

The Theme of Revenge in Shelley's
The Cenci and Shakespeare's Hamlet:
A Comparative Study

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Shelley's *The Cenci* is regarded as "the greatest tragedy composed in English since the death of Shakespeare" as J.A. Symonds comments¹. In fact, this romantic tragedy is a manuscript copied from the archives of the Cenci palace at Rome which recounted the detailed horrors of the family of the Cenci. Shelley is inspired to use this story for his tragedy following Shakespeare's tradition in his plays such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

Shelley himself says:

Nothing remained as I imagined, but to cloth it to the apprehensions of my country men works in such language action as would bring it home to their hearts. The deepest and sublimest tragic composition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello* where stories which already existed in tradition as matters of popular belief made them familiar to the sympathy of all succeeding generation of mankind.²

The tragedy of Shelley's *The Cenci* springs from moral deformity besides his belief that a tragedy which is written for the stage should not be subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose. He thinks that if any moral poetic justice like that of *The Cenci* is complied, the play would lose its effectiveness as a tragedy and Beatrice would not be a tragic character. Moreover, moral deformity which is caused by the relatives is the source of the suffering of both Prince Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beatrice in Shelley's *The Cenci*. Hamlet's uncle kills his own brother king Hamlet (Hamlet's father) desiring the Queen. The throne and the crown. Where as Beatrice's corrupted father in her paper.

The study will trace the theme of revenge in Shakespeare's Hamlet Shelly's The Cenci. A comparison will be made between the resolution of the two protagonists in fulfilling their revenge throughout the two plays.

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark is an intellectual and sensitive young man "of deeply reflective and meditative nature"³ he idealized his father to whom he is attacked believing that he (his father) is: "So excellent a king, ..., so loving to my [his]mother."⁴ when he returns from the University of Wittenberg he is plagued by his father's death and he is engulfed in an absorbing grieve mourning for the late king. Moreover his melancholy is intensified and his agony is increased by his mother's (queen Gertrude's) remarriage to his uncle Claudius (the current king of Denmark). The royal couple marries within less than two months after the death of king Hamlet. Such a hasty remarriage breaks Hamlet's heart and upset him making him mocks his mother's unfaithfulness with bitter words: "The funeral baked meats/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage table." (1.2, 180-181) but Beatrice's dilemma is of another kind. She is a young countess a beautiful daughter of count Cenci in Rome. She is devout, chaste, dutiful, forgiving and righteous. She is almost a saint who is plagued by her own father who makes her suffers a lot because he is worst than cruel to her. The first scene expresses the cruelty and the brutality of Count Cenci the "hardened" rogue whose greatest pleasure is to make people suffer. Obviously, her inhuman father count Cenci is the source of her misery and agony. He is beyond remorse and all reform. He says: "And I have no remorse and little fear/which are, I think, the checks of other men"⁵. He justifies it saying:

I love the sight of agony, and the sense of joy,

When this shall be another's, and that mine. (1.1, 80-84)

Count Cenci is the embodiment of the evil he has no moral or religious restraint to stop him from committing the most hideous sin and crime which is the incest raping his own young daughter. In fact, he is just like a demon whose special target for punishment is his family. Furthermore, he celebrates the death of his two young sons stating:

You hear me not, I tell they are dead and
They will need no food or raiment more: The
Tapers that did light them the dark way and
Their last cost. The pope, I think, will not
Except I should maintain them in their coffins.
Rejoice with me, my heart is wondrous glad. (1.3. 45-50)

Hamlet is informed about the appearance of the armed ghost of the late king by his best friend Horatio. He is an intellectual young man who assures Hamlet that the ghost who appears recurrently at midnight in the castle is the ghost of his late father. Furthermore, he assures him that he knows the late king very well besides the ghost represents the absolute resemblance of the late king, telling Hamlet that: "I [Horatio] knew your father, /these hands are not more like." (1-2, 211-212) Hamlet is shocked and suspects that something is amiss "My father's spirit in arms! All is not well." (1.2, 254). Accordingly he decides to confront the ghost of his late father by joining the guards that night at the castle.

