

Shelley: Ariel or Caliban?

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P. B. Shelley placed Shakespeare along with Milton and Dante amongst “philosophers of the very loftiest power” for their ability to communicate the “truth of things” and particularly stated that Shakespeare’s characters were “living impersonations of the truth of human passion” (*A Defence of Poetry*). We know Shelley absorbed Shakespeare from a very early age and this emerges from the numerous references we find in his poetry, prose, drama, and letters. As we shall see, *The Tempest* was a major source of inspiration: while in many instances the Romantic poet identifies himself with Ariel, in fact he has much sympathy for Caliban, a sympathy which in many ways anticipates what was to become a political interpretation of *The Tempest*, one that sees Caliban as the dispossessed native. But the borrowings or suggestions from Shakespeare’s plays extend to most of the Shelleyan production and it is clearly in Shelley’s most successful drama *The Cenci* that the influence becomes more tangible, with very specific references I will point to, especially on a theoretical level: a closer look at *The Cenci* will allow us to examine Shakespearean borrowings, structures, and themes and try to establish how much of its success is owed to this influence, also significant in *Queen Mab* or *Prometheus Unbound*. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to evaluate whether these Shakespearean echoes contribute to current critical appreciation and whether, today, Shelley’s unflagging popularity is also, though clearly not only, due to his being an artist hovering, broadly speaking, between his vision of an Ariel and a Caliban.

Keywords: Shelley, *The Cenci*, *The Tempest*, Borrowings

That English Renaissance poets, Shakespeare particularly, but also Milton, Spenser and others, had a major influence on the poets of the Romantic age has been subject to intense and unexhausted critical attention. Jonathan Bate in his book on *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* goes as far as saying that “[t]he rise of Romanticism and the growth of Shakespeare idolatry are parallel phenomena” (Bate 1986, 6). This impact, though having points in common among the Romantics (broadly, and very generically speaking, the appeal to the imagination), also reflects varying

modes of absorption when we think of first-generation poets and second-generation ones, and each one in turn. In this paper, attention will be drawn to the case of P. B. Shelley.

Shelley was captivated by Shakespeare from a very early age, and it is not surprising that Shakespearean echoes, direct allusions, quotations, and precise references can be found in his prose, his poetry, his drama, his letters, and his journal, an involvement with the Bard which was also noted by his early biographers. David Lee Clark, in his pioneering work of 1939 on Shelley and Shakespeare, relates that Medwin claimed he “was a constant reader of Shakespeare” and through this reading “hoped to invigorate his own style”; Hogg tells us he “read widely in Shakespeare”, Trelawny – who was to hold a significant role in Shelly’s life – that the young romantic “tried to improve his style by imitating Shakespeare”, and Peacock that he “read aloud to him ‘almost all of Shakespeare’s tragedies and some of his more poetical comedies’” and that he “studied Shakespeare ‘with unwearied devotion’” (Clark 1939, 261).

It would be impossible and beyond our scope to point out all the instances in Shelley’s work which in some way allude to Shakespeare; a selection of a few of these allusions have been chosen to try to establish their significance within Shelley’s poetics. Two main questions will be addressed: one suggested by the title of this paper and prompted by Trelawny’s claim that Shelley “seemed as gentle a spirit as Ariel”, which was partly a rejection of the portrayal in the press of this radical young poet as “a monster more hideous than Caliban” (Trelawny 1973, 124). Shelley himself in a letter to Hogg of 1811 had written: “I think were I compelled to associate with Shakespeare’s Caliban with any wretch [...] that I should find something to admire” (8 May 1811) (P. B. Shelley 1964, 1:77). Bate remarks that in fact Shelley “had as much sympathy with Caliban”, as we can see, among other instances such as the one just mentioned, in “his idealization of the noble savage in part eight of *Queen Mab*” which, whilst harking back to Rousseau’s noble savage, “suggests a political interpretation of *The Tempest* that reads Caliban as dispossessed native” (Bate 1986, 204), an interpretation which, as known, has become almost commonplace. The political appropriations of Shakespeare lead us to the second question: does

Shelley find in Shakespeare “what he thought was a confirmation of his own radicalism”, as Clark suggests in the closing lines of his article (Clark 1939, 287)?

