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*THE CRITICAL HERITAGE*

PERCY BYSSHE  
SHELLEY

Edited by  
JAMES E. BARCUS



**PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE**

## **THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES**

General Editor: B. C. Southam

The Critical Heritage series collects together a large body of criticism on major figures in literature. Each volume presents the contemporary responses to a particular writer, enabling the student to follow the formation of critical attitudes to the writer's work and its place within a literary tradition.

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Significant pieces of criticism from later periods are also included in order to demonstrate fluctuations in reputation following the writer's death.

# PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

JAMES E. BARCUS



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for  
**WILLIAM S. WARD**  
who introduced me to  
the labors and rewards of  
scholarship



## General Editor's Preface

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The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.



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## Preface

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Since the critical reception of any author—even a less controversial one than Shelley—includes not only formal periodical essays and critical notices, but also the letters, journals, and conversations of both the author's friends and his enemies, and of avid and discriminating readers as well as the merely literate, arbitrary standards must be imposed on a volume of this nature. While editorial taste and predilection inevitably shape any selection, every effort has been made to be representative in the selection of responses and to be as comprehensive as space permitted. Two important factors worked in the selection process. First, the early death of Shelley and the subsequent efforts of Mary Shelley and Leigh Hunt, among others, to canonize Shelley a literary saint coupled with a delayed trans-Atlantic reception of Shelley prevented the establishment of a neat closing date near to Shelley's death in 1822. In general, save for American reviewers, few entries written after 1845 were admitted, the year of the first complete American edition of Shelley's poems. The exceptions to these principles were judged significant enough to merit inclusion, either because the notices are intrinsically valuable as criticism, or because they point to a shift in the critics' thinking.

The second factor which no editor of Shelleyean criticism can ignore is the vitality and vigor of the early-nineteenth-century periodical press. In the first quarter of the 1800s, periodicals flourished and wielded an influence unparalleled to that point in English literature. While this fact has been well-documented in scholarly studies, a personal note in 1822 from Bernard Barton, a minor poet with aspirations to literary fame, to Robert Southey speaks volumes: 'The Notice of the *Quarterly Review* is an understood passport to an extensive Circle whose attention I certainly could wish to obtain.' The frequency and vigor with which these powerful periodicals reviewed Shelley's publications, coupled with his relative neglect by literary figures such as Wordsworth and Southey, led to a preponderance of British and American reviews and notices in this edition. Moreover, since Mary Shelley's formal comments are easily obtainable in her editions of Shelley's

#### PREFACE

works and since her diary entries are usually perfunctory, she is not represented in this volume.

In brief, this volume begins with the notices of Shelley's juvenile work and seeks to reprint representative essays, journal entries, conversations, and letters written between 1810 and 1850. Wherever possible the selections are grouped chronologically according to subject, but the numerous exceptions to this principle were dictated by the frequent general surveys of either Shelley's work or his person. No attempt has been made to include Continental reception and reaction.

The editorial devices employed here are standard in this series. The headnotes give complete bibliographical information and reviewer attribution or credit, if known. Footnotes are used sparingly, but the explanatory notes before the selections shed light on little-known figures or personalities significant in nineteenth-century publishing and literary history. The introduction emphasizes the formal reception of Shelley's poems by the established reviewers, leaving the letters, diaries, and journals to speak for themselves. These often personal and uninhibited remarks reveal the fluctuations in Shelley's reputation, the growth of his reputation, and the curious devices by which friends and foes came to admit his genius while appearing to have always done so. A very selective bibliography will assist the student who wishes to pursue the subject in more detail.

## Acknowledgments

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The giving of thanks, like the giving of praise, is a dangerous enterprise, for the most important is the easiest overlooked. But I wish to mention especially all those scholars and critics listed in the bibliography and mentioned in the introduction. All students and scholars see as far as they do because of the endeavors of other men, and I am grateful to all men on whose shoulders I stand. In addition to the example of William S. Ward, to whom this volume is dedicated, I wish to single out especially the encouragement and enthusiasm of the late William H. Marshall.

Special thanks should also go to the typists and secretaries who worked faithfully to put this volume into the press: Mrs Joanne Pullen, Mrs Diane Stoneberg, and Mrs Dorothy Coddington. I wish also to thank Professors Gordon Stockin and Richard Gould of Houghton College who translated the Greek, Latin, French, and Italian quotations in the text. Moreover, I wish to express my appreciation to the Committee for Faculty Research and Writing Grants of Houghton College for financial assistance for the secretarial costs and duplicating expenses incurred in the preparation of this volume.

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## Introduction

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Shelley drowned July 8, 1822, less than a month before his thirtieth birthday. His sudden and tragic death when his maturing genius was just becoming apparent may, however, have helped catapult him from relative obscurity to the front ranks of English literature. In March 1822, John Wilson, writing in answer to the question, 'What is your serious opinion about the present state of literature,' responded:<sup>1</sup>

Why, we live in an age that will be much discussed 'tis over—a very stirring, productive, active age—a generation of commentators will probably succeed—and I, for one, look to furnish them with some tough work. There is a great deal of genius astir, but, after all, not many first-rate works produced. If I were asked to say how many will survive, I could answer in a few syllables. Wordsworth's *Ballads* will be much talked of a hundred years hence; so will the *Waverly Novels*; so will *Don Juan*, I think, and 'Manfred'; so will *Thalaba*, and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and the 'Pilgrimage to the Kirk of Shotts,' and 'Christabel.'

John Wilson's amazingly accurate prophecy is marred by the omission of Shelley's major works and those of Keats, although Wilson, in 1819 and again in 1820, had called attention to Shelley's genius.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the untiring labors of Mary Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and others who kept Shelley's name before the public, Shelley's death became the occasion for an outpouring, on both sides of the Atlantic, of criticism, praise, and censure. Undoubtedly the nature of his death and the determination of his wife and friends contributed to the growth of his reputation, but he was, of course, already infamous for his alleged immorality and atheism. Much of this posthumous criticism, such as that in the American press, attempted to mitigate this censure by demonstrating to the public that his immorality was a higher morality and his atheism a new and more noble form of Christianity.

But the fact remains that during Shelley's brief lifetime and in spite of his prolific outpourings, and although the leading journals and periodicals consistently reviewed his work, except for his close friends and companions the literary world at large took little notice of him. One of the paradoxes that taunts the student of Shelley is the relative silence of his leading contemporaries. Sir Walter Scott, for example, has left no significant comment about Shelley or his work. William

## INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth's opinions are fragmentary and inconclusive. Trelawny reported that in 1819 Wordsworth thought nothing of Shelley as a poet. 'A poet who has not produced a good poem before he is twenty-five we may conclude cannot, and never will do so.' When asked about *The Cenci*, he replied, 'Won't do . . .' Trelawny adds that later Wordsworth read more of Shelley's poetry and admitted that Shelley was the greatest master of harmonious verse in our modern literature.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Wordsworth remembered that Wordsworth said, 'Shelley is one of the best *artists* of us all: I mean in workmanship of style,'<sup>4</sup> and Henry Crabb Robinson recollected that Wordsworth placed Shelley above Lord Byron.<sup>5</sup> And Gladstone said that in Wordsworth's opinion Shelley had the greatest native powers in poetry of all the men of this age.<sup>6</sup> But if Wordsworth was unsure about Shelley's poetical abilities, he was adamant in his opposition to Shelley's principles, as recorded by Gladstone, De Vere, and Hartley Coleridge. Perhaps Wordsworth's most quoted comment is recorded by Sara Coleridge: Shelley and Keats 'would ever be favorites with the young, but would not satisfy men of all ages.'<sup>7</sup> In another characteristic Wordsworthian pronouncement, he asserted that 'Shelley's poem on the Lark was full of imagination, but that it did not show the same observation of nature as his poem on the same bird did.'<sup>8</sup>

Coleridge's statements are confined to several references in letters and in a few conversations, although when Miss Coburn has completed the editing of his notebooks, more significant comments may turn up. Except for one famous letter written to Shelley, even Keats has left us few of his insights into Shelley's poetry. Most disappointing of all, of course, are Mary Shelley's letters and journals, for although she repeatedly notes that Shelley has been reading his work aloud or that she and Shelley are copying out a work for publication, she provides no glimpses into her spontaneous and personal reactions to the poetry. She meticulously records when and where she read a poem, but not what she thought about it. In the light of her subsequent commentary and publishing history, this silence is tantalizing. Even Byron who encouraged and supported Shelley, while not always on the best of terms with him, records precious few responses to Shelley's work.

