stagnant futility, suggesting a more traditional national tale of beatific filial submissiveness rather than Shelley's powerful revelations concerning British nationhood.

1. National Trauma, 1819

Focusing on the nineteenth century as providing the exemplum of ideologically impelled literary texts, James Chandler echoes the title of Shelley's political sonnet in the title of his study, *England in 1819*. Chandler argues that for English writing, 1819 comprises a watershed year, whereby literature becomes

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12 See also (Butler 2009).
13 (Craps 2013, p. 21).
14 Scholars Jerome McGann (1972), Reeve Parker, Suzanne Ferriss and Barbara Judson explore the cultural resonance of the Medusa figure for Shelley and Romanticism.
15 (Behrendt 1990, p. 225).
16 (Shelley 2002a, pp. 510–35).
17 (Wolfson 2009, p. 110; Carlson 1994, p. 199). Julie Carlson asserts that Shelley's use of Beatrice "foregrounds the tendency to blame the victim of sexual violence and to make a profit from the spectacle of pain" (199).
18 (LaCapra 1998, p. 34).

"aware of its place in and as history," or more explicitly is concerned with a "national operation of self-dating, or -redating, that is meant to count as a national self-making or -remaking."[19] Shelley is one of the Romantic writers whose literary texts seem to emerge in this conceptual framework of "national self-making or re-making" gathering around 1819. Regarding the 1819 Peterloo Massacre, Shelley explicitly declared in a letter to Charles Ollier, his publisher, that his "indignation had not yet done boiling in [his] veins" and that he was "anxiously [waiting to] hear how the Country would express its sense of this bloody murderous oppression of its destroyers," going on to write, "Something must be done . . . What yet I know not."[20] Certainly, marking a poem with the title "England in 1819" entrenches it in a particular historical moment and, as Chandler suggests, that "the *date of the nation* could figure the *state of the nation*."[21] Indeed, the political milieu around 1819 does figure as a crisis point for politically aware Romantics pursuing nationalist and constitutionalist reform.

Of course, a variety of actions led to the political unrest unleashed in 1819. The Habeas Corpus Suspension Act of 1794 terminated the right of *habeas corpus* until 1801, a suspension which was then extended in 1817, and the following Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 prevented meetings of more than fifty people and gagged public speech. Further, the Newspaper Proprietors Registration Act restricted the press. As Paul Foot explains, "At no other period has the criminal libel law been used with such abandon."[22] With increasing restrictive policy, rebellion seemed programmed to erupt. Thus, in the summer of 1819, 35,000 people met to demand universal suffrage, the assemblage that led to further protests and eventually to the Peterloo Massacre. After the radical demonstration at Peterloo, the government retaliated with more oppressive legislation: six more acts were passed that convicted anyone suspected of conspiring or meeting to discuss any political question and allowed entrance to homes without warrants. These oppressions emerging from legal, judicial, and sovereign power structures, bolstered by the fear of levelling and the infringement on the monarchy's absolute rights, and thus directed at the poor and women, reveal and perpetuate the entrenched custom of the ancestral order and patrilineage underlying British nationhood.

It is this repressive governing climate that is echoed in Count Cenci's tyranny toward his family. Although on the face of it, Cenci's repressive acts only represent a tyrannical lord suppressing his individual family members, his acts, like those of the British government, are also shored up by the hegemony of the papal state's power structures and their mystifying underlying cultural ideology. The preamble to the post-Peterloo Six Acts declares that, "every meeting for radical reform is an overt act of treasonable conspiracy against the King and his government." In particular, strict restrictions were placed on public meetings that were believed to discuss "any public grievance or any matter on Church and State," which most seriously infringed on public liberty. Similarly, the Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act empowered magistrates to seek, seize, and confiscate all materials that were deemed libelous. Evoking the preamble and these two acts' absolute shut-down of opposition, Cenci rejoices in the death of his sons who had petitioned the Pope against their father's neglect and threatens the guests who react in shock, proclaiming: "For my revenge/Is as the sealed commission of a king/That kills, and none dare name the murderer."[23] The "sealed commission" has been likened to the absolute authority of the *lettres de cachet* of the French monarch, but it can also suggest that British royalty in the early nineteenth century resorted to repression to respond to the threats of regicide and the kind of violence committed during Robespierre's Reign of Terror.[24] Thus, further reflecting the nation in the individual, Shelley intimates that fear of sedition in the Count's concerns about "peering day . . . full of