Before noting some striking ‘borrowings’ or allusions within the poems and drama, it may be useful to mention a few examples of what Shelley openly says about Shakespeare. In *Lines Written among the Euganean Hills* (1818), we read in lines 196-99:

As divinest Shakespeare’s might
Fills Avon and the world with light,
Like omniscient power which he
Imaged ‘mid mortality. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 200)

His might and power are then divine and omniscient.

In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), he famously claimed that:

Shakespeare, Dante and Milton [...] are philosophers of the very loftiest power [for] teaching the truth of things. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 640)

And later:

[C]omedy should be as in *King Lear*, universal, ideal, and sublime. [...] *King Lear* [...] may be judged to be the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world. [Shakespeare’s characters are] the living impersonations of the truth of human passions. (644)

This fascination with *Lear* is also expressed in the preface to *The Cenci* (1819), where it is considered one of the “deepest and the sublimest tragic compositions” (P. B. Shelley 2002, 311).

On Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, in a manuscript fragment attached to the preface, he had written a brief note on *Sonnet 111*, the one in which we read about the complaints of having to please the public with his work since the poet does not have private means; Shelley quotes: “[...] ‘subdued, To what it worked in, like a dyer’s hand’”, and comments: “Observe these images, how simple they are, and yet animated with what intense poetry and passion” (Clark 1939, 262).

Finally, in a suppressed passage of *Epipsychidion* (1821), his knowledge and admiration for the *Sonnets* emerge further:

If any should be curious to discover
 Whether to you I am a friend or lover,
 Let them read Shakespeare's sonnets, taking thence
 A whetstone for their dull intelligence
 That tears will not cut. (Clark 1939, 262)

These brief examples exhibit recurring epithets: divine, omniscient, universal, sublime, ideal, and so on. These appreciations are similar to the ones Keats expressed when he considered Shakespeare his "presider" and described him as something akin to nature itself; Shakespeare to Keats was like the sea, passages from Shakespeare were like the sun, the moon and stars, and he too considers *King Lear* a major inspiration (he wrote the sonnet "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" in 1818), and, as Spurgeon pointed out, his Folio edition of Shakespeare contains markings and underlinings in most of Lear's speeches, similes and metaphors (Spurgeon 1966, 49-50). Keats also claimed that the relationship between truth and beauty was exemplified everywhere in *King Lear*. In this sense, both Romantic poets acknowledge the 'pervasiveness' of Shakespeare, that sense of the ideal and sublime they absorbed from Shakespeare which was to permeate their poetry.

Like Keats we find in Shelley's work direct and indirect references to Shakespeare's plays and poems. Just a few examples may be sufficient to try to understand to what extent these are intentional or where and if, instead, they have simply come to be part of Shelley's cultural heritage. Starting with references mostly from the poems, the final part of this work will concentrate on the play *The Cenci*, where the allusions are at times less direct but which in many ways owes more to Shakespeare in terms of structure and themes and where, on a theoretical level, the connection is more interesting. *The Cenci*, as we shall see, also raises the problem of 'voluntary' or 'involuntary' borrowings just mentioned.

In *The Wandering Jew* (1810), canto III, lines 1006-9, we find a direct borrowing from *Hamlet*:

I could a tale disclose,
 So full of horror – full of woes,

Such as might blast a demon's ear,
Such as a fiend might shrink to hear – (P. B. Shelley 1887, 46)

In *Hamlet*:

I could a tale unfold whose slightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres. (I.v.15-17)¹

And in the “Conclusion” to *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), lines 8-11:

I dare not guess; but in this life
Of error, ignorance, and strife,
Where nothing is, but all things seem,
And we the shadows of the dream. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 432)

we find echoes and a paraphrase from *Hamlet*:

GUILDENSTERN

Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the
ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

HAMLET

A dream itself is but a shadow. (II.ii.257-60)

Clearly, apart from the use of the same expression, the whole Shelleyan stanza has a Hamlet ring about it, referring to the life of ignorance and all things seeming rather than being.

Hamlet and other Shakespearean echoes appear in his *Queen Mab* which, apart from its title, contains an adaptation of *Henry IV's* famous apostrophe to sleep, and borrowings from *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. We need only mention the latter from part I, lines 272-74:

Yet not the meanest worm
That lurks in graves and fattens on the dead
Less shares thy eternal breath. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 11)

which recalls Hamlet on Polonius:

¹ All Shakespeare quotations are from Shakespeare 1974.

Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. (IV.iii.21-23)

In *Julian and Maddalo*, line 204, there is a direct citation indicated with inverted commas from *Henry V*:

And that a want of that true theory still,
Which seeks a "soul of goodness" in things ill
Or in himself or others, has thus bowed
His being. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 211)

King Henry says:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distill it out. (IV.i.4-5)

And, according to Langston, Romeo's description of the drugged Juliet as Death's paramour served as a model for these lines (384-91) from *Julian and Maddalo* (Langston 1949, 167):

O, pallid as death's dedicated bride,
Thou mockery which art sitting by my side,
Am I not wan like thee? at the grave's call
I haste, invited to thy wedding-ball,
To greet the ghastly paramour for whom
Thou hast deserted me... and made the tomb
Thy bridal bed... but I beside your feet
Will lie and watch ye from my winding sheet. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 216)

Where in *Romeo and Juliet* we find:

Ah, dear Juliet,
Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that I will stay with thee;
Ans never from this palace of dim night
Depart again. (V.iii.101-8)

It seems evident that, even when the borrowings are not verbatim as in the case of *Henry V*, the tone and imagery reveal the indebtedness to a Shakespearean ‘sound’ which reverberates in many of the compositions, only some of which have been indicated here.

In Shelley’s preface to Mary’s *Frankenstein* in which he impersonates the author, he claims the novel “affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield”, a “rule” to which *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* “conform” (together with the poetry of Greece and *Paradise Lost*) (M. Shelley 1999, 9). Interestingly, these two plays are the same ones which, as Spurgeon in her *Keats’s Shakespeare* has noted, are the most heavily marked in Keats’s own copy of Shakespeare (Spurgeon 1966, 5), and *The Tempest* particularly appears in many guises in both poets’ works. This is probably, as Coleridge had noted, because the play has “especially appealed to the imagination” (Coleridge 1960, 130), and as for Ariel he declares:

If a doubt could ever be entertained whether Shakespeare was a great poet, acting upon laws arising out of his own nature, and not without law, as has sometimes been idly asserted, that doubt must be removed by the character of Ariel. (136)

Barry Weller, in his article “Shakespeare, Shelley and the Binding of the Lyric”, concludes that “in the case of [...] Romantic readers the impulse is, without challenging the primacy of *King Lear*, *Hamlet* or other tragedies among Shakespeare’s dramas, to claim the Shakespeare of *The Tempest* as an essential lyric dramatist” (Weller 1978, 929).

The Tempest was frequently in Shelley’s mind; we read in fact in one of Mary Shelley’s entries: “Read Homer and [Hope’s] ‘Anastasius’. Walk with the Williams’ in the evening. ‘Nothing of us but what must suffer a sea change’” (14 February 1822) (M. Shelley 1947, 168-69), and, as is known, Shelley’s boat initially named *Don Juan* after the poem by Byron was renamed *Ariel* and Shelley believed the quotation would be a good motto for it. The

Williams, Edward and Jane, visited Pisa and the Shelleys in 1821, where they became friends and Shelley bought Jane an Italian guitar attaching a poem to it, "With a Guitar, to Jane" (P. B. Shelley 2002, 533-35). He wrote other poems to Jane at a point in which his relationship with Mary was becoming more remote declaring an idealised love, which however was not returned. Shelley wrote in a letter: "Jane brings her guitar, and if past and future could be obliterated, the present would content me" (P. B. Shelley 1964, 2:436).

As we know, the poem begins with "Ariel to Miranda", which establishes an immediate connection with the play but at the same time, as Weller observes, defines it more as a supplement since it never appears as a stage direction given the two Shakespearean characters appear together only three times and never actually speak to one another (Weller 1978, 914). Prospero, the master, is mentioned once, but the themes of mastery and servitude are present throughout the poem, from the very first three lines:

Take

This slave of Music, for the sake
Of him who is the slave of thee (P. B. Shelley 2002, 533)

The questions of bondage and freedom are central to Shakespeare's play and here love and art are exposed as forms of subjection. The slave of music is Ariel, or the poet represented by Ariel, or the guitar itself which nevertheless needs human action to make the music. The biographical interpretation is commonly suggested as previously mentioned, with Shelley as the disappointed lover (Ariel), Jane as Miranda and her husband Edward Williams as Ferdinand, and this is represented when we read (in lines 32-39):