The appearance of the ghost represents a turning-point in the play. In fact, the play is introduced to us by its emergence. It suddenly appears and waves to Hamlet to follow it. Hamlet insists to follow the ghost despite his friends' effort to restrain him from doing so, saying

My fate cries out and makes each petty
arture in this body as hardy as the Nemean
lion's nerve. (1.4, 82-83)

The anxious Hamlet is ready to do anything to ease his worries about the appearance of his father's armored ghost which makes him "doubt[s] some fool play." (1.2, 255). Moreover, it urges one of Hamlet's friends to state there is: "something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (1.5, 90)

In privacy the ghost assures Hamlet that he is the spirt of his father urging his role son to: "revenge his [Claudius] foul and most unnatural murder." (1.5, 25) Hamlet takes the words of the ghost seriously and does what is expected from a dutiful son. Thus, he accepts the mission that is shouldered to him by the ghost without paying ant attention to his details agreeing to revenge his father's murder, saying:

Haste me to know 't, that I with wings as
Swift as meditation or the thought of love
May sweep to my revenge. (1.5, 29-31)

Moreover, the ghost reveals to Hamlet a hideous secret by telling him the real version of his murder which is committed by his own brother Claudius. Affected by his won brother's treachery the ghost informs Hamlet that Claudius kills him by pouring virulent poison into his ear while he is sleeping in the orchard, and that murderer announces to the Danes that the king's death is caused by a serpent's sting:

... Now Hamlet, hear tis given out that, sleeping
in my orchard, a serpent stung me. So, the whole
Ear of Denmark is by a forged process of my death

Rankly abused; but know, thou noble youth, the
Serpent that did sting thy father's life Now wears
his crown. (1.5, 34-39)

In addition to that the ghost tells Hamlet that the merciless poisoner deprives him from confessing his sin, consequently he is doomed to wander the earth at night until he is purified from his sins, stating:

Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatched; cut
Off even in the blossoms of my sin, unhouseled,
disappointed unaneled; no reckoning made, but sent
to my account with all my imperfections on my
head. (1.5, 75-79)

Yet the ghost, who asks Hamlet to revenge his murder, warns him not to harm his mother leaving her to be punished by her guilt and heaven:

But hows omever thou pursue this act taint
not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive against
Thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven and
To those thorns that in her bosom lodge to
Prick and sting her. (1.5, 84-88).

Before his vanishing, the ghost orders Hamlet to swear not tell anybody about what he has heard and seen from him.

Hamlet is horrified by the appearance of his father's ghost and by the shocking information that is told to him by his father's spirit. He is confused by this sudden change in his life. He realizes what a challenging mission he is shouldered.

Hamlet is the prince of Denmark and the legal heir of its throne and kingdom, besides he is the hope of his nation and all the lights are focused on him. So, he has to behave and act in accordance with his state and his responsibility putting his duty towards his country above everything else. But he is also the bereaved son of his royal father and the loyal sole son to the late king Hamlet who has to avenge his father's murder and betrayal by his uncle Claudius. But prince Hamlet surprise us when he hesitates to act fulfilling his revenge as the legal prince and the dutiful son and as opposed to the instructions of his father's ghost. Moreover, he tries to justify his delay revenge under the pretext of making sure of the words ghost and that his uncle Claudius certainly is the murderer of his father.

Hamlet is bewildered whether the ghost is the real spirit of his late father or it is a wicked devil tries to tempt him to damnation.⁶ So he decides "to put antic disposition on" (1.5, 172) pretending madness under the pretext of gaining solid evidence proving the credibility of the words of the ghost. He presumes that by faking madness Hamlet will achieve a very important thing that is to have the chance to avoid his uncle's suspicious besides his ability to collect more solid evidence proving Claudius guilt. Pretending madness will give him a free space enabling him to hear the other and their gossip freely because they will let their preservation at the presence of a mad man. moreover, he will be able to behave freely without being blamed by others.

The faster and he sincere way to inform king Claudius about Hamlet's madness is by paying a visit to Ophelia (Hamlet beloved). She is the daughter of Polonius (Claudius' counselor). So, when she is visited by the disheveled prince the echo of his premediated visit is heard by his uncle Claudius through his counselor Polonius. Consequently, Hamlet achieves his aim to inform his uncle indirectly about his supposed madness. In fact,

by faking insanity Hamlet gains an excuse to postpone his revenge from Claudius achieving no actual step to fulfill his revenge.