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[19] (Chandler 1998). 5, 6. Chandler makes clear that this literary work seeks to "state *the case of the nation*" in a way as to "alter its case" to signal the political motive behind this writing (6).
[20] (Shelley 1964, p. 117), 6 September 1819.
[21] (Chandler 1998, p. 33).
[22] (Foot 1980, p. 34).
[23] (Shelley 2002b, pp. 96–98).
[24] In "Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* and the Rhetoric of Tyranny," Suzanne Ferriss sees Louis XVI's oppression of France's populace as a corollary to Cenci's violent acts. (Ferriss 1998, pp. 208–25).

eyes and ears," which the tyrant later echoes in his questioning whether he need fear "still the eyes and ears of Rome."[25] Shelley's use of synecdochic imagery emphasizes Cenci's vulnerability, which borders on paranoia. Indeed, for Cenci, Beatrice's merely "dar[ing] to look/With disobedient insolence . . . Bending a stern and an inquiring brow/ On what I meant" leaves him "inarticulate."[26] Tellingly, to crush this perceived rebellion in Beatrice, he assures himself that he will leave her to "confound both night and day," effectively shrouding his actions.[27]

Offering counterpoint to the Count's portrait, and suggesting the need that "[s]omething must be done," as Shelley expressed in his letter to Ollier, Beatrice unmakes her father's claim to absolute power. In naming his treatment of his sons as "tyranny," for example, Beatrice challenges blind obedience. She attempts to qualify the respect demanded of the father, the obeisance owed governing bodies, subject to a universal understanding of respect and justice, the very issues of the British national reform movement. Thus, she openly declares that even though Cenci's reputation is "sheltered by a father's hoary hair," his oppressiveness must be stopped.[28] As she acknowledges, one may mistakenly view the act of his "sacred hand . . . crush[ing]" his children as "perhaps some paternal chastisement!"[29] Here, Shelley's juxtaposition of the term "sacred," to identify the legal and emotional reverence accorded both a monarch and a priest, with the word "crushed" to associate with paternal measures, again bring the state and individual in proximity. Clearly, on both levels, Shelley conveys the perilous sway of the patriarchy.

In conflating the hegemony of the institutions of family, church, and state, that is, Beatrice emphasizes the threat of autocratic rule, while expressing her own powerlessness in the face of these power structures, which, as Robert Corbett suggests, reveals the violence that is the "imageless deep truth of these sacred institutions.[30] When no one responds to her accusation of Cenci, she questions if it is because she does "sue not in some form/Of scrupulous law."[31] Here, Stuart Curran, among other scholars, determines that Beatrice is imprisoned in "inescapable cultural orientations" of corrupt religious and political ideology,[32] salvation from which Laurence Lockridge concludes, can only be achieved "through larger sociopolitical movement seeking distributive justice."[33] We can then see why Shelley chose a papal state with the autocratic Lord Cenci himself ostensibly under the rule of the papacy to expose the British nation's entrenched power structures of monarchy, church, and aristocracy, along with its concomitant cultural memory and history.