Since Ferdinand and you begun
Your course of love, and Ariel still
Has tracked your steps, and served your will;
Now, in humbler, happier lot,
This is all remembered not;
And now, alas! the poor sprite is
Imprisoned, for some fault of his,

In a body like a grave. (534)

Again, the vocabulary of bondage and imprisonment, which here is applied to the state of being trapped by love, reminds us of Ariel's entrapment in the cloven pine by Sycorax, and the poem continues with the same imagery reminding us that the guitar was once a tree which "[d]ied in sleep, and felt no pain" (534, line 55), and lived again in the form of a guitar. The reference to the tree being felled and the woods in their winter sleep recall the frequent association in *The Tempest* of wood with servitude, such as Ariel himself being threatened to be pegged in the knotty entrails of an oak, but particularly Caliban being forced to cut wood as punishment or Ferdinand given the same task when being tested. Stephano and Trinculo are confined in a lime-tree grove, and finally Prospero too wants his freedom from the 'wooden O'. The poem then, declaredly inspired by *The Tempest* especially through Ariel in his multiple functions of poet, of music, of the guitar itself, is at the same time a prisoner. This aspect of captivity and confinement inevitably recalls Caliban's own predicament. Yet, as Auden, amongst others, was to suggest:

Ariel is song; when he is truly himself, he sings [...]. He cannot express any human feelings because he has none. [He is] a voice which is as lacking in the personal and the erotic and as like an instrument as possible. (Auden 1963, 524-25)

And it is perhaps this aspect which mostly inspired Shelley and Keats; what fuels their imagination is pure sound existing in itself and for itself. Weller concludes:

The guitar is captive to silence from which Miranda can release it, but its own wood imprisons the sound of the natural world, and it is [...] Ariel's enslavement to Miranda, which delivers into a bondage, that may also be a liberation, at the hands of Miranda. (Weller 1978, 928)

This is clearly not the only poem which contains strong echoes of Shakespeare's last romance. It has been chosen as an appropriate example of the effect this play, and the character of Ariel, had on Shelley, and its hovering between the love lyric and the themes of

freedom and bondage with, in my view, an unmentioned hint at Caliban.

Shelley, like Keats, is considered primarily a lyric poet but was also “a powerful dramatist” working with the theatrical conventions of his day, and, as Jeffrey N. Cox observes, his “engagement with drama was a life-long affair” (Cox 2006, 65). Interestingly, he planned a performance of *Othello* acting as director with his circle of friends in Pisa. He left us five dramas: the unfinished *Charles the First* (1819-22), *Fragments of an Unfinished Drama* (1822), *Hellas* (1821), *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-19), and his most successful *The Cenci* (1819). He also wanted to write a play founded on Shakespeare’s *Timon*, which he thought, Trelawny claims, “would be an excellent mode of discussing our present social and political evils dramatically, and of descanting on them” (Trelawny 1973, 122), but got no further than planning in his notebook the first act of a “Modern *Timon*”. In the unfinished *Charles the First*, we find traces of Shakespeare, and he had in fact declared that he intended to write a Shakespearean type of play and that *King Lear* was to be his model “for that is nearly perfect” (122). References abound throughout, though frequently not specific, which can be summarised through the words of the early critic Newman I. White: a “touch of Shakespearean diction” and “indifferent puns in the Shakespearean manner” (White 1922, 439). As we recall, in *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley had said that the perfection of *Lear* lay also in its capacity to embrace comedy and in the character of the Fool, and here he gives King Charles’s jester, Archy, a substantial part which like *Lear*’s Fool sees everything upside down and also asks “Will you hear Merlin’s prophecy” (Shelley 1905, 253, ii.368), and again, echoing *Lear*, we hear: “Have you noted that the Fool of late / Has lost his careless mirth” (260, ii.446-47), clearly resonant with “Since my young lady’s going into France, sir, the Fool hath much pin’d away” (I.iv.73-74). *The Tempest* reverberates in many instances such as “[a] commonwealth like Gonzalo’s” (253, ii.363) as do *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but what is significant overall is the Shakespearean characterization and overall dramatic structure of the play. Shakespearean references in other dramas – *Prometheus Unbound* particularly – would deserve a study of its own given their numerous borrowings and echoes from

many of the plays, but an attentive analysis of *The Cenci*, “the most objective, the most nearly Shakespearean both in dramatic conception and in method of execution of all Shelley’s writings” (Clark 1939, 277), may be useful to draw some final conclusions.

