

# **The Cenci**

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1819

# Contents

<b>Dramatis Personæ</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Act I</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Scene I</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Scene II</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Scene III</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Act II</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Scene I</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Scene II</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Act III</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Scene I</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Scene II</b>	<b>34</b>

<b>Act IV</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Scene I</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Scene II</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Scene III</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Scene IV</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Act V</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Scene I</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Scene II</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Scene III</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Scene IV</b>	<b>68</b>

## Dramatis Personæ

COUNT FRANCESCO CENCI.

GIACOMO & BERNARDO, *his Sons*.

CARDINAL CAMILLO.

ORSINO, *a Prelate*.

SAVELLA, *the Pope's Legate*.

OLIMPIO & MARZIO, *Assassins*.

ANDREA, *Servant to Cenci*.

Nobles—Judges—Guards—Servants.

LUCRETIA, *Wife of Cenci, and Step-mother of his children*; BEATRICE, *his Daughter*.

The SCENE lies principally in Rome, but changes during the Fourth Act to Petrella, a castle among the Apulian Apennines.

*Time.* During the Pontificate of Clement VIII.

# Act I

## Scene I

*An Apartment In The Cenci Palace.*

*Enter COUNT CENCI, and CARDINAL CAMILLO*

*Camillo*

THAT matter of the murder is hushed up  
If you consent to yield his Holiness  
Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate.—  
It needed all my interest in the conclave  
To bend him to this point: he said that you  
Bought perilous impunity with your gold;  
That crimes like yours if once or twice compounded  
Enriched the Church, and respited from hell  
An erring soul which might repent and live:—  
But that the glory and the interest  
Of the high throne he fills, little consist  
With making it a daily mart of guilt  
As manifold and hideous as the deeds  
Which you scarce hide from men's revolted eyes.

*Cenci.* The third of my possessions—let it go!  
Ay, I once heard the nephew of the Pope  
Had sent his architect to view the ground,  
Meaning to build a villa on my vines  
The next time I compounded with his uncle:  
I little thought he should outwit me so!  
Henceforth no witness—not the lamp—shall see  
That which the vassal threatened to divulge  
Whose throat is choked with dust for his reward.  
The deed he saw could not have rated higher  
Than his most worthless life:—it angers me!  
Respited me from Hell!—So may the Devil  
Respite their souls from Heaven. No doubt Pope Clement,  
And his most charitable nephews, pray  
That the Apostle Peter and the saints  
Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy  
Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and length of days  
Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards  
Of their revenue.—But much yet remains  
To which they show no title.

*Camillo.* Oh, Count Cenci!

So much that thou mightst honourably live  
And reconcile thyself with thine own heart  
And with thy God, and with the offended world.  
How hideously look deeds of lust and blood  
Thro' those snow white and venerable hairs!—  
Your children should be sitting round you now,  
But that you fear to read upon their looks       7  
The shame and misery you have written there.  
Where is your wife? Where is your gentle daughter?  
Methinks her sweet looks, which make all things else  
Beauteous and glad, might kill the fiend within you.  
Why is she barred from all society  
But her own strange and uncomplaining wrongs?  
Talk with me, Count—you know I mean you well

*Enter ANDREA*

*Andrea.* My Lord, a gentleman from Salamanca  
Would speak with you.

*Cenci.* Bid him attend me in the grand saloon. [*Exit ANDREA.*

*Camillo.* Farewell; and I will pray  
Almighty God that thy false, impious words  
Tempt not his spirit to abandon thee. [*Exit CAMILLO.*

*Cenci.* The third of my possessions! I must use  
Close husbandry, or gold, the old man's sword,  
Falls from my withered hand. But yesterday  
There came an order from the Pope to make  
Fourfold provision for my cursed sons;  
Whom I had sent from Rome to Salamanca,  
Hoping some accident might cut them off;  
And meaning if I could to starve them there.  
I pray thee, God, send some quick death upon them!  
Bernardo and my wife could not be worse  
If dead and damned:—then, as to Beatrice—  
(*Looking around him suspiciously.*)  
I think they cannot hear me at the door;  
What if they should? And yet I need not speak  
Though the heart triumphs with itself in words.  
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!—Andrea!

*Enter ANDREA*

*Andrea.* My lord?

*Cenci.* Bid Beatrice attend me in her chamber  
This evening:—no, at midnight and alone. [*Exeunt.*



## Scene II

*A Garden in the Cenci Palace.*

*Enter BEATRICE and ORSINO, as in conversation*

*Beatrice.* Pervert not truth,  
*Orsino.* You remember where we held  
That conversation;—nay, we see the spot  
Even from this cypress;—two long years are past  
Since, on an April midnight, underneath  
The moonlight ruins of mount Palatine,  
I did confess to you my secret mind.

*Orsino.* You said you loved me then.

*Beatrice.* You are a Priest,  
Speak to me not of love.

*Orsino.* I may obtain  
The dispensation of the Pope to marry.  
Because I am a Priest do you believe  
Your image, as the hunter some struck deer,  
Follows me not whether I wake or sleep?

*Beatrice.* As I have said, speak to me not of love:  
Had you a dispensation I have not;  
Nor will I leave this home of misery  
Whilst my poor Bernard, and that gentle lady  
To whom I owe life, and these virtuous thoughts,  
Must suffer what I still have strength to share.  
Alas, Orsino! All the love that once  
I felt for you, is turned to bitter pain.  
Ours was a youthful contract, which you first  
Broke, by assuming vows no Pope will loose.  
And thus I love you still, but holily,  
Even as a sister or a spirit might;  
And so I swear a cold fidelity.  
And it is well perhaps we shall not marry.  
You have a sly, equivocating vein  
That suits me not.—Ah, wretched that I am!  
Where shall I turn? Even now you look on me  
As you were not my friend, and as if you  
Discovered that I thought so, with false smiles  
Making my true suspicion seem your wrong.  
Ah no! forgive me; sorrow makes me seem  
Stern 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?

*Orsino.* All will be well. 10  
Is the petition yet prepared? You know  
My zeal for all you wish, sweet Beatrice;  
Doubt not but I will use my utmost skill  
So that the Pope attend to your complaint.

*Beatrice.* Your zeal for all I wish;—Ah me, you are cold!  
Your utmost skill—speak but one word—*(aside)* Alas!

## Scene III

*A Magnificent Hall in the Cenci Palace. A Banquet.*

*Enter* CENCI, LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, ORSINO, CAMILLO, NOBLES

*Cenci.* Welcome, my friends and kinsmen; welcome ye,  
Princes and Cardinals, pillars of the church,  
Whose presence honours our festivity.  
I have too long lived like an anchorite,  
And in my absence from your merry meetings  
An evil word is gone abroad of me;  
But I do hope that you, my noble friends,  
When you have shared the entertainment here,  
And heard the pious cause for which 'tis given,  
And we have pledged a health or two together,  
Will think me flesh and blood as well as you;  
Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so,  
But tender-hearted, meek and pitiful.

*First Guest.* In truth, My Lord, you seem too light of heart,  
Too sprightly and companionable a man,  
To act the deeds that rumour pins on you.  
(*To his companion.*) I never saw such blithe and open cheer  
In any eye!

*Second Guest.* Some most desired event,  
In which we all demand a common joy,  
Has brought us hither; let us hear it, Count.

*Cenci.* It is indeed a most desired event.  
If, when a parent from a parent's heart  
Lifts from this earth to the great father of all  
A prayer, both when he lays him down to sleep,  
And when he rises up from dreaming it;  
One supplication, one desire, one hope,  
That he would grant a wish for his two sons,  
Even all that he demands in their regard—  
And suddenly beyond his dearest hope,  
It is accomplished, he should then rejoice,  
And call his friends and kinsmen to a feast,  
And task their love to grace his merriment,  
Then honour me thus far—for I am he.

*Beatrice (to Lucretia).* Great God! How horrible! Some dreadful ill  
Must have befallen my brothers.

*Lucretia.* Fear not, Child,  
He speaks too frankly.

*Beatrice.* Ah! My blood runs cold.  
I fear that wicked laughter round his eye,      12  
Which wrinkles up the skin even to the hair.

*Cenci.* Here are the letters brought from Salamanca;  
Beatrice, read them to your mother. God!  
I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform,  
By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought.  
My disobedient and rebellious sons

*ports her.*

*Beatrice.* It is not true!—Dear lady, pray look up.  
Had it been true, there is a God in Heaven,  
He would not live to boast of such a boon.  
Unnatural man, thou knowest that it is false.

*Cenci.* Ay, as the word of God; whom here I call  
To witness that I speak the sober truth;—  
And whose most favouring Providence was shown  
Even in the manner of their deaths. For Rocco  
Was kneeling at the mass, with sixteen others,  
When the church fell and crushed him to a mummy,  
The rest escaped unhurt. Cristofano  
Was stabbed in error by a jealous man,  
Whilst she he loved was sleeping with his rival;  
All in the self-same hour of the same night;  
Which shows that Heaven has special care of me.  
I beg those friends who love me, that they mark  
The day a feast upon their calendars.  
It was the twenty-seventh of December:  
Ay, read the letters if you doubt my oath. [*The Assembly appears confused; several of the guests*

*rise.*

*First Guest.* Oh, horrible! I will depart—

*Second Guest.* And I.—

*Third Guest.* No, stay!