Hamlet procrastination to achieve his revenge is bitterly compared with Beatrice's determination to avenge from her father. His unexpected delay to revenge in spite of his ability to do so can not be justified. His status as the legal heir of the throne and the adored prince of Denmark gives him the chance by putting his uncle into a public justice or at least depriving him from the fruits of his crime that are the crown, the throne and the queen. In opposite to Beatrice's situation who loses her last chance for help which is represented by her lover Orsino. By his embracing the priesthood he (Orsino) deprives her from the only possible help she can get. So, she becomes a picture of misery as she doesn't know where to turn for solace, saying bitterly: "Alas, Orsino! All the love that once / I felt for you, is turned to bitter pain" (1.2, 20-21) and

Sorrow makes me seem sterner than else
My nature might have been; I have a weight
Of melancholy thoughts, and they forbode,
But what can they forbode worse than I
Now endure? (1.2, 34-38)

Yet Beatrice's will-power to revenge from all her friend's wrong deeds is clearly shown in the banquet scene (1.3). at the beginning we are introduced to the wimpish Beatrice who appeals desperately to the quest of protecting herself and her family from future cruelties at the hands of her father:

I do entreat you, go on, noble guests what,
although tyranny and impious hate stand
sheltered by a father's hair?

.....

Takes us away! (1.3, 99-128)

Consequently, we are face to face with Beatrice as a libertarian, defying her father openly:

Retire thou, impious man! Ay, hide thyself

Where never eye can look upon thee more!

Wouldst thou have honour and obedience

Who art a tortuor? (1.3, 146-149)

So, in spite of her dilemma and misery Beatrice never gives up trying to fulfil her revenge even if the circumstances are against her. In fact, she tries to hold on even the least opportunity which enable her to achieve her shown a great courage in doing so.

Hamlet's continuous hesitation provides Claudius with a good chance to act. He (Claudius) is an intelligent man who cannot be easily convinced with such a lame reason as rejected love behind Hamlet's madness as he informed by Polonius. Therefore, he orders Hamlet's childhood friend to find the real cause of Hamlet's madness.⁷ Claudius guilt urges him to be cautious and awake even from Hamlet's least behavior. In fact, he doesn't want to take risk the revelation of his crime by Hamlet and to be condemned and to be deprived of the fruit of his crime. Claudius' guilty conscience causes him an agonizing conflict between his wish to repent of his crime and his desire to keep the fruit of it. So, in spite of his supposed calmness, Claudius' anxiety that is caused by his guilty conscious makes

him just like a dormant volcano that can be triggered at any time. He expressed that clearly in his aside:

Oh, 'tis too true

How smart a lash that speech doth give me
Conscience! The Harlot's cheek, beautied with
Plastering art, is not more ugly to the thing that helps
It than is my deed to my most painted word O heavy
burden! (3.1, 49-54)

Hamlet realize that his uncle suspects his madness and that he is carefully watched by him. In fact, Claudius is supposed to be the murderer of his own father (Hamlet's father) according to the ghost's story. So, he will not hesitate to commit another crime by killing his nephew(Hamlet) in order to protect himself as well as the fruits of his first crime. Accordingly, Hamlet has to act decisively in order to cut the way upon Claudius.

Hamlet is informed about "the tragedians of the city" (2.2, 305) by his friends who asked him to allow himself with some entertainment by attending their performance. Hamlet decides to seize this opportunity to entrap his uncle by surprising him by enacting his own crime before him. Thus, Hamlet instructs the manager of the actors to perform the play of the murder of Gonzago before the royal audience and the courtiers. He inserts a scene to the original text of the play that resembles the circumstance of Claudius' crime as it is told to him by his fathers' spirit. He becomes very optimistic about the performance of the play-within-play believing that it will provide him with a solid evidence of Claudius' crime⁸ stating that "the play [within play] the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the [guilty] king" (2.2, 557-58). Furthermore, he asks his

best friend Horatio to watch his uncle Claudius carefully during the performance of the play inferring a judgment according to Claudius' reaction.

At the night of the performance, the court is assembled to watch the play which duplicates Claudius' time. It begins with Gertrude the queen player expressing her deep love, loyalty and devotion to her husband Gonzago the king player. She promises him that she will never remarry if he dies. When Gonzago falls asleep Hamlet cunningly comments that the play is a true story drawing the attention of the audience to how Lucianus will poison him (the sleeping king) winning his victim's widow. Accordingly, Claudius infers that Hamlet insinuates to his crime. Furthermore, he is embarrassed and agitated as all the courtiers watching the resemblance between the play and events of his actual life. Besides his feeling of his unbearable guilt increases his tension. Thus, as Lucianus pours the poison into the sleeping Gonzago's ears, Claudius bursts out crying for light, leaving before the play is over. Hamlet comments on Claudius' reaction saying: "what freighted with false fire?" (3.2, 240). So, Claudius guilty conscience confirming his crime. Thus, the dormant volcano inside Claudius is triggered by the murder of Gonzago by which he is trapped. Consequently, he has to get rid of Hamlet since their rivalry becomes clear.⁹