The theory of dramatic composition is expounded in Shelley’s preface to *The Cenci*:

In a dramatic composition, the imagery and the passion should interpenetrate one another, the former reserved simply for the full development and illustration of the latter. Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion. It is thus that the most remote and the most familiar imagery may alike be fit for dramatic purposes when employed in the illustration of strong feeling, which raises what is low, and levels to the apprehension that which is lofty, casting over all the shadow of its own greatness. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 313)

In the earlier unpublished draft of the preface, in connection with this he had written: “The finest works of Shakespeare are a perpetual illustration of this doctrine” (Clark 1939, 277).

Shelley believed that drama should not have a moral purpose and attempted – as Shakespeare does – to avoid declaring a dogma but rather follow inner passions, thus portraying characters as they are rather than projecting his own beliefs or his own ego into them, once again a very Shakespearean ‘attitude’. Jonathan Bate observes that Shelley’s account of his aims implies that he has tried to live up to Shakespearean ideals which were cited frequently as the exemplar of sympathy and disinterestedness, the implication being that Shelley would rather be like Shakespeare than, say, like Byron whose characters are frequently impersonations of his own mind (Bate 1986, 208).

In *The Cenci*, we find an indebtedness to *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Richard III* and especially *Macbeth*, only a few of which will be mentioned here². Strangely – or maybe not – the only influence directly acknowledged by Shelley in his play is to the dramatic poet Calderón whom he saw as a kind of Shakespeare; in fact he declares

² For examples of critical discussions of Shakespearean echoes in *The Cenci*, see Rossington 1997, 315n1.

in a footnote in the play's preface concerning Beatrice's description of the Rock of Petrella (III.i.243ff): "An idea in this speech was suggested by a most sublime passage in *El Purgatorio de San Patricio* of Calderon; the only plagiarism which I have intentionally committed in the whole piece" (P. B. Shelley 2002, 313). Despite this, most critics have rather concentrated on Shakespeare's influence, thus opening up, as Michael Rossington observes, with the term "intentionally committed", the issue of literary indebtedness (Rossington 1997, 305), and the inevitable issue of the anxiety of influence famously raised by Harold Bloom (Bloom 1973). The footnote, in Rossington's view, seems to pre-empt the question of plagiarism and Shelley registers here "as elsewhere, apprehension that openness to work of others might be mistaken for authorial impropriety" (Rossington 1997, 305). The question is also raised in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), where he stated:

[...] I am unwilling to tread in the footsteps of any who have preceded me. I have sought to avoid the imitation of any style of language or versification peculiar to the original minds of which it is the character; designing that, even if what I have produced be worthless, it should still be properly my own. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 135)

The question of plagiarism, or literary indebtedness, is clearly one Shelley was particularly conscious of, and in the case of the footnote on Calderón in *The Cenci*, some critics have dismissed it as a bait hiding the true influence from Shakespeare (Cantor 1976, 91), whereas others have considered the Shakespearean echoes as in fact 'involuntary' in that they simply imply an elementary knowledge of Shakespeare which was probably in his mind since boyhood, as George Edward Woodberry, among others, was to observe early last century (Rossington 1997, 305) in commenting on George Bernard Shaw's highly critical evaluations of the play: "It is a strenuous but futile and never-to-be-repeated attempt to bottle the new wine in the old skins" (Shaw 1886, 372).

In the preface, Shelley indicates that the story of the Cenci family impressed him for its tragic and dramatic possibilities but wanted to "clothe it" (P. B. Shelley 2002, 311) for his public in a language

they would understand and appreciate. He observes that Sophocles and Shakespeare before him had used pre-existing stories and adapted them just as he wants to do here. As in *Macbeth*, there is a strong-willed woman who is the mainspring of the action, an old man is murdered, and the murder is planned by the heroine. Clark observes:

In *Macbeth* the first murder is committed by the principals; in *The Cenci*, it is attempted by the principals; in *Macbeth* the second murder is the work of the assassins; in *The Cenci* the second attempt is by the assassins. In *Macbeth* it is Lady Macbeth who drives and shames her husband to the deed; in *The Cenci* it is Beatrice who drives and shames the assassins to the deeds, in a language so similar to Shakespeare's that it cannot be considered merely accidental. (Clark 1939, 278)