I do believe it is some jest; tho' faith!

'Tis mocking us somewhat too solemnly.

I think his son has married the Infanta,

Or found a mine of gold in El Dorado;

'Tis but to season some such news; stay, stay!

I see 'tis only raillery by his smile.

*Cenci (filling a bowl of wine, and lifting it up).* Oh, thou  
bright wine whose purple splendour leaps  
And bubbles gaily in this golden bowl  
Under the lamp-light, as my spirits do,  
To hear the death of my accursèd sons!  
Could I believe thou wert their mingled blood,  
Then would I taste thee like a sacrament,  
And pledge with thee the mighty Devil in Hell,  
Who, if a father's curses, as men say,  
Climb with swift wings after their children's souls,  
And drag them from the very throne of Heaven,  
Now triumphs in my triumph!—But thou art  
Superfluous; I have drunken deep of joy,  
And I will taste no other wine to-night.  
Here, Andrea! Bear the bowl around.

*A Guest (rising).* Thou wretch!  
Will none among this noble company  
Check the abandoned villain?

*Camillo.* For God's sake  
Let me dismiss the guests! You are insane,  
Some ill will come of this.

*Second Guest.* Seize, silence him!

*First Guest.* I will!

*Third Guest.* And I!

*Cenci (addressing those who rise with a threatening gesture).* Who moves? Who speaks? (*turning*

*to the Company)*

'tis nothing,

Enjoy yourselves.—Beware! For my revenge

Is as the sealed commission of a king

That kills, and none dare name the murderer. [*The Banquet is broken up; several of the Guests are departing.*]

*Beatrice.* I do entreat you, go not, noble guests;

What, although tyranny and impious hate

Stand sheltered by a father's hoary hair,

What, if 'tis he who clothed us in these limbs

Who tortures them, and triumphs? What, if we,

The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh,

His children and his wife, whom he is bound

To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find

No refuge in this merciless wide world?

O think what deep wrongs must have blotted out

First love, then reverence in a child's prone mind,

Till it thus vanquish shame and fear! O think!

I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand

Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke

Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!

Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt

Remained, have sought by patience, love, and tears

To soften him, and when this could not be

I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights

And lifted up to God, the father of all,

Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard

I have still borne,—until I meet you here,

Princes and kinsmen, at this hideous feast

Given at my brothers' deaths. Two yet remain,

His wife remains and I, whom if ye save not,

Ye may soon share such merriment again

As fathers make over their children's graves.

O Prince Colonna, thou art our near kinsman,

Cardinal, thou art the Pope's chamberlain,

Camillo, thou art chief justiciary,

Take us away!

*Cenci.* (*He has been conversing with CAMILLO during the first part of BEATRICE'S speech; he*

*hears the conclusion, and now advances.*) I hope my good friends here  
Will think of their own daughters—or perhaps  
Of their own throats—before they lend an ear  
To this wild girl.

*Beatrice (not noticing the words of Cenci).* Dare no one look on me?  
None answer? Can one tyrant overbear  
The sense of many best and wisest men?  
Or is it that I sue not in some form  
Of scrupulous law, that ye deny my suit?  
O God! That I were buried with my brothers!  
And that the flowers of this departed spring  
Were fading on my grave! And that my father  
Were celebrating now one feast for all!

*Camillo.* A bitter wish for one so young and gentle;  
Can we do nothing?  
*Colonna.* Nothing that I see.  
Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy:  
Yet I would second any one.  
*A Cardinal.* And I.

*Cenci.* Retire to your chamber, insolent girl!

*Beatrice.* Retire thou impious man! Ay, hide thyself  
Where never eye can look upon thee more!  
Wouldst thou have honour and obedience  
Who art a torturer? Father, never dream  
Though thou must overbear this company,  
But ill must come of ill.—Frown not on me!  
Haste, hide thyself, lest with avenging looks  
My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat!  
Cover thy face from every living eye,  
And start if thou but hear a human step.  
Seek out some dark and silent corner, there  
Bow thy white head before offended God,  
And we will kneel around, and fervently  
Pray that he pity both ourselves, and thee.

*Cenci.* My friends, I do lament this insane girl  
Has spoilt the mirth of our festivity.  
Good night, farewell; I will not make you longer  
Spectators of our dull domestic quarrels.  
Another time.— [*Exeunt all but CENCI and BEATRICE.*]  
My brain is swimming round;  
Give me a bowl of wine! [*To BEATRICE.*]  
Thou painted viper!  
Beast that thou art! Fair and yet terrible!  
I know a charm shall make thee meek and tame,  
Now get thee from my sight! [*Exit BEATRICE.*]  
Here, Andrea,

Fill up this goblet with Greek wine. I said  
I would not drink this evening; but I must;  
For, strange to say, I feel my spirits foil



## **Act II**

# Scene I

*An Apartment in the Cenci Palace.*

*Enter LUCRETIA and BERNARDO*

*Lucretia.* Weep not, my gentle boy; he struck but me  
Who have borne deeper wrongs. In truth, if he  
Had killed me, he had done a kinder deed.  
O, God Almighty, do thou look upon us,  
We have no other friend but only thee!  
Yet weep not; though I love you as my own,  
I am not your true mother.

*Bernardo.* O more, more,  
Than ever mother was to any child,  
That have you been to me! Had he not been  
My father, do you think that I should weep!

*Lucretia.* Alas! Poor boy, what else couldst thou have done?

*Enter BEATRICE*

*Beatrice (in a hurried voice).* Did he pass this way? Have you seen him, brother?

Ah! No, that is his step upon the stairs;

'Tis nearer now; his hand in on the door;

Mother, if I to thee have ever been

A duteous child, now save me! Thou, great God,

Whose image upon earth a father is,

Dost thou indeed abandon me? He comes:

The door is opening now; I see his face;

He frowns on others, but he smiles on me,

Even as he did after the feast last night.

*Enter a Servant*

Almighty God, how merciful thou art!

'Tis but Orsino's servant.—Well, what news?

*Servant.* My master bids me say, the Holy Father

Has sent back your petition thus unopened. [*Giving a paper.*

And he demands at what hour 'twere secure

To visit you again?

*Lucretia.* At the Ave Mary. [*Exit Servant.*

So daughter, our last hope has failed; Ah me!

How pale you look; you tremble, and you stand

Wrapped in some fixed and fearful meditation,

As if one thought were over strong for you:

Your eyes have a chill glare; O, dearest child!

Are you gone mad? If not, pray speak to me.

*Beatrice.* You see I am not mad: I speak to you.

*Lucretia.* You talked of something that your father did

After that dreadful feast? Could it be worse

Than when he smiled, and cried, My sons are dead!

And every one looked in his neighbour's face

To see if others were as white as he?

At the first word he spoke I felt the blood

Rush to my heart, and fell into a trance;

And when it passed I sat all weak and wild;

Whilst you alone stood up, and with strong words

Checked his unnatural pride; and I could see

The devil was rebuked that lives in him.

Until this hour thus have you ever stood

Between us and your father's moody wrath

Like a protecting presence: your firm mind

Has been our only refuge and defence.

What can have thus subdued it? What can now

Have given you that cold melancholy look, 19

Succeeding to your unaccustomed fear?

*Beatrice.* What is it that you say? I was just thinking

'Twere better not to struggle any more.

Men, like my father, have been dark and bloody,

Yet never—Oh! Before worse comes of it

'Twere wise to die; it ends in that at last

*Enter CENCI suddenly*

*Cenci.* What, Beatrice here!  
Come hither! [*She shrinks back, and covers her face.*  
Nay, hide not your face, 'tis fair;  
Look up! Why, yesternight you dared to look  
With disobedient insolence upon me,  
Bending a stern and an inquiring brow  
On what I meant; whilst I then sought to hide  
That which I came to tell you—but in vain.

*Beatrice (wildly, staggering towards the door).* O that the earth would gape! Hide me, O God!

*Cenci.* Then it was I whose inarticulate words  
Fell from my lips, and who with tottering steps  
Fled from your presence, as you now from mine.  
Stay, I command you—from this day and hour  
Never again, I think, with fearless eye,  
And brow superior, and unaltered cheek,  
And that lip made for tenderness or scorn,  
Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of mankind;  
Me least of all. Now get thee to thy chamber!  
Thou too, loathed image of thy cursed mother, [*To BERNARDO.*  
Thy milky, meek face makes me sick with hate! [*Exeunt BEATRICE and BERNARDO.*  
(*Aside.*) So much has past between us as must make  
Me bold, her fearful.—'Tis an awful thing  
To touch such mischief as I now conceive:  
So men sit shivering on the dewy bank,  
And try the chill stream with their feet; once in...  
How the delighted spirit pants for joy!