Conflating family with state as well, the Count also frames Beatrice's confrontation as a rebellion in depicting her as having "disturbed the feast," during which he was reasserting his authority over his sons.[34] He then names Beatrice a "wild girl," "insane girl," and a "painted viper," conjuring the common images of revolutionary women at the time, such as Edmund Burke's depiction of the French female revolutionaries as furies of hell.[35] Although "Medusa" is not directly named in Shelley's tragedy, Beatrice's defiance has often been read as Medusan, the reference to which, as Jerrold Hogle explains, symbolized "cultural, sometimes, revolutionary, change" for the Romantics.[36] Nonetheless, in both *Prometheus Unbound* and the fragment "On the Medusa," Shelley modulates *The Cenci* to suggest

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25 *The Cenci*, 2.1.177–8, 4.1.5.
26 *The Cenci*, 2.1.107–09
27 *The Cenci*, 2.1.183
28 *The Cenci*, 1.3.102.
29 *The Cenci*, 1.3.111–12.
30 (Corbett 1996, p. 1).
31 Fenno states "even her direct attempt at intervention is ignored when the Pope returns her petition for help unopened" (35).
32 (Curran 1970, pp. 94–95).
33 (Lockridge 2016, pp. 95–98).
34 *The Cenci*, 2.1.152.
35 *The Cenci*, 1.3.132; 1.3.160 1.3.165. Steven Blakemore argues that conservatives in England blamed the French Revolution for what subsequently came to be known as the "woman question" as the Revolution becomes an "assault on natural positions" accorded sex (Blakemore 1996, p. 681).
36 As Jerrold Hogle explains, Medusa was "a symbol of cultural, sometimes, revolutionary, change" for the Romantics (Hogle 1988, p. 4).

Medusa not only in order to evoke revolutionary fervor, but also to evoke both beauty and terror.[37] Since, for Burke, the "generous loyalty to rank and sex" established by the chivalric code represented a precondition for societal progress and political stability, the violence of the female revolutionaries against the monarchy signaled the destruction of social order itself, a cultural belief reflected in Cenci's impugning of Beatrice as well.[38] Not surprisingly, then, Beatrice's violent retaliation against her father's brutality has also been interpreted as signposting Shelley's anxiety regarding the radical potential of political movements in Britain and Europe,[39] and, as such, can be seen as demystifying the complex underlying cultural memory and history of the British state.

2. Cultural Memory and National Trauma

Once Beatrice questions Count Cenci's authority, the Hegelian struggle for domination opens up Shelley's drama to the greater cultural memory to underscore the traumatic origins of British nationalism itself. Attempting to quash Beatrice, to coin her in his image, for example, Cenci considers: "Might I not drag her by the golden hair? Stamp on her?"[40] The act of "stamping" thus refers not only to corporal violence, but also to the "stamp" or imprint of his will onto his daughter. Importantly, he also gloats that he will "strike her dumb," destroying her voice, which on the level of the drama retaliates against the offense, but on the greater level, as the Six Acts demonstrate, is associated with liberty and identity. Presenting Cenci and Beatrice in this clash of wills thus evokes state-inflicted violence against the disenfranchised as inherently a part of British national identity and cultural memory, which seeks the dissolution of the other. As Kaplan argues, national trauma "conflates or blurs the boundaries between the individual and the collective."[41] Ironically, such nationalism seeks continuity between the empowered and the powerless, as long as the powerless remain so, and concomitantly demands a reconception of history and objectivity. Evoking national trauma through individual trauma, Shelley invests Beatrice's rape with the kind of distress of systemic continual oppression faced from the law and from the Church, which deems the victim culpable for the attack. Thus, Beatrice experiences what Craps identifies as the "everyday trauma" marginalized individuals face in the form of structural oppression of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and classism.[42] And herein lies an analogue to national ideologies.

From this trauma, Beatrice's abject powerlessness through her loss of speech and, more particularly, through the abjuration of her memory in confronting her father's horrific violence resonates with sociopolitical import that has been the subject of scholarly commentary. Thus, Dana Van Kooy argues that Beatrice's silence "contests social, political and cultural norms" by revealing the "unspeakable acts of tyranny" and Colleen Fenno views Beatrice's silence as delineating the psychology of the rape victim within Shelley's time.[43] Viewed from a larger perspective, Stephen Behrendt points out, "history and myth converge" in Shelley's exploration of the "proclivity toward brutality, domination, revenge and retribution."[44] Within this context, I argue further that, through Beatrice, Shelley incorporates cultural memory into his examination of history, and, in doing so, unmakes history, to expose the origins of Britain's national history in traumatic oppression.