Just a few examples of these similarities might serve to better illustrate the closeness in tone of the two plays. In the first act of the play, Count Cenci plans to violate his daughter (I.i.140-44):

O thou most silent air, that shalt not hear
 What now I think! Thou, pavement, which I tread
 Towards her chamber, – let your echoes talk
 Of my imperious step scorning surprise,
 But not of my intent! (P. B. Shelley 2002, 319)

Before killing Duncan, Macbeth considers:

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
 Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
 The very stones prate of my whereabouts,
 And take the present horror from the time,
 Which now suits with it. (II.i.56-60)

In both cases, there is apprehension for their victims, the pavement is like the firm-set earth and there is an inversion where in the one case the count dares his steps to be heard and in the other Macbeth wants them not to be heard, but the similarity is obvious (Harrington-Lueker 1983, 173-74). Even closer seem the words spoken in the murder scenes:

OLIMPIO

Did you not call?

BEATRICE

When?

OLIMPIO

Now. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 360, IV.iii.8)

LADY MACBETH

[...]

Did not you speak?

MACBETH

When?

LADY MACBETH

Now. (II.ii.16)

When Beatrice worries about the murder being discovered, she says, "The deed is done" (P. B. Shelley 2002, 364, IV.iv.46), much like Macbeth's announcement to his wife "I have done the deed" (342, II.ii.14). In fact, as Harrington-Lueker rightly points out, there is a recurrence around this idea of being "done"; about the incestuous designs upon Beatrice the Count asserts "It must be done; it shall be done, I swear!" (P. B. Shelley 2002, 327, I.iii.178), and Macbeth repeats variant forms "I go, and it is done" (II.i.62) and famously "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (I.vii.1-2). It has become a critical commonplace to cite the correspondences between Duncan's murder and Cenci's; the murderers, like Lady Macbeth, hesitate at killing a sleeping old man and strange noises follow the murder (Harrington-Lueker 1983, 175) and Shelley's banquet scene is not unlike Banquo's feast, particularly in their conclusion. Many more instances could be quoted, but it suffices here to note that the allusions function as a leitmotif throughout the drama in speech, images, and characters. These allusions, however, according to Paul Cantor, show a certain dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's view of authority and rebellion and make Macbeth a more attractive rebel than a character such as Lear who appears, for the critic, a more repellent figure of authority (Cantor 1976), a view which is not shared by all but leads to reflect on Shelley's actual interpretation of Shakespeare. Just one reference to *Lear* gives us an idea of a common tone displayed in a state of

rage and the attitudes displayed, for different reasons, to daughters. In the scene known as “The Curse of the Cenci”, in IV.i.115-23, 140-59, Cenci says:

God!

Hear me! If this most specious mass of flesh,
 Which thou hast made my daughter; this my blood,
 This particle of my divided being;
 Or rather, this my bane and my disease,
 Whose sight infects and poisons me; this devil,
 Which sprung from me as from a hell, was meant
 To aught good use; if her bright loveliness
 Was kindled to illumine this dark world;
 [...]
 That if she ever have a child – and thou,
 Quick Nature! I adjure thee by thy God,
 That thou be fruitful in her, and increase
 And multiply, fulfilling his command,
 And my deep imprecation! – may it be
 A hideous likeness of herself, that as
 From a distorting mirror she may see
 Her image mixed with what she most abhors,
 Smiling upon her from her nursing breast!
 And that the child may from its infancy
 Grow, day by day, more wicked and deformed,
 Turning her mother’s love to misery!
 And that both she and it may live until
 It shall repay her care and pain with hate,
 Or what may else be more unnatural;
 So he may hunt her through the clamorous scoffs
 Of the loud world to a dishonoured grave!
 Shall I revoke this curse? Go, bid her come,
 Before my words are chronicled in heaven. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 356-57)

A curse which is easily compared with that of Lear:

Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!
 Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
 To make this creature fruitful.
 Into her womb convey sterility,
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,

And from her derogate body never spring
 A babe to honor her! If she must teem,
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live
 And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her.
 Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
 With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
 Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
 To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
 How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
 To have a thankless child! – Away, away! (I.iv.275-99)