Shelley's lack of reputation, even among his literary contemporaries, probably reflects both the limited number of volumes printed and the method of publication. Later in the century, the first volume of Alfred Tennyson's verse was ignored in part because the country bookseller had not the influence on public taste of a John Murray.

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Shelley's first volume, *Original Poetry*, the joint work of Shelley and his sister Elizabeth, was issued by Stockdale, a London publisher and remainder bookseller, who received 1489 copies from the Worthing printer, but probably no more than 100 copies were ever in circulation. *St. Irvyne*, a gothic novel, was published at Shelley's expense and sold badly. Stockdale, the publisher, figured his loss at £300. *The Necessity of Atheism* was published by C. and W. Phillips of Worthing, and all but a few copies were burned. The discoverer of the heresy, the Rev. John Walker, Fellow of New College, kept one, and copies had also been sent to all the bishops and heads of the colleges before the pamphlet had come to the attention of university authorities. But clearly the pamphlet was never widely read.

Of Shelley's more mature works, 250 copies of *Queen Mab* were printed, but probably not more than 70 copies were in circulation during his lifetime. *Alastor* was first printed, again at Shelley's expense, in an edition of 250 copies. John Murray refused to publish it, but it was ultimately published by Carpenter & Son, and Baldwin & Company. As late as 1820 some copies remained. *The Revolt of Islam* appeared first in an edition of 750 copies as *Laon and Cythna*. Although some copies were distributed under the first title, Ollier, the publisher, refused to go on without revision. The poem finally was published with the new title page and after twenty-six pages of text had been cancelled.

Shelley's drama, *The Cenci*, was printed in an edition of 250 copies at Leghorn in 1819 and published by Collier in 1820. *The Cenci* was a success, for it went into a second edition in 1821, the only work which passed into an authorized second edition during Shelley's lifetime. However, *Prometheus Unbound* did not fare as well. Shelley himself thought it would sell no more than 20 copies, and John Gisborne remarked that *Prometheus Unbound* was never intended for more than five or six persons. Ollier, on Shelley's instructions, did send copies to Leigh Hunt, Godwin, Hogg, Peacock, Keats, Thomas Moore, Horace Smith, and Byron. The 100 copies of 'Epipsychidion' were printed to be sold at two shillings, and the author's name was kept a secret. The poem did not arouse much comment. 'Adonais' was printed at Pisa where Shelley could oversee the proofing and printing. As T. J. Wise pointed out, the poem received much more care than any of Shelley's other books. It sold for 3s. 6d., and as late as 1824 a copy could be purchased for the same price.

As the publication figures indicate, Shelley's poems had little chance for wide-spread public success. Printed in relatively small editions,

#### INTRODUCTION

usually at great distance from the author, published by a bookseller who feared, rightfully so, prosecution, and much abused by the leading periodicals and journals, Shelley's poetry clearly had a limited circulation in England and few opportunities to reach a larger audience than those already committed to the author or his principles.

Given the inevitable time lapse between publication in England and critical response in America, Shelley seems to have fared somewhat better among his American near-contemporaries. To be sure, Thoreau apparently ignored him and Emerson questioned whether Shelley was a poet.<sup>9</sup> But Margaret Fuller Ossoli repeatedly sought to interest Emerson in Shelley, and Hawthorne employed the figure of Shelley in two short stories which appeared in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Nos 99, 100).

In light of the scorn and ire heaped on Shelley in the English press, the sympathy of American periodicals for him, for his poetry, and for his political and social ideas testifies to the vitality and vision of American men of letters. Just as political persuasion influenced English opinion, undoubtedly American critics saw Shelley as a fellow-traveler, a reformer with the spirit of America, and a spokesman for the ideals and aspirations that had already turned the essentially mercenary nature of the revolution of 1776 into a mythic liberation of Prometheus on the national level. Why these critics were not threatened by the popular accounts of Shelley's supposed immorality is a conundrum, but it is interesting to note that most American estimates touch lightly on Shelley's personal life. During his lifetime, Shelley was, however, little recognized in America. Julia Power says that the very first mention of Shelley in any work published in America was in the American edition of Leigh Hunt's *Foliage*, which contained two sonnets on the poet and was dedicated to him.<sup>10</sup> Shelley's work was first noticed in the *Belles-Lettres Repository and Monthly Magazine* for March 1, 1820, but the first American criticism of Shelley was published in the *American Atheneum* for September 1, 1821.<sup>11</sup>

The publisher of Shelley's *Queen Mab* has been indicted by the Society for the suppression of Vice. It is dreadful to think that for the chance for a miserable pecuniary profit, any man would become the active agent to disseminate principles so subversive to the happiness of society.

However, the often favorable reaction of the American press to Shelley was forecast in July 1820 when *The Literary and Scientific Repository* published a selection of excerpts from *The Quarterly Review*, Black-

## INTRODUCTION

*wood's* and *The New Monthly* so arranged as to place Shelley in the best light.

This is not to imply, however, that American response was primarily adulation and praise. In all sections of the country, as Shelley's life and work became better known, he stirred controversy, and in the second quarter of the century, leading periodicals in New England, the Middle States, and the South, carried significant and often controversial articles on Shelley. In the North, *The Literary Journal and Weekly Register of Science and the Arts* for January 11, 1834, published an original and appreciative criticism. The *Yale Literary Magazine* (1839-40) also praised him highly. One of the most thorough reviews was written by Orestes Brownson for his *Boston Quarterly Review* (No. 94) for October 1841, but the most exciting notices in the North, if not the best criticism, occurred in the verbal battle between Emerson and Andrews Norton. Since the real issue was orthodoxy versus liberalism, for Andrews Norton Shelley represented the way the new morality was whittling away at the very foundations of true religion. The original article which upset Norton was published in the *Western Messenger* for February 1837, but the controversy grew out of Emerson's now famous Divinity School Address. Nevertheless sides were drawn and Shelley's poetry became the issue. While the controversy produced little significant criticism it does illustrate feelings about Shelley at this period, and the drift of critical thought.

In the Middle States a series of important articles kept Shelley's name before the reading public. Journals of differing quality commented on him, including *Godey's Lady's Book* which published a verse tribute in May of 1831. As early as 1828, the *Philadelphia Monthly Magazine* (No. 81) noted that Shelley was a misunderstood man, but a poet without merit and without any hope of eventual popularity.<sup>12</sup> By 1836, however, the leading Philadelphia magazine, the *American Quarterly Review*, (No. 87) thought Shelley, Wordsworth, and Byron the three greatest poets of the century.<sup>13</sup> In New York a similar division of opinion existed, but critics on the whole were favorable. The *New York Literary Gazette and Phi Beta Kappa Repository* (No. 80) published in 1825-6 the very earliest American criticism devoted entirely to Shelley. While the article begins negatively, on the whole the reviewer applauds Shelley and asserts he was superior to all the poets of his age.<sup>14</sup> Another sympathetic but even more significant critical statement was published by Parke Godwin in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (No. 96) for December 1843. Clearly Godwin's social

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views coincided with those of Shelley, but he is also an astute critic, especially in his discussions of *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps because literary and intellectual trends seemed to have traveled slowly in the South, Shelley and other Romantics did not receive much attention in southern journals until the 1840s. By the fifth decade of the century the *Southern Literary Messenger* had become as important as northern magazines, and it devoted a considerable number of articles to Shelley. H. T. Tuckerman's article, on the occasion of the publication of Shelley's *Prose Works* in 1840 is representative of an enlightened perspective,<sup>16</sup> but by no means indicates universal acceptance (No. 92), for in December of 1840 'A Friend of Virtue' wrote refuting Tuckerman and attacking Shelley on moral and religious grounds.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the 1840s, however, the *Southern Literary Messenger* published articles, mostly favorable and often written by northerners, praising Shelley and celebrating his genius. Although the American press was anything but niggardly in its attention to Shelley, the fact remains that it was in England that the great and powerful reviews flourished. There an English poet's reputation would be made and it was in the pages of *The Quarterly*, *Blackwood's*, *The Edinburgh*, and *The London* that Shelley sought acceptance.