Hamlet is thrilled with Claudius' reaction towards the play which confirms his guilty besides confirming the story of the ghost. Thus, he addresses his best friend: "O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost word for a thousand pound! Didst perceive?" (3.2, 200-1) Hamlet is completely convinced that his uncle is the real murderer of his father, so he has to act fulfilling his revenge taking the initiative striking Claudius first. We expected from Hamlet the prince and heir of the Danish throne to act as a

true knight revenging his father's murder (the late king of Denmark) and restoring the honor of the family by killing his father's murderer and the usurper of the throne and the queen. But his speculative nature hinders him again from taking any action¹⁰ to the extent that he admits his cowardice and rebukes himself saying: "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (2.2, 502) consequently the play-within- the play "further emphasizes Hamlet procrastinating tendency"¹¹ since it does not provoke him to achieve his revenge. Thus, Hamlet disappoints us again with his hesitation which is expressed very well by his failure to take any actual action against Claudius avenging from him.

Affected by The Murder of Gonzago, Claudius privately curses his own hideous crime wondering about repentance and forgiveness in a soliloquy saying:

But oh, what form of player can serve me

Turn? Forgive me my fool murder? That

Cannot be, since I am still possessed, Of

Those effects for which I did the murder,

My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. (3.3, 51-55)

Overwhelmed with remorse for murdering his own brother beside usurping the throne and the queen, Claudius kneels praying for money. Meanwhile Hamlet enters hearing Claudius' confession of his crime against his brother. Moreover, he is alone so it the golden opportunity that Hamlet waits for to avenge his father's murder. But once again we are shocked by Hamlet who waste such a chance postponing killing Claudius. Hamlet's continues series of procrastination is continued by shrinking from the deed under the pretext that if he kills Claudius while he is

praying then he (Claudius) will be rewarded with heaven.¹² besides Hamlet wants his uncle to be damned in hell suffering just like his victim (Hamlet's father). Accordingly delays his revenge waiting for an opportunity when Claudius does "Some act / That has no relish of salvation isn't" (3.3, 91-92) to guarantee his damnation in hell. So, by wasting such golden successive chances to avenge from Claudius, Hamlet shrinks from the action. Accordingly, he proves his irresolution besides proving his inability to cope with the mission that is shouldered upon him by the ghost. Moreover, he demonstrates his ability to revenge with words rather than action.

When Hamlet is summoned to the chamber of the queen, who is worried about her son's Welfare, he decides to "speak daggers to her but use none." (3.2, 357) Hamlet's castigation frightens to think that he is kill her. Her cry for help is echoed by Polonius whom is stabbed accidentally by Hamlet believing that he is killing Claudius. Consequently, he provides Claudius with the reason he needs to get rid of Hamlet using the kill of Polonius as an excuse. Thus, he is relived from Hamlet who represent a great danger and threat to Claudius' safety. Claudius' decision to exile prince Hamlet into England is attributed to Hamlet's madness on one hand and the false allegation of protecting his (Hamlet's) life on the other. Obviously, Claudius acts decisively and wisely to avoid the resentment of the queen and the public besides eliminating Hamlet. By being sent to England, Hamlet is sent to his death since Claudius asks the king of England to kill Hamlet when he arrives England.¹³ but when he discovers Claudius' scheme and manages to avoid the assassination, Hamlet returns to the Denmark to do nothing avenging from Claudius.

As Hamlet continues what he is good at that is hesitation, determined Beatrice tries to create her last chance to be released from her bad

situation and sadness. So, she decides to return to her petition to the Pope. But she loses what represents her last hope. Moreover, her increasing despair is intensified by her father when he rapes her (not mentioning her physical torture). Consequently, she becomes, as Shelley describes her, a calculating demon whose actions and insensitivities rival the atrocities of her sadistic father, she is a revengeful demon saying:

In this mortal world there is no vindication
And no law which can adjudge and execute
The doom of that thought which I suffer.

(3.1,

134-137)

Out of her misery and desperation Beatrice becomes thirsty for blood concentrating on fulfilling her revenge from her own father. She tells Lucretia:

But now! O blood, which art my father's
blood,

Circling through these contaminated veins,
.....
.....