*Lucretia (advancing timidly towards him).* O husband! Pray forgive poor Beatrice.  
She meant not any ill.

*Cenci.* Nor you perhaps?  
Nor that young imp, whom you have taught by rote  
Parricide with his alphabet? Nor Giacomo?  
Nor those two must unnatural sons, who stirred  
Enmity up against me with the Pope?  
Whom in one night merciful God cut off:  
Innocent lambs! They thought not any ill.  
You were not here conspiring? You said nothing  
Of how I might be dungeoned as a madman;  
Or be condemned to death for some offence,  
And you would be the witness?—This failing,  
How just it were to hire assassins, or  
Put sudden poison in my evening drink?  
Or smother me when overcome by wine?      21  
Seeing we had no other judge but God,  
And he had sentenced me, and there were none  
But you to be the executioners  
Of this decree enregistered in heaven?  
Oh, no! You said not this?

*Lucretia.* So help me God

## Scene II

*A Chamber in the Vatican.*

*Enter CAMILLO and GIACOMO, in conversation*

*Camillo.* There is an obsolete and doubtful law  
By which you might obtain a bare provision  
Of food and clothing—

*Giacomo.* Nothing more? Alas!  
Bare must be the provision which strict law  
Awards, and aged, sullen avarice pays.  
Why did my father not apprentice me  
To some mechanic trade? I should have then  
Been trained in no highborn necessities  
Which I could meet not by my daily toil.  
The eldest son of a rich nobleman  
Is heir to all his incapacities;  
He has wide wants, and narrow powers. If you,  
Cardinal Camillo, were reduced at once  
From thrice-driven beds of down, and delicate food,  
An hundred servants, and six palaces,  
To that which nature doth indeed require?—

*Camillo.* Nay, there is reason in your plea; 'twere hard.

*Giacomo.* 'Tis hard for a firm man to bear: but I  
Have a dear wife, a lady of high birth,  
Whose dowry in ill hour I lent my father  
Without a bond or witness to the deed:  
And children, who inherit her fine senses,  
The fairest creatures in this breathing world;  
And she and they reproach me not. Cardinal,  
Do you not think the Pope would interpose  
And stretch authority beyond the law?

*Camillo.* Though your peculiar case is hard, I know  
The Pope will not divert the course of law.  
After that impious feast the other night  
I spoke with him, and urged him then to check  
Your father's cruel hand; he frowned and said,  
"Children are disobedient, and they sting  
Their father's hearts to madness and despair,  
Requiting years of care with contumely.  
I pity the Count Cenci from my heart;  
His outraged love perhaps awakened hate,  
And thus he is exasperated to ill.  
In the great war between the old and young  
I, who have white hairs and a tottering body,  
Will keep at least blameless neutrality."

*Enter* ORSINO



You, my good Lord Orsino, heard those words.

*Orsino.* What words?

*Giacomo.* Alas, repeat them not again!  
There then is no redress for me, at least  
None but that which I may achieve myself,  
Since I am driven to the brink.—But, say,  
My innocent sister and my only brother  
Are dying underneath my father's eye.  
The memorable torturers of this land,  
Galeaz Visconti, Borgia, Ezzelin,  
Never inflicted on the meanest slave  
What these endure; shall they have no protection?

*Camillo.* Why, if they would petition to the Pope  
I see not how he could refuse it—yet  
He holds it of most dangerous example  
In aught to weaken the paternal power,  
Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own.  
I pray you now excuse me. I have business  
That will not bear delay. [*Exit CAMILLO.*]

*Giacomo.* But you, Orsino,  
Have the petition: wherefore not present it?

*Orsino.* I have presented it, and backed it with  
My earnest prayers, and urgent interest;  
It was returned unanswered. I doubt not  
But that the strange and execrable deeds  
Alleged in it—in truth they might well baffle  
Any belief—have turned the Pope's displeasure  
Upon the accusers from the criminal:  
So I should guess from what Camillo said.

*Giacomo.* My friend, that palace-walking devil Gold  
Has whispered silence to his Holiness:  
And we are left, as scorpions ringed with fire.  
What should we do but strike ourselves to death?  
For he who is our murderous persecutor  
Is shielded by a father's holy name,  
Or I would— (*Stops abruptly.*)

*Orsino.* What? Fear not to speak your thought.  
Words are but holy as the deeds they cover:  
A priest who has forsworn the God he serves;  
A judge who makes Truth weep at his decree; 25  
A friend who should weave counsel, as I now,  
But as the mantle of some selfish guile;  
A father who is all a tyrant seems,  
Were the profaner for his sacred name.

*Giacomo.* Ask me not what I think; the unwilling brain  
Feigns often what it would not; and we trust

## ***Act III***

## Scene I

*An Apartment in the Cenci Palace.*

LUCRETIA, *to her enter* BEATRICE

*Beatrice. (She enters staggering, and speaks wildly.)* Reach me that handkerchief!—My brain is

hurt;  
My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me...  
I see but indistinctly...

*Lucretia.* My sweet child,  
You have no wound; 'tis only a cold dew  
That starts from your dear brow ... Alas! Alas!  
What has befallen?

*Beatrice.* How comes this hair undone?  
Its wandering strings must be what blind me so,  
And yet I tied it fast.—O, horrible!  
The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls  
Spin round! I see a woman weeping there,  
And standing calm and motionless, whilst I  
Slide giddily as the world reels.... My God!  
The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!  
The sunshine on the floor is black! The air  
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe  
In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps  
A clinging, black contaminating mist  
About me ... 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,  
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues  
My fingers and my limbs to one another,  
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves  
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning  
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!  
My God! I never knew what the mad felt  
Before; for I am mad beyond all doubt!  
(*More wildly.*) No, I am dead! These putrefying limbs  
Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul  
Which would burst forth into the wandering air! (*A pause.*)  
What hideous thought was that I had even now?  
'Tis gone; and yet its burthen remains here  
O'er these dull eyes ... upon this weary heart!  
O, world! O, life! O, day! O, misery!

*Lucretia.* What ails thee, my poor child? She answers not:  
Her spirit apprehends the sense of pain,  
But not its cause; suffering has dried away  
The source from which it sprung...

*Beatrice (frantically).* Like Parricide...  
Misery has killed its father: yet its father  
Never like mine ... O, God! What thing am I?

*Lucretia.* My dearest child, what has your father done?

*Beatrice (doubtfully).* Who art thou, questioner? I have no father.  
(*Aside.*) She is the madhouse nurse who tends on me,  
It is a piteous office.

(*To Lucretia, in a slow, subdued voice.*) Do you know  
I thought I was that wretched Beatrice  
Men speak of, whom her father sometimes hales

*Enter* ORSINO

*(She approaches him solemnly.)* Welcome, Friend!  
I have to tell you that, since last we met,  
I have endured a wrong so great and strange,  
That neither life nor death can give me rest.  
Ask me not what it is, for there are deeds  
Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue.

*Orsino.* And what is he who has thus injured you?

*Beatrice.* The man they call my father: a dread name.

*Orsino.* It cannot be...

*Beatrice.* What it can be, or not,  
Forbear to think. It is, and it has been;  
Advise me how it shall not be again.  
I thought to die; but a religious awe  
Restrains me, and the dread lest death itself  
Might be no refuge from the consciousness  
Of what is yet unexpiated. Oh, speak!

*Orsino.* Accuse him of the deed, and let the law avenge thee.

*Beatrice.* Oh, ice-hearted counsellor!  
If I could find a word that might make known  
The crime of my destroyer; and that done,  
My tongue should like a knife tear out the secret  
Which cankers my heart's core; ay, lay all bare  
So that my unpolluted fame should be  
With vilest gossips a stale mouthèd story;  
A mock, a bye-word, an astonishment:—  
If this were done, which never shall be done,  
Think of the offender's gold, his dreaded hate  
And the strange horror of the accuser's tale,  
Baffling belief, and overpowering speech;  
Scarce whispered, unimaginable, wrapt  
In hideous hints ... Oh, most assured redress!

*Orsino.* You will endure it then?

*Beatrice.* Endure?—Orsino,  
It seems your counsel is small profit. *(Turns from him, and speaks half to herself.)*  
Ay,  
All must be suddenly resolved and done.  
What is this undistinguishable mist  
Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow,  
Darkening each other?

30

*Orsino.* Should the offender live?  
Triumph in his misdeed? and make, by use,  
His crime, whate'er it is, dreadful no doubt,  
Thine element; until thou mayest become  
Utterly lost; subdued even to the hue  
Of that which thou permittest?

*Enter GIACOMO, in a hurried manner*

How! Have you ventured hither? Know you then  
That Cenci is from home?

*Giacomo.* I sought him here;  
And now must wait till he returns.

*Orsino.* Great God!  
Weigh you the danger of this rashness?