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[37] Barbara Judson, in "The Politics of Medusa: Shelley's Physiognomy of Revolution," specifies that Shelley's Medusa depicts the "Revolution's spiral through beauty, promise, and eventual terror" in that the force "derails" into revolutionary violence (Judson 2001, p. 151). In "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure," Neil Hertz (1983) speculates on the logic through which revolutionary violence is "emblematized ... as a fierce but not exactly sexless woman" (135).

[38] (Burke 1791, p. 113).

[39] Reeve Parker argues Beatrice's calm at the end gives "a sense both of what has just happened and of what is surely to come" (Parker 2011, p. 220), and Suzanne Ferriss argues that Shelley speaks to the "revolutionary excesses experienced by the French" (208) as Beatrice's parricide is a "perversion of the revolutionary impulse in politics" (209).

[40] *The Cenci*, 4.1.6–7.

[41] (Kaplan 2005, p. 19).

[42] (Craps 2013, pp. 25–26).

[43] (Van Kooy 2016, p. 30; Fenno 2015, p. 54).

[44] (Behrendt 1990, pp. 214, 218).

It is Shelley's exploration of the ideal, which he describes in his *Defence of Poetry* as the "unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator,"[45] that impels Shelley to reimagine British nationhood. As Tilottama Rajan makes clear through her delineation of Hegel's depiction of the progression of the artist, the Romantic phase, which follows the Symbolic phase, envisions the idea that "can no longer find its adequate reality" in the "shapes available to it in its culture."[46] According to Hegel, then, the Romantic artist is superior to the Symbolic artist because "he withdraws from existing discourses into the clarity of a free resistance, while the latter is at the mercy of contemporary material, his imagination deformed by what it cannot form."[47] Kim Wheatley argues that this withdrawal "from existing discourses" through Shelley's aesthetic idealism "open[s] up a nonpartisan aesthetic space [which] can be seen as offering a way out of a rigid and morally bankrupt political discourse" of Shelley's time.[48]

Indeed, such idealism is revealed in the classic quality of the drama: *The Cenci* displays a "tendency toward a unity of time, along with offstage violence and a *mythos*."[49] Importantly here, the traumatic personal history of the protagonist, marked by "misremembering," foregrounds a mythic national narrative in this sense. Just as poets transformed the rape of Lucrece into a defining national moment, so too Beatrice's projection of her grief outside herself in this moment guides the tragedy's audiences to consider beyond the material event. Shelley intimates again that Cenci's act of domination carries significantly broader sociopolitical and historiographical implications when he has Beatrice depict the world as "reel[ing]" and as "flecked with blood."[50] Using *The Cenci* to comment on contemporary British history, Shelley suggests that Britain's national history and identity can neither be completely encapsulated nor redeemed by the cultural memory of the ancestral traditions of England that belie violent national trauma of disenfranchisement. In this sense, the contamination Beatrice feels "circling through her veins" after her father's violation speaks more or less directly to destructive nationalist ideology.[51] According to Burke, national inheritance links families and nations. The dark side of such belief in "familial" nationalism emerges in Shelley's drama when Count Cenci considers his lasting punishment of Beatrice, for he envisions her torture in terms of inheritance, both in familial and material lineage, which he has to power to withhold from her. Abrogating the Burkean ideal, Cenci says he will burn his possessions and leave "nothing but [his] name;/Which shall be an inheritance to strip/Its wearer bare as infamy."[52] He decrees that he will also expose Beatrice and, "Her name shall be the terror of the earth ... [her] body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin."[53] Even more destructively, the Count prays that the child she begets will "be/A hideous likeness of herself," reminding her of his outrage toward her.[54]