The curses evidently display the same tone, one desiring a daughter to reproduce, the other to be sterile, but in complete wrath and frenzy, with terms emphasizing the presumed unnaturalness of the girls' behaviours and the contempt and condemnation of the fathers. *King Lear* is commonly thought of as the tragedy of filial ingratitude whereas *The Cenci* is somewhat the opposite. *King Lear*, like *Macbeth*, is rooted in a world where God, king and father represent the authority, and this gives the universe its own order; the breaking of which produces chaos which must be restored. Though, as Jonathan Dollimore states, "the view that Shakespeare and his contemporaries adhered to the tenets of the so-called Elizabethan World Picture has long been discredited" (Dollimore 2004, 6), these plays, as most other tragedies and histories, maintain this general framework even when displaying disruption within them, whereas in *The Cenci* this ordered universe is lacking completely and God, Pope and Father represent the powers of evil which, in Shelley's eyes, must be defeated. It is worth considering, as Bate notes, that in the case of this play at least Shelley could be "responding to Shakespeare in [...] a 'revisionary' way", as Bloom would say (Bate 1986, 266).

One final play worth drawing attention to is *Othello*. Making allowance for the fact that both Shakespeare and Shelley derived their plots from Italian material of the same period, there are parallels which cannot go unnoticed: the plans of the two Machiavellians, Iago and Orsino, who try to manipulate the action, fail in the end, but only after they have produced domestic murders; the tools through which the villains act, Giacomo and Roderigo, remain entangled in the machinations for their inability

to be heroes or stronger and wiser than their manipulators. Desdemona and Beatrice, albeit different characters, “suffer death” but “remain uncorrupted” until the end (Watson 1940, 612). Iago manages to work on his victim’s weaknesses to his own advantages. Similarly, Orsino manages emotions and actions of the Cencis; he says in the second scene of the second act, lines 107-9, 145-46.

It fortunately serves my own designs
 That 'tis a trick of this same family
 To analyse their own and other minds.
 [...]
 From the unravelled hopes of Giacomo
 I must work out my own dear purposes. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 336-37)

Words which would perfectly have suited Iago, as would the following from the first scene of the fifth act, lines 79-83:

[...] to attain my own peculiar ends
 By some such plot of mingled good and ill
 As others weave; but there arose a Power
 Which grasped and snapped the threads of my device,
 And turned it to a net of ruin. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 371)

A clear echo of Iago’s net to “enmesh them all” (II.iii.362). Watson notices also a similarity in structure, with the desultory beginning in both plays – Roderigo and Iago in one case, Camillo and Count Cenci in the other, talking about past deeds which however illuminate the characters (Watson 1940, 613-14).

The most obvious parallel occurs in Giacomo’s soliloquy on the contemplation of parricide in the second scene of the third act, lines 9-11, 51-52:

Thou unreplenished lamp! whose narrow fire
 Is shaken by the wind, and on whose edge
 Devouring darkness hovers!

And yet once quenched I cannot thus relume
 My father’s life. (P. B. Shelley 2002, 351-52)

which displays a choice of vocabulary which cannot but recall Othello's meditation on the murder of Desdemona:

Put out the light, and then put out the light:
 If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
 I can again thy former light restore,
 Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
 Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
 I know not where is that Promethean heat
 That can thy light relume. (V.ii.7-13)

The terms "quench" and "relume" seem too specific to simply be accounted for by the idea of Shakespeare's pervasiveness and hence of an involuntary appropriation.

The list of borrowings, voluntary or not, could continue, but I believe those mentioned are sufficient to demonstrate the impact the reading of Shakespeare had on Shelley. The 'Ariel' quality of Shelley's work is most prominent in the use of imagery, sound, and primacy of the imagination as we have amply seen, particularly in "With a Guitar, to Jane", which however also introduced in a different guise the theme of bondage and freedom associated with Caliban, a theme which is prominent in all of Shelley's production. This is particularly clear in parts of *Queen Mab* or in *Prometheus Unbound*, which gave Shelley the opportunity of treating in a rather complex way the relationships between various forms of injustice and oppression. Whether the Shakespearean appropriations contribute to Shelley's radicalism, as the pioneering study of Clark suggested, remains an intricate question. He theorized and put into practice in his drama, as we saw, "characters as they really are", avoiding dogmas and hence, as he claimed, not exposing personal opinions through his own lens. His radicalism may be grounded in his reading of Shakespeare (his desire to write a "Modern Timon" is a sign of this) depending on how he read the plays. The critic Sara Ruth Watson in the middle of last century closes her brief study commenting on Clark's claim, observing that whether Shelley "found in Shakespeare 'a confirmation of his own radicalism' needs to be expanded and demonstrated" (Watson 1940, 614). More recent studies may help to shed light on the issue, though not solve it.

Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* (1984) analyses three Shakespeare plays placing emphasis precisely on their more radical aspects. He dismisses, for instance, both the Christian and the humanist interpretation of *King Lear* (one of Shelley's favourites, as we saw) focusing instead on its political dimension. He stresses particularly those instances in which the King – deprived of his status – reflects on social issues which he was unable to see before. When on the heath, for instance, insisting that his Fool should take refuge in the hovel before him, he exclaims: "You houseless poverty" (III.iv.26), and then: "Oh I have ta'en / Too little care of this!" (32-33). These statements, Dollimore claims, bring to light the separation of "the privileged from the deprived" (Dollimore 2004, 192), a theme the play insists upon and that the critic considers primarily one concerned with power, property and inheritance. Through a process of self-awareness, the realities those in power had been blind to tend to emerge, as also in the case of Gloucester, literally blind, who says to his unrecognized son Edgar:

Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your pow'r quickly;
So distribution should undo excess. (IV.i.67-70, emphasis mine)

This could have been Shelley's reading of the play and could justify his admiration for it as the most perfect specimen of dramatic art.

The other two plays analysed by Dollimore are *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*: in the first the classic interpretation of love winning over duty – which is not denied – is reinterpreted as essentially a power struggle in which love itself is expressed through martial language and imagery. More obviously in *Coriolanus*, power as strategy is a constant metaphor, but Dollimore, interestingly, reverses the common assumption that Shakespeare portrays the mob as usually fickle and worthless, observing that "the plebeians [...] are presented with both complexity and sympathy" (Dollimore 2004, 224). Once again, such a play should be seen within its political and social reality rather than in essential humanist terms.

In 2012 Chris Fitter dedicates a whole book to *Radical Shakespeare: Politics and Stagecraft in the Early Career* which intends to demonstrate that in the early plays “his politics are radical, that from his very entry into drama Shakespeare seeks to destabilize establishment ideology” (Fitter 2012, 81). By resituating dramas in specific political moments, Shakespeare, in Fitter’s view, articulates public angers: “grievances of military disasters, unpaid troops, and territorial losses [and] of hypertaxation”, to mention but a few (245), and concludes, as Clark had implied nearly a century before him, that “the greatest literary genius of the Elizabethan age emerged, from the outset, as a radical playwright” (254).

Factual proofs of a radical interpretation of Shakespeare are exposed in a political-literary article by Antony Taylor titled “Shakespeare and Radicalism: The Uses and Abuses of Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century Popular Politics”. Taylor locates Shakespeare in the tradition of nineteenth-century politics in Britain and illustrates in very precise terms the struggle for the appropriation of Shakespeare by the Chartist movement and radical liberal culture. Shakespeare is seen, in this phase, as a poet of the people. A play such as *Julius Caesar* had already been “adopted by seventeenth-century Whigs as a legitimation of tyrannicide and as a model for the overthrow of James II” (Taylor 2002, 362), with Brutus emerging as the hero opposed to tyranny. In the middle of the nineteenth-century, plays such as *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV*, and *King John* were interpreted as precursors of the people’s Charter and precedents for later parliamentary reforms. *Coriolanus*, particularly, was a favourite, since the Chartists perceived in it “an attack on the patrician class”, authoritarian injustice and “references to food shortages” (367). Taylor’s article takes us through the evolution of radical appropriation of Shakespeare until the Tercentenary of 1864 in which memories of Shakespeare held a significant role in the movement of radical protest. “Radical readings”, Taylor concludes, “interpreted him as a reformer, a republican, a land nationalizer, and sometimes even a freethinker” (379).

These critical approaches partly help us to answer the question concerning Shakespeare’s influence on Shelley’s radicalism and can relate to his admitted sympathy for Caliban, and generally to his

siding with the underdog, advocating for a liberal future. Though Shelley never explicitly declares to have found confirmation of his own political perspective through his absorption of Shakespeare's plays, commenting instead, as we saw, on the Bard being "sublime" and "ideal" and "perfect" in his dramatic composition, we cannot exclude that, voluntarily or not, his own socio-political stance was powered also by the constant reading of these plays.

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