*Giacomo. Ay!*  
Does my destroyer know his danger? We  
Are now no more, as once, parent and child,  
But man to man; the oppressor to the oppressed;  
The slanderer to the slandered; foe to foe:  
He has cast Nature off, which was his shield,  
And Nature casts him off, who is her shame;  
And I spurn both. Is it a father's throat  
Which I will shake, and say, I ask not gold;  
I ask not happy years; nor memories  
Of tranquil childhood; nor home-sheltered love;  
Though all these hast thou torn from me, and more;  
But only my fair fame; only one hoard  
Of peace, which I thought hidden from thy hate,  
Under the penury heaped on me by thee,  
Or I will ... God can understand and pardon,  
Why should I speak with man?

*Orsino.* Be calm, dear friend.

*Giacomo.* Well, I will calmly tell you what he did.  
This old Francesco Cenci, as you know,  
Borrowed the dowry of my wife from me,  
And then denied the loan; and left me so  
In poverty, the which I sought to mend  
By holding a poor office in the state.  
It had been promised to me, and already  
I bought new clothing for my ragged babes,  
And my wife smiled; and my heart knew repose.  
When Cenci's intercession, as I found,  
Conferred this office on a wretch, whom thus  
He paid for vilest service. I returned  
With this ill news, and we sate sad together  
Solacing our despondency with tears  
Of such affection and unbroken faith  
As temper life's worst bitterness; when he,  
As he is wont, came to upbraid and curse,  
Mocking our poverty, and telling us  
Such was God's scourge for disobedient sons.

And then, that I might strike him dumb with shame  
I spoke of my wife's dowry; but he coined  
A brief yet specious tale, how I had wasted

The sum in secret riot and he saw  
My wife was touched, and he went smiling forth.  
And when I knew the impression he had made



*Enter BEATRICE*

*Beatrice.* 'Tis my brother's voice! You know me not?

*Giacomo.* My sister, my lost sister!

*Beatrice.* Lost indeed!

I see Orsino has talked with you, and  
That you conjecture things too horrible  
To speak, yet far less than the truth.

Now, stay not,

He might return: yet kiss me; I shall know  
That then thou hast consented to his death.

Farewell, farewell! Let piety to God,  
Brotherly love, justice and clemency,  
And all things that make tender hardest hearts

Make thine hard, brother. Answer not ... farewell. [*Exeunt severally.*]

## Scene II

*A mean Apartment in GIACOMO'S House.*

GIACOMO *alone*

*Giacomo.* 'Tis midnight, and Orsino comes not yet. [*Thunder, and the sound of a storm.*  
What! can the everlasting elements  
Fell with a worm like man? If so the shaft  
Of mercy-wingèd lightning would not fall  
On stones and trees. My wife and children sleep:  
They are now living in unmeaning dreams:  
But I must wake, still doubting if that deed  
Be just which was most necessary. O,  
Thou un replenished lamp! whose narrow fire  
Is shaken by the wind, and on whose edge  
Devouring darkness hovers! Thou small flame,  
Which, as a dying pulse rises and falls,  
Still flickerest up and down, how very soon,  
Did I not feed thee, wouldst thou fail and be  
As thou hadst never been! So wastes and sinks  
Even now, perhaps, the life that kindled mine:  
But that no power can fill with vital oil  
That broken lamp of flesh. Ha! 'tis the blood  
Which fed these veins that ebbs till all is cold:  
It is the form that moulded mine that sinks  
Into the white and yellow spasms of death:  
It is the soul by which mine was arrayed  
In God's immortal likeness which now stands  
Naked before Heaven's judgment seat! (*A bell strikes.*)  
One! Two!  
The hours crawl on; and when my hairs are white,  
My son will then perhaps be waiting thus,  
Tortured between just hate and vain remorse;  
Chiding the tardy messenger of news  
Like those which I expect; I almost wish  
He be not dead, although my wrongs are great;  
Yet ... 'tis Orsino's step...

*Enter* ORSINO

Speak!

*Orsino.* I am come  
To say he has escaped.

*Giacomo.* Escaped!

*Orsino.* And safe  
Within Petrella. He past by the spot  
Appointed for the deed an hour too soon.

*Giacomo.* Are we the fools of such contingencies?  
And do we waste in blind misgivings thus  
The hours when we should act? Then wind and thunder,  
Which seemed to howl his knell, is the loud laughter  
With which Heaven mocks our weakness! I henceforth  
Will ne'er repent of aught designed or done  
But my repentance.

*Orsino.* See, the lamp is out.

*Giacomo.* If no remorse is ours when the dim air  
Has drank this innocent flame, why should we quail  
When Cenci's life, that light by which ill spirits  
See the worst deeds they prompt, shall sink for ever?  
No, I am hardened.

*Orsino.* Why, what need of this?  
Who feared the pale intrusion of remorse  
In a just deed? Altho' our first plan failed,  
Doubt not but he will soon be laid to rest.  
But light the lamp; let us not talk i' the dark.  
*Giacomo (lighting the lamp).* And yet once quenched I cannot thus relume  
My father's life: do you not think his ghost  
Might plead that argument with God?

*Orsino.* Once gone  
You cannot now recall your sister's peace;  
Your own extinguished years of youth and hope;  
Nor your wife's bitter words; nor all the taunts  
Which, from the prosperous, weak misfortune takes;  
Nor your dead mother; nor...

*Giacomo.* O, speak no more!  
I am resolved, although this very hand  
Must quench the life that animated it.

*Orsino.* There is no need of that. Listen: you know  
Olimpio, the castellan of Petrella  
In old Colonna's time; him whom your father  
Degraded from his post? And Marzio,  
That desperate wretch, whom he deprived last year  
Of a reward of blood, well earned and due?

## ***Act IV***

# Scene I

*An Apartment in the Castle of Petrella*

*Enter CENCI*

*Cenci.* She comes not; yet I left her even now  
Vanquished and faint. She knows the penalty  
Of her delay: yet what if threats are vain?  
Am I not now within Petrella's moat?  
Or fear I still the eyes and ears of Rome?  
Might I not drag her by the golden hair?  
Stamp on her? Keep her sleepless till her brain  
Be overworn? Tame her with chains and famine?  
Less would suffice. Yet so to leave undone  
What I most seek! No, 'tis her stubborn will  
Which by its own consent shall stoop as low  
As that which drags it down.

*Enter LUCRETIA*

Thou loathèd wretch!  
Hide thee from my abhorrence; fly, begone!  
Yet stay! Bid Beatrice come hither.

*Lucretia.* Oh,  
Husband! I pray for thine own wretched sake  
Heed what thou dost. A man who walks like thee  
Thro' crimes, and thro' the danger of his crimes,  
Each hour may stumble o'er a sudden grave.  
And thou art old; thy hairs are hoary gray;  
As thou wouldst save thyself from death and hell,  
Pity thy daughter; give her to some friend  
In marriage: so that she may tempt thee not  
To hatred, or worse thoughts, if worse there be.

*Cenci.* What! like her sister who has found a home  
To mock my hate from with prosperity?  
Strange ruin shall destroy both her and thee  
And all that yet remain. My death may be  
Rapid, her destiny outspeeds it. Go,  
Bid her come hither, and before my mood  
Be changed, lest I should drag her by the hair.

*Lucretia.* She sent me to thee, husband. At thy presence  
She fell, as thou dost know, into a trance;  
And in that trance she heard a voice which said,  
"Cenci must die! Let him confess himself!  
Even now the accusing Angel waits to hear  
If God, to punish his enormous crimes,  
Harden his dying heart!"

*Cenci.* Why—such thing are...  
No doubt divine revealings may be made.  
'Tis plain I have been favoured from above,  
For when I cursed my sons they died.—Ay ... so...  
As to the right of wrong that's talk ... repentance...  
Repentance is an easy moment's work  
And more depends on God than me. Well ... well...  
I must give up the greater point, which was  
To poison and corrupt her soul. [*A pause; LUCRETIA approaches anxiously, and then shrinks*

*bask as he speaks.* One, two;  
Ay ... Rocco and Cristofano my curse  
Strangled: and Giacomo, I think, will find  
Life a worse Hell than that beyond the grave:  
Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate,  
Die in despair, blaspheming: to Bernardo,  
He is so innocent, I will bequeath  
The memory of these deeds, and make his youth  
The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts  
Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb.  
When all is done, out in the wide Campagna,  
I will pile up my silver and my gold;  
My costly robes, paintings and tapestries;  
My parchments and all records of my wealth,  
And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave  
Of my possessions nothing but my name;  
Which shall be an inheritance to strip  
Its wearer bare as infamy. That done,  
My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign  
Into the hands of him who wielded it;  
Be it for its own punishment or theirs,  
He will not ask it of me till the lash  
Be broken in its last and deepest wound;  
Until its hate be all inflicted. Yet,  
Lest death outspeed my purpose, let me make  
Short work and sure ... [*Going.*]

*Lucretia.* (*Stops him.*) Oh, stay! It was a feint:  
She had no vision, and she heard no voice.  
I said it but to awe thee.