### Juvenalia

Unlike Alexander Pope who saw the wisdom of either destroying his early verse or rewriting it at a later date when maturity had overcome youthful indulgence, Shelley published a volume of verse, *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*, two romances, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, and one prose essay, *The Necessity of Atheism*, by the age of twenty. To a twentieth-century reader little in these pieces commends them. Although the more prestigious *Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review* did not comment on Shelley's early work, the more popular but still respectable journals such as *The British Critic* and *The Critical Review* took up the volumes and reviewed them in some detail.

Given the political unrest and the fear for public morality that characterized the second decade of the nineteenth century, the reviewers' attacks are almost predictable. The anonymous writer for *The Anti-Jacobin Review* (No. 7) raised the battle flag and spoke for other reviewers as well in his comments on *St. Irvyne or the Rosicrucian* (1811). It is the critics' duty 'to mark every deviation from religious and moral principle with strong reprobation; as well as to deter

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readers from wasting their time in the perusal of unprofitable and vicious productions, as to check silly and licentious writers at an early period of their literary career.' One year earlier the reviewer for *The Critical Review* (No. 5) had cudged Shelley on the same grounds for *Zastrozzi: A Romance* (1810). The style and story are so contemptible, he says, that the romance would have passed unnoticed 'had not our indignation been excited by the open and bare-faced immorality and grossness displayed throughout.' The character of *Zastrozzi* is 'one of the most savage and improbable demons that ever issued from a diseased brain.' Such trash, the reviewer continues, 'is fit only for the inmates of a brothel.'

Notwithstanding the censures for immorality and corruption of public morals, the criticisms are not motivated entirely by political prejudice and puritanical morality. Most of the critics denounce the gothic element recurrent in all three of Shelley's youthful works: the 'Victor and Cazire' volume, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. The writer for *The Literary Panorama* (No. 1) noted that 'modern poets are the most unhappy of men! Their imaginations are perpetually haunted with terrors.' While others bask in the sun, 'these votaries of the Muse of misery see nothing but glooms, and listen to the pealing thunder.' Similarly, although the anonymous reviewer for *The Critical Review* (No. 5) found *Zastrozzi* objectionable primarily on moral grounds, he too concluded that 'not all his "scintillated eyes," his "battling emotions," his "frigorific torpidity of despair," nor his "Lethean torpor" can save Shelley from infamy.'

*The British Critic* (No. 6) quoted the opening paragraph of *St. Irvyne: or the Rosicrucian* 'believing that some readers will be satisfied and proceed no further.' Those who do will find 'descriptions wilder than are to be found in Radcliffe, and a tale more extravagant than the *St. Leon* of Godwin.' *The Literary Panorama* of February 1811 sarcastically noted the similarities with the gothic horror novels by excerpting sections from *St. Irvyne* under headings such as 'How to Begin a Romance, A.D. 1811' and 'How to End a Romance, A.D. 1811.'<sup>18</sup> In January of 1812 *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* (No. 7) continued to contrast *Zastrozzi* with Ann Radcliffe's work. The reviewer claims that if the title page had not told him the author was a gentleman, 'a freshman, of course, we should certainly have ascribed it to some "Miss" in her teens; who, having read the beautiful and truly poetic descriptions, in the unrivalled romances of Mrs. Radcliffe [sic], imagined that to admire the writings of that lady, and to imitate her

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style were one and the same thing.' Shelley's youthful interest in the gothic element persisted throughout his life, and eventually led his wife Mary to write the classic horror tale, *Frankenstein*.

Although these critics do not agree about the merits of the horror romance as a genre (the *Anti-Jacobin* reviewer is more sympathetic than *The British Critic*), both reviewers agree that Shelley's efforts are inferior to Ann Radcliffe's. Their reasons are similar and still stand today. 'Here we have *description run mad*,' says the *Anti-Jacobin* reviewer, 'every uncouth epithet, every wild expression, which either the lexicographer could supply, or the disordered imagination of the romance-writer suggest, has been pressed into the service of "the Rosicmeian" [sic].'

The same reviewer also censured Shelley's attempts to heighten the horror by intensifying adjectives describing the action. 'Woe and terror are heightened by the expressions used to describe them. Heroes and heroines are not merely distressed and terrified, they are "en-anguished" and "enhorred".' Such criticisms are more than a tally of violations of a debased eighteenth-century critical principle of decorum. Both here and in the other early reviews the critics speak from a more objective standard than mere taste and fashion. Their objections are those of any discerning reader to the youthful and indiscriminate use of adjectives rather than strong verbs and concrete nouns.

The plots and characterization are also the subject of criticism. The reviewer for *The Critical Review* (No. 5) noted that characters are introduced into the narrative of *Zastrozzi* without preparation or motivation, and he lists a series of improbabilities and absurdities. One important exception to this criticism stands out. The reviewer for *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (No. 4) thought *Zastrozzi* a 'well-told tale of horror;', and 'so artfully conducted that the reader cannot easily anticipate the denouement.' He concludes, however, that the Continental setting is appropriate because the characters and vices which are useful in the narrative, 'thank God, are not to be found in this country.'

Several reviewers from this early period object to Shelley's failures to observe the rules of grammar. The significance of the criticism is uncertain. Certainly all reviewers at all times find it difficult to distinguish between the ignorance of freshmen and the genius of Faulkner. The reviewer for *The Anti-Jacobin*, (No. 7), in a remark too reminiscent of the classroom, comments sarcastically: 'From one who, disdaining the common forms and modes of language, aims at sublimity both of thought and expression, a slavish subjection to the vulgar restrictions of

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grammar . . . cannot reasonably be extracted.' Still, some of the examples cited by these early reviewers are violations of normal and natural word order and the reviewers feel they lack the fire of genuine poetic expression. Even these apparently cavilling remarks show that the critics had a more balanced and sane judgment of Shelley's early literary output than the casual readers of these reviewers and the repeaters of literary gossip have led us to believe.

### *Queen Mab*

*Queen Mab*, the first product of Shelley's maturing poetic genius, was written in 1812 and 1813 and privately printed by Shelley in an edition of 250 copies. Since only 70 copies had been disposed of when Richard Carlile bought the remaining stock in December of 1822, circulation of the poem was certainly minimal.<sup>19</sup> The one major contemporary notice of the volume appeared in *The Theological Inquirer or Polemical Magazine* (No. 11) in an article signed F., whom Newman Ivey White tentatively identified as Sir Ronald Crawford Ferguson, a liberal and well-known supporter of all movements toward granting more civil and religious liberty.<sup>20</sup> This notice, in which Shelley was almost certainly involved, carefully avoids giving any clue to the author's identity, but instead quotes profusely from the poem, undoubtedly hoping that the reader of the review would be stimulated to purchase a copy although the reviewer, in a patently absurd story, purports to have purchased his copies on the Continent since it is 'too bold a production to issue from the British press.'

The anonymous reviewer is content to praise the poem in general terms, asserting that the poem is filled with 'sublime descriptions,' 'rapturous gratulation,' and 'fanciful description.' Clearly the author's purpose is to stimulate discussion, and his devices for doing so are time-honored and successful. He apologizes for not proving that the poet is a philosopher of the first rank, but he cannot do so because of 'the boldness of his sentiments, which, in his country, where the freedom of the press is little more than an empty name, it would be hazardous to disseminate.' In a short one-sentence paragraph he calls attention to Shelley's notes to the poem, by asserting that it is not part of his plan to mention 'the copious and elegant notes to the poem.' These notes were, of course, to bear the brunt of the reviewers' attacks a decade later.<sup>21</sup>

In 1821, eight years later, a pirated edition of the poem was printed, to which Shelley objected because he thought the work immature.

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Probably because the scandal of Shelley's personal life had been aired so publicly, this later edition received a number of critical notices. They are noteworthy, for in spite of the publicity and rumors surrounding Shelley, the critics are almost unanimous in their praise of Shelley's genius. The liberal journal, *The London Magazine and Theatrical Inquisitor* (No. 13) refuses to meddle in either the private scandal or the speculative ideas in the poem. 'If his [Shelley's] opinions are palpably absurd and false, they must fall by their own absurdity and falsehood.' The reviewer believes that Barry Cornwall is more tender and delicate than Shelley, and Keats and Coleridge of more fertile imagination, but he insists that Shelley is a man of genius.