Through Shelley's interpellation defining the subaltern as extraneous to the power structure, except as to serve in total obedience, Beatrice's birthright and legacy have been wrecked and effaced, underscoring her mournful query: "What name, what place, what memory shall be mine?/What retrospects, outliving even despair?"[55] Indeed, the subsequent dissolution of Beatrice's subject-position is reflected in her inability to even articulate this trauma. Her horror is depicted as "formless"; no social space exists to encompass her father's act—there is "no vindication and no law,/[To] adjudge

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45 *Defence of Poetry*, 515.
46 (Rajan 2015).
47 (Rajan 2015).
48 (Wheatley 1999, p. 6).
49 (Behrendt 1990, p. 86).
50 *The Cenci*, 3.1.12–13.
51 *The Cenci*, 3.1.96.
52 *The Cenci*, 4.1.60–62.
53 *The Cenci*, 4.1.92, 95.
54 *The Cenci*, 4.1.146.
55 *The Cenci*, 3.1.75–76.

and execute the doom" she has suffered.[56] If she speaks of the crime, her tale would "baff[le] belief, and overpower[ ] speech."[57] The state arena offers no legal recourse for the dispossessed.

In this narrative, Beatrice, at once the formidable force of revolution and its suppression, reveals the "false consciousness" inherent in the formation of the British national narrative and national identity[58] or the way in which subjects are formed through a process distorted by the national trauma within British cultural memory and history that "conflates or blurs the boundaries between the individual and the collective" in Kaplan's words.[59] In linking her cry of "What am I" to "What name, what place, what memory shall be mine?" Beatrice's perceived loss of identity (which she associates with both lineage and homeland) stems from her traumatic experience and, just as importantly, can only be superficially recovered by means of repressing horrific acts of the past.

3. Beautiful Failure

Notwithstanding Shelley's powerful exposure of not only an unjust national inheritance, as well as an untenable political response in Britain, in the end, his focus on Beatrice's suffering in *The Cenci* enforces a silencing of the trauma within Britain's cultural history, which then succumbs to a traditional national narrative of Britain. Such tensions are not unknown in Shelley's work; they emerge in *The Cenci* through his deploying the figure of a woman to represent the nation. Woman, both bodily and psychically, stands as a familiar metonym for the body politic of Britain, as witnessed in the personification of Britain as Britannia. In his *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Edmund Burke capitalizes upon this ideal figuration to consolidate his reactionary politics, relating Englishness to the familiar and the familial as he associates political obedience with filial submissiveness. As argued by Deirdre Lynch, however, Burke's vitriolic attack on female revolutionaries in France made clear that woman's sexual nature problematizes her position as an actual national subject.[60] Specific to Shelley's play, Julie Carlson depicts this paradox, "*The Cenci* accords more space than any other romantic drama to the inner condition of a female protagonist, but that condition is associated with her sexuality and is gestured at in strikingly inarticulate ways" as the "body of woman displayed is a dangerous spectacle."[61] In *The Cenci*, by silencing Beatrice, by emphasizing her suffering, Shelley silences not only history but also his ideas concerning nationhood.

Shelley's attraction to the portrait of Beatrice Cenci initially attributed to Guido Reni, which acts as the catalyst for his drama, ultimately delimits his focus on her suffering in that this portrait's power lies not only in its art but in the "Gothic horrors" of its subject matter.[62] Barbara Groseclose argues that Shelley sees himself in Beatrice's features in the portrait, as well as "in the pathos of (fe)male suffering" which, for Julie Carlson, allows "projecting the suffering but keeping the victimization."[63] I have further argued that Shelley's attraction to the beautiful tragedy of Beatrice's punishment evinces problematically invested "pleasure-in-pain," leaving a sympathetic understanding for Beatrice's trauma, individual and national, marginalized. Especially in fetishizing Beatrice's torture, which represents structural and historical oppression, or national trauma, Shelley appears to abandon his attempt for an "interpenetration of a diviner nature" in his examination of state violence and oppression in *The Cenci*. Similarly, Dominick LaCapra depicts this dangerous attraction to national trauma as a "transvaluation of trauma that brings to the subject an experience of elation or Rausch" that "one may be unable—or even find it undesirable—to overcome the allure of sublimity or the valorization of