*Cenci.* That is well.  
Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God,  
Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie!  
For Beatrice worse terrors are in store  
To bend her to my will.

*Lucretia.* Oh! to what will?  
What cruel sufferings more than she has known  
Canst thou inflict?

*Cenci.* Andrea! Go call my daughter,  
And if she comes not tell her that I come.  
What sufferings? I will drag her, step by step,  
Thro' infamies unheard of among men:  
She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon  
Of public scorn, for acts blazoned abroad,       40  
One among which shall be ... What? Canst thou guess?  
She shall become (for what she most abhors  
Shall have a fascination to entrap  
Her loathing will) to her own conscious self  
All she appears to others; and when dead,  
As she shall die unshrived and unforgiven,  
A rebel to her father and her God



*Enter ANDREA*

*Andrea.* The Lady Beatrice...

*Cenci.* Speak, pale slave! What  
Said she?

*Andrea.* My lord, 'twas what she looked; she said:  
"Go tell my father that I see the gulf  
Of Hell between us two, which he may pass,  
I will not." [*Exit ANDREA.*

*Cenci.* Go thou quick, Lucretia,  
Tell her to come; yet let her understand  
Her coming is consent: and say, moreover  
That if she come not I will curse her. [*Exit LUCRETIA.*  
Ha!

With what but with a father's curse doth God  
Panic-strike armèd victory, and make pale  
Cities in their prosperity? The world's Father  
Must grant a parent's prayer against his child,  
Be he who asks even what men call me.  
Will not the deaths of her rebellious brothers  
Awe her before I speak? For I on them  
Did imprecate quick ruin, and it came.

*Enter LUCRETIA*

Well; what? Speak, wretch!

*Lucretia.* She said, "I cannot come;  
Go tell my father that I see a torrent  
Of his own blood raging between us."

*Cenci (kneeling).* 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;  
If nursed by thy selectest dew of love  
Such virtues blossom in her as should make  
The peace of life, I pray thee for my sake,  
As thou the common God and Father art  
Of her, and me, and all; reverse that doom!  
Earth, in the name of God, let her food be  
Poison, until she be encrusted round  
With leprous stains! Heaven, rain upon her head  
The blistering drops of the Maremma's dew,  
Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up  
Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs  
To loathed lameness! All-beholding sun,  
Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes  
With thine own blinding beams!

*Lucretia.* Peace! Peace!  
For thine own sake unsay those dreadful words.  
When high God grants he punishes such prayers.

*Cenci (leaping up, and throwing his right hand towards Heaven).* He does his will, I mine! This in

addition,  
That if she have a child...

*Lucretia.* Horrible thought!

*Cenci.* 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. [*Exit LUCRETIA.*  
I do not feel as if I were a man,  
But like a fiend appointed to chastise  
The offences of some unremembered world.  
My blood is running up and down my veins;  
A fearful pleasure makes it prick and tingle:  
I feel a giddy sickness of strange awe;  
My heart is beating with an expectation  
Of horrid joy.

*Enter LUCRETIA*

What? Speak!

*Lucretia.* She bids thee curse;  
And if thy curses, as they cannot do,  
Could kill her soul...

*Cenci.* She would not come. 'Tis well,  
I can do both: first take what I demand,  
And then extort concession. To thy chamber!  
Fly ere I spurn thee: and beware this night  
That thou cross not my footsteps. It were safer  
To come between the tiger and his prey. [*Exit LUCRETIA.*  
It must be late; mine eyes grow weary dim  
With unaccustomed heaviness of sleep.  
Conscience! Oh, thou most insolent of lies!  
They say that sleep, that healing dew of Heaven,  
Steeps not in balm the foldings of the brain  
Which thinks thee an impostor. I will go  
First belie thee with an hour of rest,  
Which will be deep and calm, I feel: and then...  
O, multitudinous Hell, the fiends will shake  
Thine arches with the laughter of their joy!  
There shall be lamentation heard in Heaven  
As o'er an angel fallen and upon Earth  
All good shall droop and sicken, and ill things  
Shall with a spirit of unnatural life  
Stir and be quickened ... even as I am now. [*Exit.*

## Scene II

*Before the Castle of Petrella.*

*Enter BEATRICE and LUCRETIA above on the Ramparts*

*Beatrice.* They come not yet.

*Lucretia.* 'Tis scarce midnight.

*Beatrice.* How slow  
Behind the course of thought, even sick with speed,  
Lags leaden footed time!

*Lucretia.* The minutes pass...  
If he should wake before the deed is done?

*Beatrice.* O, mother! He must never wake again.  
What thou hast said persuades me that our act  
Will but dislodge a spirit of deep hell  
Out of a human form.

*Lucretia.* 'Tis true he spoke  
Of death and judgment with strange confidence  
For one so wicked; as a man believing  
In God, yet recking not of good or ill.  
And yet to die without confession!...

*Beatrice.* Oh!  
Believe that Heaven is merciful and just,  
And will not add our dread necessity  
To the amount of his offences.

*Enter OLIMPIO and MARZIO, below*

*Lucretia.* See,  
They come.

*Beatrice.* All mortal things must hasten thus  
To their dark end. Let us go down. [*Exeunt LUCRETIA and BEATRICE from above.*]

*Olimpio.* How feel you to this work?

*Marzio.* As one who thinks  
A thousand crowns excellent market price  
For an old murderer's life. Your cheeks are pale.

*Olimpio.* It is the white reflection of your own,  
Which you call pale.

*Marzio.* Is that their natural hue?

*Olimpio.* Or 'tis my hate and the deferred desire  
To wreak it, which extinguishes their blood.

*Marzio.* You are inclined then to this business?

*Olimpio.* Ay.

If one should bribe me with a thousand crowns  
To kill a serpent which had stung my child,  
I could not be more willing.

*Enter BEATRICE and LUCRETIA, below*

Noble ladies!

*Beatrice.* Are ye resolved?

*Olimpio.* Is he asleep?

*Marzio.* Is all

Quiet?

*Lucretia.* I mixed an opiate with his drink:

He sleeps so soundly...

*Beatrice.* That his death will be

But as a change of sin-chastising dreams,

A dark continuance of the Hell within him,

Which God extinguish! But ye are resolved?

Ye know it is a high and holy deed?

*Olimpio.* We are resolved.

*Marzio.* As to the how this act

Be warranted, it rests with you.

*Beatrice.* Well, follow!

*Olimpio.* Hush! Hark! What noise is that?

*Marzio.* Ha! some one comes!

*Beatrice.* Ye conscience-stricken cravens, rock to rest

Your baby hearts. It is the iron gate,

Which ye left open, swinging to the wind,

That enters whistling as in scorn. Come, follow!

And be your steps like mine, light, quick and bold. [*Exeunt.*

## Scene III

*An Apartment in the Castle.*

*Enter BEATRICE and LUCRETIA*

*Lucretia.* They are about it now.

*Beatrice.* Nay, it is done.

*Lucretia.* I have not heard him groan.

*Beatrice.* He will not groan.

*Lucretia.* What sound is that?

*Beatrice.* List 'tis the tread of feet  
About his bed.

*Lucretia.* My God!  
If he be now a cold stiff corpse...

*Beatrice.* O, fear not  
What may be done, but what is left undone:  
The act seals all.

*Enter OLIMPIO and MARZIO*



Is it accomplished?

*Marzio*. What?

*Olimpio*. Did you not call?

*Beatrice*. When?

*Olimpio*. Now.

*Beatrice*. I ask if all is over?

*Olimpio*. We dare not kill an old and sleeping man;

His thin gray hair, his stern and reverent brow,

His veined hands crossed on his heaving breast,

And the calm innocent sleep in which he lay,

Quelled me. Indeed, indeed, I cannot do it.

*Marzio*. But I was bolder; for I chid Olimpio,

And bade him bear his wrongs to his own grave

And leave me the reward. And now my knife

Touched the loose wrinkled throat, when the old man

Stirred in his sleep, and said, "God! hear, O, hear,

A father's curse! What, art thou not our father?"

And then he laughed. I knew it was the ghost

Of my dead father speaking through his lips,

And could not kill him.

*Beatrice*. Miserable slaves!

Where, if ye dare not kill a sleeping man,

Found ye the boldness to return to me

With such a deed undone? Base palterers!

Cowards and traitors! Why, the very conscience

Which ye would sell for gold and for revenge

Is an equivocation: it sleeps over

A thousand daily acts disgracing men;

And when a deed where mercy insults Heaven...

Why do I talk? [*Snatching a dagger from one of them and raising it.*

Hadst thou a tongue to say,

She murdered her own father, I must do it!

But never dream ye shall outlive him long!

*Olimpio*. Stop, for God's sake!

*Marzio*. I will go back and kill him.

*Olimpio*. Give me the weapon, we must do thy will.