This recognition of Shelley's talent was even extended by *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres* (No. 14), a magazine which consistently attacked Shelley on other points. While the reviewer regrets Shelley's ideas, he insists Shelley's genius is 'doubtless of a high order.' In fact, in the reviewer's judgment, Shelley is not inferior to Southey. At one point he says, 'This is genuine poetry.' This praise of Shelley by the conservative *Literary Gazette* is particularly noteworthy when even the liberal weekly, *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (No. 16) thought Shelley furnished 'one of the most striking and melancholy instances of the perversion, or rather prostitution of genius, that we ever met with.' Among these notices only *The Monthly Magazine and British Register* (No. 15) took exception. Since the magazine was mildly radical, the reviewer feared that Shelley was being lured into a trap. Even *The Quarterly Review* had been praising his genius as of the highest order. Either the Establishment was laying a plot 'or our Critics are a set of dunces, who cannot distinguish between sublimity and bombast,—between poetry and "prose run mad".'

These reviewers also note a characteristic of Shelley's poetry which all students of Shelley since have commented on: that much of the strength and beauty of his poetry stems from the firmness and fervency of his convictions. Both the disillusioned and disinterested readers and the committed revolutionary have noted this quality in Shelley's writings. The reviewer in *The London Magazine and Theatrical Inquisitor* (No. 13) says,

We apprehend, indeed, that the peculiar charm of Shelley's writing is derived from that complete conviction which he evidently entertains of the justness and importance of all he asserts. This feeling, whether a man's opinions be right or wrong, communicates a force and pointedness to diction, and an interest to

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composition, which mere labour can never bestow. All Mr. Shelley's thoughts are feelings.

And in an otherwise stern review, *The Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* (No. 16) reflects that Shelley must have a 'hell in his own conscience, but a man of Mr. Shelley's cultivated mind, cannot but possess strong feelings.'

In the midst of this clear recognition of Shelley's genius and the sincerity of his convictions, nearly all of the reviewers fear that *Queen Mab* undermines the very structure and fabric of all social institutions including marriage, religion, family, and the parliamentary system. *The London Magazine* (No. 13) exhorted Shelley to take up a task truly worthy of his talents, and the reviewer for *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres* (No. 14) so feared Shelley's supernatural origins that like Othello viewing Iago, he expected to see a cloven hoof.

we asked a friend who had seen this individual [Shelley], to describe him to us—as if a cloven foot, or horn, or flames from the mouth, must have marked the external appearance of so bitter an enemy to mankind.

One of the more interesting and more bitter responses to *Queen Mab* is an anonymous volume announced by William Clark in *The Literary Chronicle* as *An Answer to Queen Mab*.<sup>22</sup> In Clark's trial for publishing *Queen Mab*, he cited the pamphlet for his defense, arguing that he had not intended to propagate Shelley's ideas, and in some respects the book may have been written with this purpose in mind. The first chapter takes issue with Shelley's ideas on marriage and the legitimate reasons for dissolving a marriage. The anonymous author (who may be William Johnson Fox) begins with two assumptions: a man will roam if not forcibly held to one spot and, secondly, a woman is inherently weak and unable to take care of herself. 'Men may be often false;—may often forget the vows sworn at the altar, and venture to taste "forbidden fruits:" but to make falsehood a creed, villainy a profession, and injustice a moral duty, is a measure of guilt, for which language has no adequate expression.'<sup>23</sup> He further defines the problem:<sup>24</sup>

Man sighs, vows and betrays:—woman believes, confides, and is undone. The treasure is rifled; and the robber hastes on the high-road of pleasure to make other victims. The institution of marriage *checks*, though it does not eradicate this. It takes care, at least, that part of the female sex shall be, in some degree, protected from the caprice of the *lords* of creation.

Although the author does point out that part of the dilemma arises because the laws obviously favor men, still 'woman can never be

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raised upon the stage of this bustling world, into an equality with man. . . . Women have no intuitive knowledge to discover the truth of affection, from its dissembled counterfeit. Prone to believe "what seems but fair," how are they to detect the guile that lurks beneath the specious promise of the flatters' tongue!"<sup>25</sup>

In the second chapter the difficulty of Shelley's purported atheism is neatly solved by showing that Shelley has merely substituted Necessity for God. All of the attributes which Alexander Pope attributed to God Shelley attributes to Necessity. Shelley's only error is his assigning attitudes and characteristics to God which are really human aberrations and deviations. Therefore the supposed atheism of Shelley is really a deep and abiding faith under another name.

What stands out in these reviews of Shelley's first poem which promised even better things to come is that these first critics, men who were beset by political, religious, and personal prejudice and who lived in a milieu which expected politics and religion to take precedence over critical taste, found and praised in Shelley's poetry the qualities and virtues which later and perhaps more objective critics have also noticed. Even when motivated by personal preservation, as in William Clark's publication of *A Response to Queen Mab*, there is a willingness to deal with the issues and ideas, although a longer perspective has decided in Shelley's favor rather than the critics'.

### *Alastor*

Shelley wrote *Alastor, or, The Spirit of Solitude, and Other Poems* in 1815. After Shelley had printed 250 copies at his own expense, the volume was published in 1816 by Baldwin, Cradock & Joy and Carpenter & Son. Following upon the rather auspicious earlier reviewers, the notices of this volume are disappointing on several grounds. None of the reviewers pays particular attention to the shorter lyrics although several, including 'Mutability,' are among those most frequently anthologized today. Moreover, with several noticeable exceptions even the comments on *Alastor*, the title poem, reveal little critical taste. Although the conservative *Monthly Review* (No. 20) found 'some beautiful imagery and poetical expressions,' the 'sublime obscurity' of the poems is explained by a poem addressed to Wordsworth which explains 'in what school the author had formed his taste.' The sarcastic reviewer for *The British Critic* (No. 21) complains because he is 'condemned to pore over much profound and prosing stupidity.' He is, therefore, 'not a little delighted with the nonsense

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which mounts, which rises, which spurns the earth, and all its dull realities; we love to fly with our author to a silent nook.'

In spite of its conservative bias, *The Eclectic Review* (No. 22) again affirmed Shelley's genius and noted his talent for descriptive poetry. But the reviewer's analysis of the character of *Alastor*, while couched in the language and jargon of the eighteenth century, and reflecting the moralistic biases of a previous age, nevertheless coincides with the darker visions of Romantic poetry as explained by twentieth-century critics like Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom.<sup>26</sup> The reviewer underlines Shelley's interest in the imagination. 'The poem is adapted to show the dangerous, the fatal tendency of that morbid ascendancy of the imagination over the other faculties.' When the imagination achieves this ascendancy the mind is unable to give adequate attention to the 'work-day' life and the discharging of social duties. The poem 'exhibits the utter uselessness of imagination, when wholly undisciplined, and selfishly employed for the mere purposes of intellectual luxury,' without reference to moral ends. The poem has 'glitter without warmth, succession without progress, excitement without purpose and a search which terminates in annihilation.' This unexpected recognition of the crisis precipitated by the inward quest of all Romantic poets from Blake to Yeats strikes a peculiarly modern chord, although one wishes the critic were less blind to the stimuli for such a journey.

Leigh Hunt began his long and loyal defense of Shelley in December 1816 and January 1817 with two brief notices in *The Examiner* (No. 23). Hunt's efforts on Shelley's behalf were to continue long after the poet's death, and in these notices he wisely seeks to give Shelley a sympathetic reading rather than to be an obvious champion. In the December article he discusses Shelley along with Reynolds and Keats as supposed representatives of a new school of poetry, a view which, he says, is wrong. These poets are really the native stream of English poetry, for they have rejected the influence of the French. Their object is 'to restore the same love of Nature, and of *thinking* instead of mere *talking*, which formerly rendered us real poets, and not mere versifying wits, and bead-rollers of couplets.'

Among the reviews of *Alastor*, the most important and most friendly appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (No. 24), and may have been written by John Gibson Lockhart. According to a letter Shelley wrote on December 15, 1819 to Charles Ollier from Florence, he was glad 'to see the *Quarterly* cut up, and that by one of their own people.'<sup>27</sup> Shelley, perhaps with false modesty, says the 'praise

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would have given me more pleasure if it had been less excessive,' and indeed the reviewer does defend Shelley vigorously. The poet has either been 'entirely overlooked, or slightly noticed, or grossly abused.' Although the short poems are vague and obscure and although Shelley is enamoured of dreams of death ('he loves to strike his harp among the tombs'), the poet is 'destined to achieve great things in poetry.' He continues, 'there is the light of poetry even in the darkness of Shelley's imagination.'