Death! Death! Our law and our religion call
thee

A punishment and a reward. (3.1, 95117)

Accordingly, Beatrice is compelled to plan to revenge from the inhuman Count Cenci in cold blood. Moreover, she informs Orsino about her intention to kill her father asking his help to achieve her aim. In fact, her misery, agony and hopelessness are the sources of her resolution and determination that urge her to fulfill her plan. Thus, she chooses two of Count Cenci's ill-treated servants, Morzio and Olimpio, to carry out the murderous task.

At the night of the execution they enter Cenci's bed chambers to conduct the murder, but they hesitate to kill the sleeping Count saying:

We dare not kill an old and sleeping man; his thin
Gray hair, his stern and reverend brow, his veined
Crossed on his heaving breast, and the clam
innocent sleep in which he lay. (4.3, 9-12)

Beatrice rebukes, the two hesitate servants snatching dagger from one then killing her sleeping father and not sparing even them, crying:

Miserable slaves!

.....

.....

Is an equivocation: it sleeps over, A thousand
daily
acts disgracing men; and when a deed where
mercy
insults heaven. (4.3, 22-30).

So, even when the servants shrink from the deed she proves her determination in achieving her revenge killing her own father cold bloodily by her own hand.

Whereas Hamlet's constant procrastination gives the decisive Claudius the chance to strike first. Thus, he decided to protect himself and the gains of his crime by killing Hamlet but by Leartes' (Polonius son) hands. So, he conspires with Leartes to put an end to Hamlet life by challenging him (Hamlet) to a duel by Laertes aiming at stabbing him with a poison sword. Furthermore, he is told about Claudius' support for him

by putting "a solemn wager" on him in order to embarrass Hamlet and to guarantee his acceptance of the duel. Claudius inescapable scheme to kill Hamlet consists of two plans to ensure Hamlet's kill during the fencing match. The first one in which Leartes will use sword with a poisoned tip. In fact, Leartes' sword will be tipped in a deadly poison to the extent that one touch of it to Hamlet blood will cost him his life. Yet if Leartes fails to stab Hamlet with the poisoned sword, then death is waiting for Hamlet in a cup of a poisoned wine. Claudius believes that in the course of the duel and as it gets violent Hamlet will thirst:

And that he calls for drink, I'll [Claudius] have
Preferred him a chalise for the nonce, where on
but sipping, if he by chance escape your [laertes']
venomed stuck, our purpose may hold there (4.7,
158-161).

Obviously, Hamlet's irresolution to act fulfilling his revenge leads him to his death. He wastes all the opportunities he gets to kill Claudius the murderer of his father by postponing his action recurrently for unreasonable causes. So, Hamlet is trapped by his irresolution since he gives Claudius the chance to strike first. Even his father's murder panelizing Claudius.

During the fencing match Hamlet is struck by Leartes' poisoned sword. But the swords are swapped accidently and Hamlet manages to wound Leartes with his (Leartes') own poisoned sword. Simultaneously Queen Gertrude collapses as a result of drinking the poisoned wine telling her son: "... O my Hamlet – the drink- I am poisoned." (5.2, 289-290) furthermore the dying Leartes tells Hamlet about Claudius' treachery and

his scheme to kill him (Hamlet) with poison which causes the death of Hamlet, his mother and Leartes himself. Finally, Hamlet stabs Claudius who tries to escape from the crime scene.

Beatrice who is victimized by her own father Count Cenci manages to achieve her revenge killing her own father. She is daunted by all those whom are asked to help her, but she never gives up. Moreover, throughout her quest to revenge she is rejected by person whom are obliged to help her as a part of their duty yet they let her down. But her resolution, determination and will enable her to fulfill her aim avenging from her own father. Thus, she is determined, calm and firm satisfying with what she has achieved depending on her resolution:

The deed is done, and what may follow now
Regards not me. I am as universal as the light;
Free as the earth – surrounding air; as firm as
The world's Centre. Consequence, to me. Is as
The wind which strikes the solid rock but shakes
It not. (4.4, 46-52)

Hamlet is imposed by a task that is completely different from his nature revealing his deficiency in particular his procrastination tendency.¹⁴ in fact, his quest for revenge is hindered constantly by his irresolution and his postponement of revenge to the extent that he and procrastination represent the two sides of one coin. Finally, he manages to achieve his revenge by killing Claudius, but his repeated hesitations cost him his own life. The same thing goes for Beatrice who pays her own life as a cost of her revenge although she represents the complete opposite of Hamlet. In fact, she is dauntless and determined and she has such a will-power that

enables her to achieve her revenge in spite of the fact that all the odds are against her. Accordingly, the sole thing that gathers Hamlet and Beatrice in that their quest for revenge is ended with their death.