*Beatrice*. Take it. Depart! Return! [*Exeunt OLIMPIO and MARZIO.*

How pale thou art!

We do but that which 'twere a deadly crime

To leave undone.

*Lucretia*. Would it were done!

*Beatrice*. Even whilst

That doubt is passing through your mind, the world

Is conscious of a change. Darkness and Hell

Have swallowed up the vapour they sent forth

To blacken the sweet light of life, My breath

Comes, methinks, lighter, and the jellied blood

Runs freely thro' my veins. Hark!

*Enter OLIMPIO and MARZIO.*

He is...

*Olimpio.* Dead!

*Marzio.* We strangled him that there might be no blood;  
And then we threw his heavy corpse i' the garden  
Under the balcony; 'twill seem it fell.

*Beatrice (giving them a bag of coin).* Here, take this gold and hasten to your homes.  
And, Marzio, because thou wast only awed  
By that which made me tremble, wear thou this! [*Clothes him in a rich mantle.*  
It was the mantle which my grandfather  
Wore in his high prosperity, and men  
Envied his state: so may they envy thine.  
Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God  
To a just use. Live long and thrive! And, mark,  
If thou hast crimes, repent: this deed is none. [*A horn is sounded.*

*Lucretia.* Hark, 'tis the castle horn; my God! it sounds  
Like the last trump.

*Beatrice.* Some tedious guest is coming.

*Lucretia.* The drawbridge is let down; there is a tramp  
Of horses in the court; fly, hide yourselves! [*Exeunt OLIMPIO and MARZIO.*

*Beatrice.* Let us retire to counterfeit deep rest;  
I scarcely need to counterfeit it now:  
The spirit which doth reign within these limbs  
Seems strangely undisturbed. I could even sleep  
Fearless and calm: all ill is surely past. [*Exeunt.*

## Scene IV

*Another Apartment in the Castle.*

*Enter on one side the Legate SAVELLA, introduced by a Servant, and on the other LUCRETIA and BERNARDO*

*Savella.* Lady, my duty to his Holiness  
Be my excuse that thus unseasonably  
I break upon your rest. I must speak with  
Count Cenci; doth he sleep?

*Lucretia (in a hurried and confused manner).* I think he sleeps;  
Yet wake him not, I pray, spare me awhile,  
He is a wicked and a wrathful man;  
Should he be roused out of his sleep to-night,  
Which is, I know, a hell of angry dreams,  
It were not well; indeed it were not well.  
Wait till day break ... *(aside)* O, I am deadly sick!  
*Savella.* I grieve thus to distress you, but the Count  
Must answer charges of the gravest import,  
And suddenly; such my commission is.

*Lucretia (with increased agitation).* I dare not rouse him:  
I know none who dare...  
'Twere perilous;... you might as safely waken  
A serpent; or a corpse in which some fiend  
Were laid to sleep.  
*Savella.* Lady, moments here  
Are counted. I must rouse him from his sleep,  
Since none else dare.

*Lucretia (aside).* O, terror! O, despair!  
*(To BERNARDO.)* Bernardo, conduct you the Lord Legate to  
Your father's chamber. [*Exeunt SAVELLA and BERNARDO.*]

*Enter BEATRICE*

*Beatrice.* 'Tis a messenger  
Come to arrest the culprit who now stands  
Before the throne of unappealable God.  
Both Earth and Heaven, consenting arbiters,  
Acquit our deed.

*Lucretia.* Oh, agony of fear!  
Would that he yet might live! Even now I heard  
The Legate's followers whisper as they passed  
They had a warrant for his instant death.  
All was prepared by unforbidden means  
Which we must pay so dearly, having done.  
Even now they search the tower, and find the body;  
Now they suspect the truth; now they consult  
Before they come to tax us with the fact;  
O, horrible, 'tis all discovered!

*Beatrice.* Mother,  
What is done wisely, is done well. Be bold  
As thou art just. 'Tis like a truant child  
To fear that others know what thou hast done,  
Even from thine own strong consciousness, and thus  
Write on unsteady eyes and altered cheeks  
All thou wouldst hide. Be faithful to thyself,  
And fear no other witness but thy fear.  
For if, as cannot be, some circumstance  
Should rise in accusation, we can blind  
Suspicion with such cheap astonishment,  
Or overbear it with such guiltless pride,  
As murderers cannot feign. 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. [*A cry within and tumult.*  
*Voices.* Murder! Murder! Murder!

*Enter BERNARDO and SAVELLA*

*Savella (to his followers).* Go search the castle round; sound the alarm;  
Look to the gates that none escape!

*Beatrice.* What now?

*Bernardo.* I know not what to say ... my father's dead.

*Beatrice.* How; dead! he only sleeps; you mistake, brother.  
His sleep is very calm, very like death;  
'Tis wonderful how well a tyrant sleeps.  
He is not dead?

*Bernardo.* Dead; murdered.

*Lucretia (with extreme agitation).* Oh no, no,  
He is not murdered though he may be dead;  
I have alone the keys of those apartments.  
*Savella.* Ha! Is it so?

*Beatrice.* My Lord, I pray excuse us;  
We will retire; my mother is not well:  
She seems quite overcome with this strange horror. [*Exeunt LUCRETIA and BEATRICE.*]  
*Savella.* Can you suspect who may have murdered him?

*Bernardo.* I know not what to think.  
*Savella.* Can you name any  
Who had an interest in his death?

*Bernardo.* Alas!  
I can name none who had not, and those most  
Who most lament that such a deed is done;  
My mother, and my sister, and myself.  
*Savella.* 'Tis strange! There were clear marks of violence.  
I found the old man's body in the moonlight  
Hanging beneath the window of his chamber,  
Among the branches of a pine; he could not  
Have fallen there, for all his limbs lay heaped  
And effortless; 'tis true there was no blood...  
Favour me, Sir; it much imports your house  
That all should be made clear; to tell the ladies  
That I request their presence. [*Exit BERNARDO.*]

*Enter GUARDS bringing in MARZIO*

*Guard.* We have one.

*Officer.* My Lord, we found this ruffian and another  
Lurking among the rocks; there is no doubt  
But that they are the murderers of Count Cenci;  
Each had a bag of coin; this fellow wore  
A gold-inwoven robe, which shining bright  
Under the dark rocks to the glimmering moon  
Betrayed them to our notice: the other fell  
Desperately fighting.

*Savella.* What does he confess?

*Officer.* He keeps firm silence; but these lines found on him  
May speak.

*Savella.* Their language is at least sincere. [*Reads.*

“TO THE LADY BEATRICE.—That the atonement of what my nature sickens to conjecture may soon arrive, I send thee, at thy brother’s desire, those who will speak and do more than I dare write.... Thy devoted servant,  
ORSINO.”

*Enter* LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, *and* BERNARDO  
Knowest thou this writing, Lady?

*Beatrice.* No.

*Savella.* Nor thou?

*Lucretia.* (*Her conduct throughout the scene is marked by extreme agitation*). Where was it found?

What is it?  
It should be  
Orsino's hand! It speaks of that strange horror  
Which never yet found utterance, but which made  
Between that hapless child and her dead father  
A gulf of obscure hatred.  
*Savella.* Is it so?  
Is it true, Lady, that thy father did  
Such outrages as to awaken in thee  
Unfilial hate?

*Beatrice.* Not hate, 'twas more than hate:  
This is most true, yet wherefore question me?  
*Savella.* There is a deed demanding question done;  
Thou hast a secret which will answer not.

*Beatrice.* What sayest? My Lord, your words are bold and rash.  
*Savella.* I do arrest all present in the name  
Of the Pope's Holiness. You must to Rome.

*Lucretia.* O, not to Rome, Indeed we are not guilty.

*Beatrice.* Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord,  
I am more innocent of parricide  
Than is a child born fatherless. ... Dear mother,  
Your gentleness and patience are no shield  
For this keen-judging world, this two-edged lie,  
Which seems, but is not. What! will human laws,  
Rather will ye who are their ministers,  
Bar all access to retribution first,  
And then, when Heaven doth interpose to do  
What ye neglect, arming familiar things  
To the redress of an unwonted crime,  
Make ye the victims who demanded it  
Culprits? 'Tis ye are culprits! That poor wretch  
Who stands so pale, and trembling, and amazed,  
If it be true he murdered Cenci, was  
A sword in the right hand of justest God.  
Wherefore should I have wielded it? Unless  
The crimes which mortal tongue dare never name  
God therefore scruples to avenge.  
*Savella.* You own  
That you desired his death?

*Beatrice.* It would have been  
A crime no less than his, if for one moment  
That fierce desire had faded in my heart. 55  
'Tis true I did believe, and hope, and pray,  
Ay, I even knew ... for God is wise and just,  
That some strange sudden death hung over him.  
'Tis true that this did happen, and most true  
There was no other rest for me on earth,  
No other hope in Heaven ... now what of this?