The reviewer's finest praise comes as he damns *The Quarterly Review* for its earlier review of *The Revolt of Islam*. Shelley has been 'infamously and stupidly treated in *The Quarterly Review*.' If the prose of *The Quarterly*'s reviewer is compared with Shelley's poetry, one thinks not of 'Satan reproving Sin,' but 'of a dunce rating a man of genius.' Either the *Quarterly* critic is unable to recognize genius or he is a liar. If the first, he ought not to write; if the latter, he is guilty of the very crime of which he accuses Shelley.

In spite of the limited notices and the personal, political, and social biases of the reviewers, to the contemporary ear the reviewers of the *Alastor* volume, while unfair in many respects, reflect a broader spectrum of opinion and a profounder understanding of Shelley's poetry than we might expect. The critics are not totally blind to Shelley's genius, and occasionally, as in *The Eclectic Review* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, their comments point the way that twentieth-century criticism would take.

#### *The Revolt of Islam*

*The Revolt of Islam*, a revision of an earlier poem *Laon and Cythna* which had been written in 1817 while Shelley was living at Great Marlow, appeared in 1818 after Shelley finally agreed to the changes which his publisher Ollier demanded. Although both Shelley and Hunt insisted that only two or three copies of the original poem had been sold, many more than these exist and it was a copy of the original which *The Quarterly Review* saw and reviewed. The poem contains Shelley's views on the state of English society, the necessity for reform, and suggestions for how such a revolution ought to be carried out—unselfishly and bloodlessly—in marked contrast to the French Revolution.

The vehemence of the critical notice which the volume received reflects the close literary and personal ties between Leigh Hunt and Shelley. Since Hunt and his brother John had been imprisoned for

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slandering the Prince Regent, George IV, the Tory reviews naturally pronounced Shelley guilty by association. Before *The Revolt of Islam* had appeared, *Blackwood's Magazine* (No. 26), in an article on the 'Cockney School,' had attacked Hunt viciously:

His poetry is that of a man who has kept company with kept-mistresses. He talks indelicately like a tea-sipping milliner girl. Some excuse for him might have been, had he been hurried away by imagination or passion. But with him indecency is a disease, and he speaks unclean things from perfect inanition. The very concubine of so impure a wretch as Leigh Hunt would be pitied, but alas! for the wife of such a husband! For him there is no charm in simple seduction; and he gloats over it only when accompanied with adultery and incest.

The fact that Hunt knew Shelley personally and praised him, automatically drew the fire of the conservative reviewers.

The critical exchange between Hunt's *The Examiner* and the conservative reviews centred primarily on Shelley's political and social ideas. Both sides, however, affirmed Shelley's genius again. *Blackwood's* (No. 26) repeated its attack on Hunt and Keats as members of the Cockney School who as poets are 'worthy of sheer and instant contempt.' Unfortunately their views have 'been taken up by one [Shelley], of whom it is far more seriously, and deeply, and lamentably unworthy.' But 'his genius is due its praise.' In spite of his weakness as a philosopher, Shelley, as a poet, 'is strong, nervous, original; well entitled to take his place near to the great creative masters.' In a final thrust, malicious, condescending and ill-tempered, the reviewer says that Shelley is 'a scholar, a gentleman, and a poet; and he must therefore despise from his soul the only eulogies to which he has hitherto been accustomed—paragraphs from *The Examiner* and sonnets from Johnny Keats.' In addition, *The Monthly Review* (No. 27) lamented 'the waste of so much capability of better things.'

About the poetry itself, critical opinion is divided. Leigh Hunt in *The Examiner* praised the deep sentiments of the poem, the grandeur of its imagery, and the sweet and noble versification, 'like the placid playing of a great organ.' Hunt did take exception to the sameness and frequency of sea images and metaphors. The book will not appeal to humanity, he says, because Shelley does not appeal 'through the medium of its [humanity's] common knowledge.' *Blackwood's* (No. 26) is generous in its praise but not uncritical, for 'the author has composed his poem in much haste, and he has inadvertently left many detached parts, both of his story and his allusion, to be made out as the reader

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best can, from very inadequate data.' The reviewer praises Shelley for 'having poured over his narrative a very rare strength and abundance of poetic imagery and feeling—of having steeped every word in the essence of his inspiration.'

John Taylor Coleridge, in *The Quarterly Review* (No. 28), admitted that the poem is 'not without beautiful passages, that the language is in general free from errors of taste, and the versification smooth and harmonious.' He regrets that Shelley is an 'inspiring imitator' and, in a probable reference to Wordsworth, commiserates with 'another mountain poet' from whom Shelley borrows and to 'whose religious mind it must be a matter . . . of perpetual sorrow to see the philosophy which comes pure and holy from his pen, degraded and perverted.' Only *The Monthly Review* (No. 27) found no redeeming poetic value in *The Revolt of Islam*. According to its reviewer, Shelley's 'command of language is so thoroughly abused as to become a mere snare for loose and unmeaning expression; and his facility of writing, even in Spenser's stanza, leads him into a licentiousness of rhythm and of rhyme that is truly contemptible.' Except for this reviewer, who concludes epigrammatically, 'he [Shelley] goes on rhyming without reason, and reasoning without rhyme,' the other reviewers consistently praise Shelley's genius and his poetic achievement, although they usually find his philosophy either pernicious or valueless or both.

The clash between Shelley's admirers, especially Leigh Hunt, and his adversaries over *The Revolt of Islam* has a familiar ring, not only to those knowledgeable in nineteenth-century literary criticism, but also to all who have listened to both sides in the perennial debates between reformers and defenders of the status quo. *Blackwood's* and *The Quarterly Review* sound the conservative strain. Shelley is naïve, youthful, idealistic. He too easily despairs and is too ready to correct. His solutions are simplistic because his understanding of the issues is facile and simple-minded. Shelley suggests that love, properly employed, will go far toward resolving the social, political, and religious evils of his day. But Coleridge says in *The Quarterly Review*, 'Love is a wide word with many significations, and we are at a loss as to which of them he would have it now bear. We are loath to understand it in its lowest sense, though we believe that as to the issue this would be the correctest mode of interpreting it.' Still Shelley cannot possibly mean it in its highest sense. 'He does not mean that love, which is the fulfilling of the law, and which walks after the commandments, for he would erase the Decalogue and every other code of laws.'

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Shelley's adversaries, the conservatives, insist that he has undermined the very fabric of English society, the law, the family, and the Church. Coleridge says, 'As far as in him lay, he has loosened the hold of our protecting laws, and sapped the principles of our venerable polity; he has invaded the purity and chilled the unsuspecting ardour of our fireside intimacies: he has slandered, ridiculed and blasphemed our holy religion.' Coleridge's male chauvinism is revealed in his comments on Shelley's supposed naïveté about the process for effecting change. He attacks the figure of Cythna who 'by her own eloquence rouses all of her own sex to assert their liberty and independence; this perhaps was no difficult task; a female tongue in such a cause may be supposed to have spoken fluently at least, and to have a willing audience.'

Leigh Hunt's defense is worth quoting, for he anticipates the attacks of Shelley's critics before they occur and those of all who are satisfied with the present way of the world. In a passage both eloquent and profound, he says:

They say it is impossible the world should alter; and yet it has often altered. They say it is impossible, at any rate, it should mend; yet people are no longer burnt at the stake . . . But one man,—they say—what can one man do? Let a glorious living person answer,—let Clarkson answer, who sitting down in his youth by a road-side, thought upon the horrors of the Slave Trade, and vowed he would dedicate his life to endeavour at overthrowing it. He was laughed at; he was violently opposed; he was called presumptuous and even irreligious; he was thought out of his senses; he made a noble sacrifice of his own health and strength; and he has *lived* to see the Slave Trade . . . made a Felony.