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56 *The Cenci*, 3.1.111; 3.1.134–36.
57 *The Cenci*, 3.1.156–57; 3.1.164.
58 In *The Political Unconscious*, Frederic Jameson (1982) critiques cultural analysis that tends toward "some ideal unity of consciousness or thinking and experience or the 'objective' fact," which he terms a "false consciousness" (282).
59 (Kaplan 2005, p. 19).
60 (Lynch 1996; Richardson and Hofkosh 1996, p. 41).
61 Julie Carlson, "A Theater of Remorse," in (Carlson 1994, pp. 198–99).
62 (Groseclose 1985, p. 223).
63 (Carlson 1994, pp. 198–99).

melancholy, particularly when they attest to an extreme situation and are combined with arresting insights that are otherwise denied or obscured."[64] Although LaCapra, like Caruth (Caruth 1995), holds a more narrow historical view of trauma, mostly characterizing trauma as stemming from single, catastrophic events in Western history, unlike Caruth (Caruth 1995), he recognizes the danger of characterizing trauma as psychologically incomprehensible, which can then lead to its fetishization. In speaking to the history of the Holocaust, LaCapra cautions that historians must "recogniz[e] the temptation [to fetishize trauma] and threat of possibilities that should meet with active resistance."[65]

In his preface to *The Cenci*, Shelley details his attempt "whilst at Rome to observe such monuments of this [Cenci] story as might be accessible to a stranger."[66] The monument he gives the most attention to is the portrait of Beatrice. Depicting this portrait of the enigmatic and beautiful Beatrice as a monument locates the crux of the problem, as he signals the elegiac nature of his representation of Beatrice in the denouement, ultimately centering the work on the grief and pain she suffered from her father's oppression. In depicting himself contemplating the "gentleness" in the portrait of Beatrice "taken . . . during her confinement in prison," Shelley suggests that the "crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and sufferer are as the mask and mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world."[67] And, through his heavily stylized drama, Beatrice becomes just such "an actor and sufferer" as she is transformed from an impassioned critic of her father and the Church to a martyr.

Shelley's fixation on and admiring description of this artwork, then, highlights Beatrice's beauty, which he links to her selfless suffering, as his lengthy description cathects upon the exquisite pain of her trauma:

The portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace is admirable as a work of art: it was taken by Guido during her confinement in prison. But it is most interesting as a just representation of one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature. There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched: the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lusterless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien, there is a simplicity and dignity which, united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow, are inexpressibly pathetic. Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another: her nature was simple and profound.[68]

For Shelley, the simplicity and dignity depicted in Beatrice's portrait, united with her poignant loveliness and distress, are inexpressibly pathetic: her "despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness"; "her eyes, which are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lusterless, but beautifully tender and serene." In both the moment represented in the portrait and in Shelley's dramatic recreation of it through Beatrice's demeanor in the denouement subdues the forceful nature of Beatrice's character. This moment is thereby marked through a stasis of pathetic sorrow and despair, as embodied in Cenci's punishment of his daughter and in her sentencing for murdering him. This static moment of beauty and despair overwhelms the sublimity of what Anne McWhir otherwise describes as Beatrice's "anatomizing stare," which "reveals people to themselves and leaves them blind and dumb," characterizing both her earlier rebellion and the revolutionary

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64 (LaCapra 1998, pp. 34–35).
65 (LaCapra 1998, pp. 34–35).
66 Preface, *The Cenci*, 144.
67 Preface, *The Cenci*, 144.
68 Preface, *The Cenci*, 144.

reform Shelley attempts to speak to in his drama.[69] Her suffering then becomes emptied out of the sociopolitical significance that ties her trauma to national culture.