*Savella.* Strange thoughts beget strange deeds; and here are both

## ***Act V***



## Scene I

*An Apartment in ORSINO'S Palace.*

*Enter ORSINO and GIACOMO*

*Giacomo.* Do evil deeds thus quickly come to end?  
O, that the vain remorse which must chastise  
Crimes done, had but as loud a voice to warn  
As its keen sting is mortal to avenge!  
O, that the hour when present had cast off  
The mantle of its mystery, and shown  
The ghastly form with which it now returns  
When its scared game is roused, cheering the hounds  
Of conscience to their prey! Alas! Alas!  
It was a wicked thought, a piteous deed,  
To kill an old and hoary-headed father.

*Orsino.* It has turned out unluckily, in truth.

*Giacomo.* To violate the sacred doors of sleep;  
To cheat kind nature of the placid death  
Which she prepares for overwearied age;  
To drag from Heaven an unrepentant soul  
Which might have quenched in reconciling prayers  
A life of burning crimes...

*Orsino.* You cannot say  
I urged you to the deed.

*Giacomo.* O, had I never  
Found in thy smooth and ready countenance  
The mirror of my darkest thoughts; hadst thou  
Never with hints and questions made me look  
Upon the monster of my thought, until  
It grew familiar to desire...

*Orsino.* 'Tis thus  
Men cast the blame of their unprosperous acts  
Upon the abettors of their own resolve;  
Or anything but their weak, guilty selves.  
And yet, confess the truth, it is the peril  
In which you stand that gives you this pale sickness  
Of penitence; confess 'tis fear disguised  
From its own shame that takes the mantle now  
Of thin remorse. What if we yet were safe?

*Giacomo.* How can that be? Already Beatrice,  
Lucretia and the murderer are in prison.  
I doubt not officers are, whilst we speak,  
Sent to arrest us.

58

*Orsino.* I have all prepared.  
For instant flight. We can escape even now,  
So we take fleet occasion by the hair.

*Giacomo.* Rather expire in tortures, as I may.  
What! will you cast by self-accusing flight  
Assured conviction upon Beatrice?

## Scene II

*A Hall of Justice.*

CAMILLO, JUDGES, etc., *are discovered seated; MARZIO is led in*

*First Judge.* Accused, do you persist in your denial?

I ask you, are you innocent, or guilty?

I demand who were the participators

In your offence? Speak truth and the whole truth.

*Marzio.* My God! I did not kill him; I know nothing;

Olimpio sold the robe to me from which

You would infer my guilt.

*Second Judge.* Away with him!

*First Judge.* Dare you, with lips yet white from the rack's kiss

Speak false? Is it so soft a questioner,

That you would bandy lover's talk with it

Till it wind out your life and soul? Away!

*Marzio.* Spare me! O, spare! I will confess.

*First Judge.* Then speak.

*Marzio.* I strangled him in his sleep.

*First Judge.* Who urged you to it?

*Marzio.* His own son Giacomo, and the young prelate

Orsino sent me to Petrella; there

The ladies Beatrice and Lucretia

Tempted me with a thousand crowns, and I

And my companion forthwith murdered him.

Now let me die.

*First Judge.* This sounds as bad as truth. Guards, there,

Lead forth the prisoner!

*Enter LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, and GIACOMO, guarded*

Look upon this man;  
When did you see him last?

*Beatrice.* We never saw him.

*Marzio.* You know me too well, Lady Beatrice.

*Beatrice.* I know thee! How? where? when?

*Marzio.* You know 'twas I

Whom you did urge with menaces and bribes

To kill your father. When the thing was done

You clothed me in a robe of woven gold

And bade me thrive: how I have thriven, you see.

You, my Lord Giacomo, Lady Lucretia,

You know that what I speak is true. [*BEATRICE advances towards him; he covers his face, and*

*shrinks back.* O, dart  
The terrible resentment of those eyes  
On the dead earth! Turn them away from me!  
They wound: 'twas torture forced the truth. My Lords,  
Having said this let me be led to death.

*Beatrice.* Poor wretch, I pity thee: yet stay awhile.

*Camillo.* Guards, lead him not away.

*Beatrice.* Cardinal Camillo,  
You have a good repute for gentleness  
And wisdom: can it be that you sit here  
To countenance a wicked farce like this?  
When some obscure and trembling slave is dragged  
From sufferings which might shake the sternest heart  
And bade to answer, not as he believes,  
But as those may suspect or do desire  
Whose questions thence suggest their own reply:  
And that in peril of such hideous torments  
As merciful God spares even the damned. Speak now  
The thing you surely know, which is that you,  
If your fine frame were stretched upon that wheel,  
And you were told: "Confess that you did poison  
Your little nephew; that fair blue-eyed child  
Who was the loadstar of your life:"—and though  
All see, since his most swift and piteous death,  
That day and night, and heaven and earth, and time,  
And all the things hoped for or done therein  
Are changed to you, through your exceeding grief,  
Yet you would say, "I confess anything:"  
And beg from your tormentors, like that slave,  
The refuge of dishonourable death.  
I pray thee, Cardinal, that thou assert  
My innocence.

*Camillo (much moved).* What shall we think, my Lords?  
Shame on these tears! I thought the heart was frozen  
Which is their fountain. I would pledge my soul  
That she is guiltless.  
*Judge.* Yet she must be tortured.

*Camillo.* I would as soon have tortured mine own nephew  
(If he now live he would be just her age;  
His hair, too, was her colour, and his eyes  
Like hers in shape, but blue and not so deep)  
As that most perfect image of God's love      61  
That ever came sorrowing upon the earth.

She is as pure as speechless infancy!  
*Judge.* Well, be her purity on your head, my Lord,  
If you forbid the rack. His Holiness

Enjoined us to pursue this monstrous crime  
By the severest forms of law; nay even  
To stretch a point against the criminals

*Enter an Officer*

*Officer.* Marzio's dead.

*Judge.* What did he say?

*Officer.* Nothing. As soon as we  
Had bound him on the wheel, he smiled on us,  
As one who baffles a deep adversary;  
And holding his breath, died.

*Judge.* There remains nothing  
But to apply the question to those prisoners,  
Who yet remain stubborn.

*Camillo.* I overrule

Further proceedings, and in the behalf  
Of these most innocent and noble persons  
Will use my interest with the Holy Father.

*Judge.* Let the Pope's pleasure then be done. Meanwhile  
Conduct these culprits each to separate cells;  
And be the engines ready: for this night  
If the Pope's resolution be as grave,  
Pious, and just as once, I'll wring the truth  
Out of those nerves and sinews, groan by groan. [*Exeunt.*

## Scene III

*The Cell of a Prison.*

BEATRICE *is discovered asleep on a couch. Enter BERNARDO*

*Bernardo.* How gently slumber rests upon her face,  
Like the last thoughts of some day sweetly spent  
Closing in night and dreams, and so prolonged.  
After such torments as she bore last night,  
How light and soft her breathing comes. Ay, me!  
Methinks that I shall never sleep again.  
But I must shake the heavenly dew of rest  
From this sweet folded flower, thus ... wake! awake!  
What, sister, canst thou sleep?

*Beatrice (awaking).* I was just dreaming  
That we were all in Paradise. Thou knowest  
This cell seems like a kind of Paradise  
After our father's presence.

*Bernardo.* Dear, dear sister,  
Would that thy dream were not a dream! O God!  
How shall I tell?

*Beatrice.* What wouldst thou tell, sweet brother?

*Bernardo.* Look not so calm and happy, or even whilst  
I stand considering what I have to say  
My heart will break.

*Beatrice.* See now, thou mak'st me weep:  
How very friendless thou wouldst be, dear child,  
If I were dead. Say what thou hast to say.

*Bernardo.* They have confessed; they could endure no more  
The tortures...

*Beatrice.* Ha! What was there to confess?  
They must have told some weak and wicked lie  
To flatter their tormentors. Have they said  
That they were guilty? O white innocence,  
That thou shouldst wear the mask of guilt to hide  
Thine awful and serenest countenance  
From those who know thee not!

*Enter JUDGE with LUCRETIA and GIACOMO, guarded*



Ignoble hearts!  
For some brief spasms of pain, which are at least  
As mortal as the limbs through which they pass,  
Are centuries of high splendour laid in dust?  
And that eternal honour which should live  
Sunlike, above the reek of mortal fame,  
Changed to a mockery and a bye-word? What!  
Will you give up these bodies to be dragged  
At horses' heels, so that our hair should sweep  
The footsteps of the vain and senseless crowd,  
Who, that they may make our calamity  
Their worship and their spectacle, will leave  
The churches and the theatres as void  
As their own hearts? Shall the light multitude  
Fling at their choice, curses or faded pity,  
Sad funeral flowers to deck a living corpse,  
Upon us as we pass to pass away,  
And leave ... what memory of our having been?  
Infamy, blood, terror, despair? O thou,  
Who wert a mother to the parentless,  
Kill not thy child! Let not her wrongs kill thee!  
Brother, lie down with me upon the rack,  
And let us each be silent as a corpse;  
It soon will be as soft as any grave.  
'Tis but the falsehood it can wring from fear  
Makes the rack cruel.