Hunt's defense in *The Examiner* of 1818 and 1819 is cogent, reasoned, and principled (Nos 25 and 29). He rightly tries to show that Shelley seeks to expose injustice, violence, and selfishness wherever they exist and however disguised. Hunt's argument rests on the premise that, rather than opposing religion and undermining the fabric of society, Shelley is a proponent of a true Christianity, and that he is a genuine follower of Christ, a stalwart defender of the rights and privileges of all men against those who would abridge the rights of the weak and the defenseless. In the October 3, 1819 *Examiner* he says, 'we have no hesitation in saying that the moral spirit of his philosophy approaches infinitely nearer to that Christian benevolence so much preached and so little practised, than any the most orthodox dogmas ever published.'

These differences are not easily resolved. Shelley's unabated idealism, his affirmation of the principle of love, his optimism about man's ability to reform himself stand in sharp contrast to the conservatives'

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realism, their faith in the system, and their resistance to a change which does not carry with it a guarantee of a better world. The gap between Shelley and his public had grown to a chasm. In spite of Leigh Hunt's masterful defense, the lines were clearly drawn and not until after Shelley's death, when most of his proposals for reform were at least legal realities, would Shelley's reputation be restored.

### *Rosalind and Helen*

In 1818 Shelley completed the title poem for the volume *Rosalind and Helen, with Other Poems* which appeared in 1819. The title poem, begun in 1817, recounts the morbid and sorrowful tales of two women, Rosalind and Helen, disappointed in love, one who married a miser after learning her lover was her brother, and the second the mistress of a now dead 'noble Peer.' The exchange of confidences between Rosalind and Helen provides Shelley with an opportunity to repeat his attacks on the greedy and selfish clergy, the ill effects of superstition and religion, the opportunities the law provides for outwitting innocent women, and the beauties of marriage without benefit of clergy. *Blackwood's* (No. 32) commented: 'God knows there is enough of evil and of guilt in this world, without our seeking to raise up such hideous and unnatural phantasms of wickedness.' In general, the reviewers reiterate their attacks on Shelley's doctrines, adding little new to their earlier arguments. *The Commercial Chronicle's* attack (No. 31) is typical. 'The poets of this school have the original merit of conceiving that the higher emotions of the heart are to be roused in their highest degree by deformity, physical and moral; they have found out a new source of the sublime—disgust; and with them the more sickening the circumstance, the more exquisite the sensibility.'

Still the reviewers insist that Shelley is a true poet and *Rosalind and Helen*, in the words from *Blackwood's*, 'breathe throughout strong feeling, and strong passion, and strong imagination.' And *The Monthly Review* (No. 33) regretted 'to see so considerable a portion of real genius wasted in merely desultory fires.' Several of the reviewers seek to convince the reader of Shelley's genius by comparing him with other popularly acclaimed poets. Leigh Hunt, always Shelley's defender, compared *Rosalind and Helen* with Wordsworth's 'Peter Bell' (*The Examiner*, May 9, 1819).

The object of Mr. Wordsworth's administrations of melancholy is to make men timid, servile, and (considering his religion) selfish;—that of Mr. Shelley's, to render them fearless, independent, affectionate, infinitely social. . . . The Poet of

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the Lakes always carries his egotism and 'saving knowledge' about with him, and unless he has the settlement of the matter, will go in a pet and plant himself by the side of the oldest tyrannies and slaveries;—our Cosmopolite-Poet would evidently die with pleasure to all personal identity, could he but see his fellow-creatures reasonable and happy. . . . But comparisons are never so odious, as when they serve to contrast two spirits who ought to have agreed.

The reviewer in *Blackwood's* (No. 32) thought that not even Byron had written lines superior to those describing the effect of Lionel's death on Helen. He regrets that Shelley has had limited circulation, since his poetry equals that of Barry Cornwall, a truly astounding comparison, for *The Literary Gazette* had included Cornwall in the 'Bread and Milk School' of poetry. Referring back to *The Revolt of Islam*, he says Shelley approaches more nearly to Scott and Byron than any of their contemporaries. Moreover, in this last volume Shelley equals the tenderness and pathos of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Clearly, both Wilson and Hunt sought to enhance Shelley's fortunes and his reputation through associating him with established figures like the much-condemned Byron and the already revered Wordsworth.

Although the reviewers fail to establish or enunciate a standard for criticizing poetry and they are often content with attacking Shelley's views, they recognize Shelley's genius and also his weaknesses. For example, in addition to the title poem, *Rosalind and Helen* contained three of Shelley's best-known poems, 'Ozymandias,' 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and 'Lines Written among the Euganean Hills.' While only the last of these three received notice in the reviews, both *The Examiner* (No. 30) and the generally critical *Monthly Review* (No. 33) praised 'Lines'. Hunt felt that 'parts of the poem are among the grandest if not the deepest that Mr. Shelley has produced, with a stately stepping in measure,' and both journals singled out Shelley's compliment to Lord Byron for praise (lines 167-265), lines which, according to Forman, may have been an afterthought.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, John Wilson (*Blackwood's*, No. 32), while anxious to praise Shelley's powers, also noted Shelley had borrowed heavily from Godwin and thus Shelley's 'opinions carry no authority along with them to others. . . . The finer essence of his poetry never penetrates them—the hues of his imagination never clothes [sic] them with attractive beauty. The cold, bald, clumsy, and lifeless parts of this poem are those in which he obtrudes upon us his contemptible and long-expected dogmas.'

The praise for 'Lines Written among the Euganean Hills' and such

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insights as these by John Wilson show how time has verified the verdict of Shelley's early critics even without the formal statement of literary standards.

### *The Cenci*

The year 1819 was, indeed, Shelley's 'annus mirabilis,' for he suffered much, both personally in the death of his son William, who followed his sister Clara to the grave, and politically in the so-called Manchester massacre, and he also produced his two most important large-scale works, *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*. Of the two only *The Cenci* was intended for the stage. Although Shelley pointed out, in the introduction, the difficulties inherent in producing the play ('This story of the Cenci is indeed eminently fearful and monstrous: anything like a dry exhibition of it on the stage would be insupportable.'), he hoped that Covent Garden would agree to stage it. In a letter to Peacock (July 1819) Shelley said that the 'principal character Beatrice is precisely fitted for Miss O'Neil, & it might even seem to have been written for her—(God forbid that I shd. see her play it—it wd. tear my nerves to pieces) and in all respects it is fitted only for Covent Garden. The chief male character I confess I should be very unwilling that any one but Kean shd. play—that is impossible, & I must be contented with an inferior actor.'<sup>29</sup>

The play is not, of course, very stageworthy, although Shelley thought it compared favorably with Coleridge's *Remorse* (which is not a very remarkable play either). Again to Peacock (July 1819), Shelley wrote, 'I am strongly inclined . . . that as a composition it is certainly not inferior to any of the modern plays that have been acted, with the exception of *Remorse*.'<sup>30</sup> Both plays were generated by the general enthusiasm and excitement that accompanied the nineteenth-century rediscovery of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists. The numerous stagings and interpretations of Shakespeare sparked unusual interest in the theatre on the part of other Romantic poets such as Keats (*King Otho*) and even the Victorians. Both Tennyson and Browning tried their hand at the stage, but neither succeeded any better than Coleridge and Shelley.

The reasons for the low estate of nineteenth-century drama are probably legion. The immense size of the newer theatres necessarily led to disaster and limited originality, although the effort of imitating Shakespeare undoubtedly encouraged bombast and pretentious acting. The rebuilt Covent Garden of 1808 seated 3,000 and the new Drury

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Lane, built in 1812, held even more. Sir John Vanbrugh, architect of Blenheim Palace, designed the Haymarket, so sacrificing acoustics to grandeur that Colley Cibber damned its 'extraordinary, and superfluous Space' in his 'Apology' (1740). Perhaps even more important for the serious dramatist is the taste of the audience, and in the nineteenth century the mob which preferred splendor, spectacle, and burlesque held sway. In general the best poets avoided the stage altogether except when pressed by men like Charles Macready who hoped that Elizabethan imitations like Browning's *Strafford* (1837) would close the gap between the public and serious theatre.

It was probably inevitable that Shelley would fail as a dramatist, for unlike Keats, he was not even a regular theatre attender. He knew nearly nothing about stagecraft, and it is perhaps a mark of his genius that *The Cenci* is stageable at all. (The play was first performed by the Shelley Society in 1886.) As Shelley himself later realized and wrote to John Gisborne on October 22, 1821, 'You might as well go to a ginshop for a leg of mutton, as expect anything human or earthly from me.'<sup>31</sup> As a drama, *The Cenci* fails on this very point. Even the early reviewers, in addition to their horror about the action itself, noted that the play failed to dramatize real people and real passions, but rather provided an opportunity for two characters to carry on a dialogue of ideas.