Indeed, it is Beatrice's feminine and sorrowful beauty, her "golden hair," that draws Shelley's feeling and evokes the "romantic conception of the archetypal heroine."[70] Tellingly, the manuscript "The Relation of the Death of the Family Cenci" that serves as Shelley's source for his drama is the single source of the Cenci tragedy that characterizes Beatrice as blonde.[71] Creating a series of tensions, then, Shelley's depiction of Beatrice not only turns away from his "ideals" concerning nationhood but also shifts to the cultural aesthetic of the beautiful, suggestive of another of Edmund Burke's traditional conceptions—the aesthetic category of the beautiful–which he characterizes as submissively feminine:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze through which the unsteady eye glides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?[72]

In linking beauty with a woman's body, Burke's aesthetic category not only becomes eroticized and erotic, but also completely knowable, rather than ideal. Burke's superior point of view seems as well to be the aesthetic ideal Shelley envisions in his portrait of Beatrice Cenci. Even though Shelley insists that in this depiction of Beatrice, he has "endeavored as nearly as possible to represent the characters as they probably were, and [. . .] sought to avoid the error of making them actuated by my own conceptions of right or wrong, false or true," in his drama's resolution, this character nonetheless emerges from his sentiment, rather than a sympathetic understanding.[73]

Feminist scholars like Susan Wolfson focus on the resolution of *The Cenci* to highlight the importance of gender politics in the tragedy in that both Beatrice's "torment and retaliation are inseparable from their formation in, and by, corrupt patriarchy."[74] Certainly, the drama associates the integrity of the papal state to Cenci's control over his children, or the patriarchal institutions of the father, the state, and the Church. Thus, when Camillo relates to Giacomo that the Pope has invalidated his petition against his father since it is a "dangerous example/In aught to weaken the paternal power,/Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own," Shelley highlights this interconnection.[75] In the denouement of the drama, however, the character of Beatrice has been subsumed by Shelley's beautiful fantasy of her suffering, which silences her painful history's revelation about the power structures of patriarchy, the state and the Church, as well as nationhood. After Cenci has meted out his punishment by raping his daughter, the image of the disheveled Beatrice most clearly alludes to her loss of purity, a traditional view of a women's worth. Beatrice signals this injury in asking confusedly, "How comes this hair undone?"[76] The hair, a sign of femininity, has come "undone," marking a lack of decorum in her appearance but also carrying the implication of her "undoing."

Shelley concludes the drama with Beatrice's heartbreaking appeal to her mother:

Here, Mother, tie

My girdle for me, and bind up this hair

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[69] (McWhir 1989, p. 147). Similarly, Carlson in "A Theater of Remorse," depicts Beatrice as a "commanding actress" with a "gaze" that "pierc[es]" (192).

[70] (Mathews 1984, p. 35).

[71] According to Groseclose, a description of Beatrice accompanied Shelley's manuscript of the Cenci history: Beatrice was rather tall, of a fair complexion; and she had a dimple on each cheek, which, especially when she smiled, added a grace to her lovely countenance that transported everyone who beheld her. Her hair appeared like threads of gold; and . . . the splendid ringlets dazzled the eyes of the spectator. Her eyes were of a deep blue, pleasing, and full of fire. (223).

[72] (Burke 1823, p. 166).

[73] Preface, *The Cenci*, 147.

[74] (Wolfson 2009, p. 104).

[75] *The Cenci*, 2.2.54–56.

[76] *The Cenci*, 3.1.7.

In any simple knot; aye, that does well.
And yours I see is coming down. How often
have we done this for one another; Now
We shall not do it any more. My Lord,
We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well."[77]

While the evocation of entrapment through the act of binding could reflect on the nation, the simple domesticity in the depiction of the mother–daughter bond pulls the narrative into a more conventional portrait, in which Beatrice turns from the national sphere, with the result that a very traditional narrative emerges: with a beatific calm, she prepares for her execution."[B]loody murderous oppression," in national acts and nationalism, that for Shelley establishes the import of *The Cenci* is submerged in smothering female domesticity.

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[77] *The Cenci*, 5.4.159–66.

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