*Giacomo.* They will tear the truth  
Even from thee at last, those cruel pains:  
For pity's sake say thou art guilty now.

*Lucretia.* Oh, speak the truth! Let us all quickly die;  
And after death, God is our judge, not they;  
He will have mercy on us.

*Bernardo.* If indeed  
It can be true, say so, dear sister mine;  
And then the Pope will surely pardon you,  
And all be well.  
*Judge.* Confess, or I will warp.  
Your limbs with such keen tortures...

*Beatrice.* Tortures! Turn  
The rack henceforth into a spinning wheel!  
Torture your dog, that he may tell when last  
He lapped the blood his master shed ... not me!  
My pangs are of the mind, and of the heart, 65  
And of the soul; ay, of the inmost soul,  
Which weeps within tears as of burning gall  
To see, in this ill world where none are true,  
My kindred false to their deserted selves.  
And with considering all the wretched life  
Which I have lived, and its now wretched end,  
And the small justice shown by Heaven and Earth

*Giacomo.* Have I confessed? It is all over now?  
No hope! No refuge! O weak, wicked tongue  
Which hast destroyed me, would that thou hadst been  
Cut out and thrown to dogs first! To have killed  
My father first, and then betrayed my sister;  
Ay, thee! the one thing innocent and pure  
In this black guilty world, to that which I  
So well deserve! My wife! my little ones!  
Destitute, helpless, and I ... Father! God!  
Canst thou forgive even the unforgiving,  
When their full hearts break thus, thus!... [*Covers his face and weeps.*]

*Lucretia.* O my child!  
To what a dreadful end are we all come!  
Why did I yield? Why did I not sustain  
Those torments? Oh, that I were all dissolved  
Into these fast and unavailing tears,  
Which flow and feel not!

*Beatrice.* What 'twas weak to do,  
'Tis weaker to lament, once being done;  
Take cheer! The God who knew my wrong, and made  
Our speedy act the angel of his wrath,  
Seems, and but seems, to have abandoned us.  
Let us not think that we shall die for this.  
Brother, sit near me; give me your firm hand,  
You had a manly heart. Bear up! Bear up!  
O dearest Lady, put your gentle head  
Upon my lap, and try to sleep awhile:  
Your eyes look pale, hollow and overworn,  
With heaviness of watching and slow grief.  
Come, I will sing you some low, sleepy tune,  
Not cheerful, nor yet sad; some dull old thing,  
Some outworn and unused monotony,  
Such as our country gossips sing and spin,  
Till they almost forget they live: lie down!  
So, that will do. Have I forgot the words?  
Faith! They are sadder than I thought they were.

SONG

False friend, wilt thou smile or weep  
When my life is laid asleep?  
Little cares for a smile or a tear,  
The clay-cold corpse upon the bier!  
Farewell! Heigho!  
What is this whispers low?  
There is a snake in thy smile, my dear;  
And bitter poison within thy tear.

Sweet sleep, were death like to thee,  
Or if thou couldst mortal be,  
I would close these eyes of pain;  
When to wake? Never again.  
O World! Farewell!  
Listen to the passing bell!  
It says, thou and I must part,  
With a light and a heavy heart. [*The scene closes.*]

## Scene IV

*A Hall of the Prison.*

*Enter CAMILLO and BERNARDO*

*Camillo.* The Pope is stern; not to be moved or bent.  
 He looked as calm and keen as is the engine  
 Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself  
 From aught that it inflicts; a marble form,  
 A rite, a law, a custom: not a man.  
 He frowned, as if to frown had been the trick  
 Of his machinery, on the advocates  
 Presenting the defences, which he tore  
 And threw behind, muttering with hoarse, harsh voice:  
 "Which among ye defended their old father  
 Killed in his sleep?" Then to another: "Thou  
 Dost this in virtue of thy place; 'tis well."  
 He turned to me then, looking deprecation,  
 And said these three words, coldly: "They must die."

*Bernardo.* And yet you left him not?

*Camillo.* I urged him still;  
 Pleading, as I could guess, the devilish wrong  
 Which prompted your unnatural parent's death.  
 And he replied: "Paolo Santa Croce  
 Murdered his mother yester evening,  
 And he is fled. Parricide grows so rife  
 That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young  
 Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs.  
 Authority, and power, and hoary hair  
 Are grown crimes capital. You are my nephew,  
 You come to ask their pardon; stay a moment;  
 Here is their sentence; never see me more  
 Till, to the letter, it be all fulfilled."

*Bernardo.* O God, not so! I did believe indeed  
 That all you said was but sad preparation  
 For happy news. Oh, there are words and looks  
 To bend the sternest purpose! Once I knew them,  
 Now I forget them at my dearest need.  
 What think you if I seek him out, and bathe  
 His feet and robe with hot and bitter tears?  
 Importune him with prayers, vexing his brain  
 With my perpetual cries, until in rage  
 He strike me with his pastoral cross, and trample  
 Upon my prostrate head, so that my blood  
 May stain the senseless dust on which he treads,  
 And remorse waken mercy? I will do it!  
 Oh, wait till I return! [*Rushes out.*]

69

*Camillo.* Alas! poor boy!  
 A wreck-devoted seaman thus might pray  
 To the deaf sea.  
*Enter* LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, and GIACOMO, *guarded*

*Beatrice.* I hardly dare to fear  
 That thou bring'st other news than a just pardon

*conversing with CAMILLO, who now goes out; GIACOMO advances.*

*Giacomo.* Know you not, Mother ... Sister, know you not?  
Bernardo even now is gone to implore  
The Pope to grant our pardon.

*Lucretia.* Child, perhaps  
It will be granted. We may all then live  
To make these woes a tale for distant years:  
Oh, what a thought! It gushes to my heart  
Like the warm blood.

*Beatrice.* Yet both will soon be cold.  
Oh, trample out that thought! Worse than despair,  
Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope:  
It is the only ill which can find place  
Upon the giddy, sharp and narrow hour  
Tottering beneath us. Plead with the swift frost  
That it should spare the eldest flower of spring:  
Plead with awakening earthquake, o'er whose couch  
Even now a city stands, strong, fair, and free:  
Now stench and blackness yawn, like death. Oh, plead  
With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,  
Blind lightning, or the deaf sea, not with man!  
Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,  
In deeds a Cain. No, Mother, we must die:  
Since such is the reward of innocent lives;  
Such the alleviation of worst wrongs.  
And whilst our murderers live, and hard, cold men,  
Smiling and slow, walk thro' a world of tears  
To death as to life's sleep; 'twere just the grave  
Were some strange joy for us. Come, obscure Death,  
And wind me in thine all-embracing arms!  
Like a fond mother hide me in thy bosom,  
And rock me to the sleep from which none wake.  
Live ye, who live, subject to one another  
As we were once, who now... [*BERNARDO rushes in.*

*Bernardo.* Oh, horrible,  
That tears, that looks, that hope poured forth in prayer,  
Even till the heart is vacant and despairs,  
Should all be vain! The ministers of death  
Are waiting round the doors. I thought I saw  
Blood on the face of one ... What if 'twere fancy?  
Soon the heart's blood of all I love on earth  
Will sprinkle him, and he will wipe it off  
As if 'twere only rain. O life! O world! 70  
Cover me! let me be no more! To see  
That perfect mirror of pure innocence  
Wherein I gazed, and grew happy and good,  
Shivered to dust! To see thee, Beatrice,  
Who made all lovely thou didst look upon...  
Thee, light of life ... dead, dark! while I say, sister,  
To hear I have no sister; and thou, Mother

*Enter CAMILLO and Guards*

They come! Let me  
Kiss those warm lips before their crimson leaves  
Are blighted ... white ... cold. Say farewell, before  
Death chokes that gentle voice! Oh, let me hear  
You speak!

*Beatrice.* Farewell, my tender brother. Think  
Of our sad fate with gentleness, as now;  
And let mild, pitying thoughts lighten for thee  
Thy sorrow's load. Err not in harsh despair,  
But tears and patience. One thing more, my child,  
For thine own sake be constant to the love  
Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,  
Tho' wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame,  
Lived ever holy and unstained. And tho'  
Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name  
Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow  
For men to point at as they pass, do thou  
Forbear, and never think a thought unkind  
Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves.  
So mayest thou die as I do; fear and pain  
Being subdued. Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!

*Bernardo.* I cannot say, farewell!

*Camillo.* O Lady Beatrice!

*Beatrice.* Give yourself no unnecessary pain,  
My dear Lord Cardinal. Here, Mother, tie  
My girdle for me, and bind up this hair  
In any simple knot; ay, that does well.  
And yours I see is coming down. How often  
Have we done this for one another, now  
We shall not do it any more. My Lord,  
We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Percy Bysshe Shelley  
The Cenci  
1819

<https://www.bartleby.com/18/4/>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**