Reviewers both sympathetic and hostile to Shelley found the plot line of *The Cenci* objectionable. In 1818 Shelley read the story of Count Cenci, who gloats over the murder of two sons, and who forces incestuous relationships on his daughter Beatrice, and he found the tale a ready vehicle for his customary attacks on the institutionalization of evil in the church and society. Greed supposedly motivates both the Count and the Church, which profits from the Count's indemnities while he lives and which will inherit the family wealth after the execution of Beatrice and her helpers in the murder of her father.

In this post-Freudian age, accustomed to reels of violence, rape, and sordidness, the critical furore over the action is nearly incomprehensible. Although Leigh Hunt called *The Cenci* the 'greatest production of the day' (*The Examiner*, March 19, 1820),<sup>32</sup> most reviewers, like the writer for *The Monthly Magazine* (No. 34), were appalled by this family history 'well adapted to the death-like atmosphere, and unwholesome regions, in which Mr. Shelley's muse delights to tag its wings.' Instead of terror, Shelley only succeeds in inspiring horror and disgust. *The Literary Gazette* (No. 35) was even more offended.

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The reviewer begins, 'Of all the abominations which intellectual perversion, and poetical atheism have produced in our times, this tragedy appears to us to be the most abominable.' A fiend must have written the play, he says, 'for the entertainment of devils in hell.' He continues that 'the writer out herods Herod, and outrages possibility in his personation of villainy, by making Count Cenci a character which transforms Richard III, an Iago, a Sir Giles Overreach comparatively into angels of light.'

The thought of incest was particularly offensive, too offensive even for some reviewers to name. *The London Magazine* (No. 36) noted that Shelley 'turns from war, rapine, murder, seduction, and infidelity—the vices and calamities with the description of which our common nature and common experience permits the generality of persons to sympathize—to cull some morbid and maniac sin of rare and doubtful occurrence.' *The Monthly Review* (No. 43) could not understand why Shelley chose incest and murder for the modern stage. Such a decision was 'manifest proof of the rudeness and barbarism of a newly-born, or lately-reviewing, literature.' In the same vein, but with more attention or principles of dramatic craftsmanship, *The British Review and London Critical Journal* (No. 45) commented: 'Incestuous rape, murder, the rack, and the scaffold are not the proper materials of the tragic Muse: crimes and punishments are not in themselves dramatic, though the conflict of passions which they occasion, and from which they arise, often is so.'

Several other reviewers also criticized from more clearly enunciated principles. *The Theatrical Inquisitor and Monthly Memoir* (No. 37) drew attention to the low taste of the London theatre audience. Although 'audiences are universally the dupes of feeling and that feeling is too often the wrong one,' the contemporary London stage, he says, suffers from even worse maladies than the tastes of the mob.

The patent puppet-shows of this mighty metropolis are swayed and supplied by individuals who have no emulation but in the race of gain; rash, ignorant, and rapacious, they have rendered the stage a medium of senseless amusement, and if their sordid earnings could be secured by a parricidal sacrifice of the drama itself, we do not scruple to confess our belief that such a detestable sacrifice would be readily effected.

For this reason, the reviewer urges Shelley to give up the stage and devote his talent and energies to something else than the 'loathsome honours of play-house approbation.' A fragmentary philosophy of

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poetry undergirds the comments of the reviewer in *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register* (No. 38) who felt that *The Cenci* story was not only unfit to be told merely as historic truth but even more inappropriate for poetry. Although the imagination is able to soften sorrow and, by its mediating power, to reconcile man to the vicissitudes and brevity of life in this world, it cannot charm away the repulsive and loathsome. Since imagination cannot blend with grief of this magnitude, it only outlines the blackness of *The Cenci* more clearly and fearfully. Beauties may be thrown around such crimes and suffering, but 'as they cannot mingle with their essence they will but increase their horrors, as flowers fantastically braided round a corpse instead of lending their bloom to the cheek, render its lividness more sickening.' This theory of poetry certainly limits the power and influence of poetry, and, some would say, denies poetry its legitimate place as conveyor of man's most essential wisdom about the mysteries of the universe. Few critics today would argue that the imagination is unable to cope with the darkest events in man's individual and communal existence, but, in defense of the critic, few writers since Wordsworth have given thought to finding the 'strength which remains behind' of 'the soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering' let alone the 'years that bring the philosophic mind.' In the opinion of *The Independent or London Literary and Political Review* (No. 44), 'Improvement and innocent pleasure should be its [poetry's] aim.'

As a play, the critics agree that Shelley's language in *The Cenci* is equal to the best poetry he has written. *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (No. 36) in a series of truly perceptive comments on the Cockney School, admitted that Shelley has 'more fervid imagination and splendid talents than nine-tenths' of his companions. 'The rich yet delicate imagery that is every where scattered over it, is like the glowing splendour of the setting sun.' *The New Monthly Magazine* (No. 38) praised the diction of the play which is 'scarcely ever overloaded with imagery which the passion does not naturally create.' *The Edinburgh Monthly Review* (No. 39) thought the middle acts contained the best poetry, but the action was too loathsome to quote. In spite of these beauties, the critic felt that Shelley had not 'mastered the very difficult art of English dramatic versification.' Still, that was a trivial matter, for Shelley's 'genius is rich to overflowing in all the nobler requisites for tragic excellence, and were he to choose and manage his themes with . . . regard for the just opinion of the world, . . . he might easily and triumphantly overtop all that

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has been written during the last century for the English stage.' *The London Magazine* (No. 40) admired the 'vigorous, clear, manly turn of expression' and asserted that 'his images constitute the very genius of poetry.' In one of the best reviews of the play as a drama, the critic for *The British Review and London Critical Journal* (No. 45) failed to join the general praise of Shelley's poetry. The reviewer insisted that there was nothing really dramatic about *The Cenci*, that versified dialogue is not drama, and that Shelley's language is loose and disjointed; sometimes ambitious, then bald, inelegant, and mosaic. To the twentieth-century reader of these reviews, what stands out is the unanimity of praise for Shelley's poetic powers. In spite of their distaste for the subject matter, nearly all of the critics agree that Shelley has not lost his power to strike the flaming image.

About the characters in the play, there is less unanimity. *The Literary Gazette* (No. 35) thought all the characters reprehensible: 'no good effect can be produced by the delineations of such diabolism . . . whoever may be the author of such a piece, we will assert, that Beelzebub alone is fit to be the prompter.' *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (No. 36) agreed. 'The characters . . . are of no mortal stamp; they are daemons in human guise, inscrutable in their actions, subtle in their revenge.' Such comments do not, of course, speak to the question of dramatic plausibility, a question which few of the critics take up. *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register* (No. 38) however, asserted that the characters with one exception are not only believable, but truly life-like. Shelley 'has at least shown himself capable . . . of endowing human characters with life, sympathy, and passion. With the exception of Cenci, who is half maniac and half fiend, his persons speak and act like creatures of flesh and blood, not like the problems of strange philosophy set in motion by galvanic art.'

The character of Beatrice stands out, of course, and intrigued the critics. As Neville Rogers points out, Shakespeare would have entitled the play, *The Tragical History of Beatrice Cenci*.<sup>33</sup> *The Theatrical Inquisitor* (No. 37) quoted her outbursts following the incestuous encounter with her father as evidence of fine and plausible character portrayal. Leigh Hunt, in *The Indicator* (No. 41) again championed Shelley and praised the character of Beatrice. He attempts, as usual, to explain Shelley's work and, in particular, to answer the critic's objections to Beatrice's refusal to admit her guilt. Beatrice is, according to Hunt, so repulsed by having murdered her father that 'she would almost persuade herself as well as others, that no such thing had

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actually taken place. . . . It is a lie told, as it were, for the role of nature, to save it the shame of a greater contradiction.'

Throughout these reviews of *The Cenci*, the reviewers grapple with a not very clearly articulated feeling that, in spite of their best efforts to understand and to correct, a revolution in English poetry and thought has occurred. In many ways these reviews repeat the critical attacks and clichés of the previous decade, but there is a growing realization that what had seemed to be an aberration, a perversion, a deliberate and immoral attack on solid English life is in reality a major intellectual event. *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (No. 36) sounded the alarm. Whereas earlier commentators had encouraged Shelley to model himself after Wordsworth, this reviewer, in his attack on the Cockney School, lumps Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley into one diseased ball.

A few symptoms of this literary malady appeared as early as the year 1795, but it then assumed the guise of simplicity and pathos. It was a poetical Lord Fanny. It wept its pretty self to death by murmuring brooks, and rippling cascades, it heaved delicious sighs over sentimental lambs, and love-lorn sheep, apostrophized donkies in the innocence of primaeval nature; sung tender songs to tender nightingales; went to bed without a candle, that it might gaze on the chubby faces of the stars; discoursed sweet nothings to all who would listen to its nonsense; and displayed (*horrendum dictu*) the acute profundity of its grief in ponderous folios and spiral duodecimos.

In spite of the strenuous exertions of the critics who have not contracted this 'new species of intellectual dandyism, the evil has been daily and even hourly increasing.'

Shelley himself led some reviewers to see a relationship with Wordsworth, for in the preface to *The Cenci* he laid down some principles of language which sounded very much like Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*: Shelley says, 'I entirely agree with those modern critics who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men. . . . But it must be the real language of men in general, and not that of any particular class to whose society the writer happens to belong.'<sup>34</sup> The reviewer for *The Monthly Review* (No. 43) said, 'Now what is all this but the exploded *Wordsworthian heresy*, that the language of poetry and the language of real life are the same?' In a similar vein, *The Independent* (No. 44) thought Shelley's philosophy not only objectionable, but also imitative. Byron treads the same path, but he at least 'mixes life and its scenes with its horrors; he sports and laughs at them.' And this, alas Shelley does not. The

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*London Magazine* review (No. 40) repeats the oft heard charges of immorality, perversion of intellectual and religious qualities, and deformities of nature. But a new and now time-tested offense is added to the list. 'Like poor Tom, in *Lear*, whom the foul fiend has possessed for many a day, it will run through ditches, through quagmires, and through bogs, to see a man stand on his head for the exact space of half an hour. Ask the reason of this raging appetite for eccentricity, the answer is, such a thing is out of the beaten track of manhood, *ergo*, it is praiseworthy.' *The Independent, or London Literary and Political Review* (No. 44) sounded a similar warning, in an almost prophetic statement concerning the impending crisis between the artist and his public. The successful author, he says, must consult the wants, the wishes, and the interests of the many; 'and the many are not of an author's particular day—but they are the people of futurity. In this particular it is, that our modern great men fail. They write for themselves; not for the world; they feel as individuals, not as component poets of a great body.'

The individualism of these authors constitutes one important sign of this revolution, but another is the critics' comprehension that a totally new value system has taken hold. Up to this point, most of the reviewers felt that Shelley and his companions had either literally or figuratively sold their souls to the devil. Some critics hoped that, like Faustus in reverse, Shelley might yet be dragged kicking and screaming back from the fiery pit. *The Cenci* gave the reviewers an opportunity to contrast Shelley's work with the Elizabethan dramas they admired so highly, and also with ancient classical drama. Although modern critics would find their readings of these earlier tragedies difficult to accept and often facile, the reviewer for *The London Magazine* (No. 40) drew some conclusions which have since been supported by modern writers such as Murray Krieger and Morse Peckham.<sup>35</sup> As the *London* critic notes, the essential distinction between earlier tragedy and Shelley's version is the loss of transcendental order and supernatural authority. Writers like Shelley, he says, 'leave the nature of man bare and defenceless. . . . They render miserable man accountable for all his acts; his soul is the single source of all that occurs to him; he is forbidden to derive hope either from his own weakness or the strength of a great disposing authority, presiding over the world, and guiding it on principles that have relation to the universe.' This vision is, of course, quite unlike the classical tragic view, for 'the blackness and the storms suspended over the head of man, and which often discharged

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destruction on his fairest possessions, *hung from Heaven*, and above them there was light, and peace, and intelligence.' This description of a world without value except that imposed by man and originating in man coincides of course with Shelley's view that evil exists because man wills it to exist. But the description, combined with the emphasis on individualism and self-consciousness, proves that these early reviewers laid the foundation for the judgment of critics a century later.

### *Prometheus Unbound*

*Prometheus Unbound*, according to *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (No. 51) is 'one of the most stupendous of those works which the daring and vigorous spirit of modern poetry and thought has created.' But not all reviewers agreed, and the division of critical opinion, which began immediately on publication and still haunts Shelley's reputation, is represented by the judgment of *The Quarterly Review* (No. 54). 'Mr. Shelley's poetry is, in sober sadness, drivelling prose run mad.'

In all of the reviews of *Prometheus Unbound* political and religious prejudices play a major role both in the condemnations and defenses. Although there is not unanimous praise for Shelley's genius such as he enjoyed earlier, there is substantial agreement on the significant issues. Critics on both sides recognized that *Prometheus Unbound* was an intellectual and stylistic watershed. The sympathetic *London Magazine* (No. 48) proclaimed that 'this poem is more completely the child of the *Time* than almost any other modern production: it seems immediately sprung from the throes of the great intellectual, political, and moral labour of nations.' In a long and abusive review in *The Quarterly Review* (No. 54), W. S. Walker, in contrast, held fast to the presuppositions of a previous age and literary fashion and condemned Shelley's stylistics. 'It seems to be his maxim, that reason and sound thinking are aliens in the dominions of the Muses, and that, should they ever be found wandering about the foot of Parnassus, they ought to be chased away as spies sent to discover the nakedness of the land.' The major intellectual shift represented by Shelley's handling of the Promethean theme was described by the perceptive reviewer in *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (No. 51). Whereas to Aeschylus the fate of Prometheus suggested the temporary predominance of brute force over intellect, the oppression of right by might, and the final deliverance of the spirit of humanity from the iron grasp of its foes, Aeschylus seems not to have placed symbolic

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meaning in Prometheus's deliverance. In Shelley's play, the deliverance of Prometheus is 'a symbol of the peaceful triumph of goodness over power; of the subjection of might to right . . . To represent vividly and poetically this vast moral change is . . . the design of the drama.' Thus reviewers sympathetic and critical caught the intellectual and moral significance of *Prometheus Unbound*. To some, this monster need only suffer the scrutiny of public examination to be met with its deserved contempt. The reviewer for *The Literary Gazette* (No. 49) felt it his duty rather 'to stem such a tale of literary folly and corruption, than to promote its flooding over the country.' But as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (No. 50) remarked, however men may disagree about Shelley's poetical power, 'there is one point in regard to which all must be agreed, and that is his Audacity.'

And disagree the critics did, and have ever since, about Shelley's poetical power in *Prometheus Unbound*. In place of the earlier universal praise for Shelley's genius, more reservations are voiced in these reviews than in earlier ones. *The Literary Gazette* (No. 49), using the figure of *Lear's* Tom again, insisted that Shelley was a candidate for Bedlam. *The Monthly Review and British Register* (No. 53) repeated the inevitable pun that *Prometheus Unbound* will always remain unbound, but did affirm Shelley's genius. W. S. Walker in *The Quarterly Review* (No. 54) setting out with the avowed purpose of ending the question of Shelley's poetical merits, concluded, 'Poetical power can be shown only by writing good poetry and this Mr. Shelley has not yet done.'

Then, as now, the critical question centred on Shelley's use of similes and metaphors and the profusion of images. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (No. 50) would not deny that Shelley demonstrated 'very extraordinary powers of language and imagination in his treatment of the allegory.' Although *Prometheus* is a pestiferous mixture, all who read carefully will agree it abounds in poetical beauties of the highest order. *The London Magazine and Monthly Critical and Dramatic Review* (No. 51) praised the 'profusion of felicitously compounded epithets' and the imagery which the reviewer feels resembles that of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

On the other hand, some sophisticated and provincial journals recognized that Shelley's style in *Prometheus Unbound* represented a new direction in English verse, a direction not to be tolerated or encouraged. *The Lonsdale Magazine or Provincial Repository* (No. 52) compared *Prometheus* to the song of the Sirens. Thomas Paine had been too low