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(Anonymous)
review by

David Cole

on pp. xxiv-xxvi

THE
YALE REVIEW

VOL. LX · PUBLISHED IN JUNE 1971 · No. 4

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throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to construct a better society. Something changes by the 1930's. Huey Long, "The red-neck dictator of Louisiana," is dismissed as one of "the authoritarian, half-populist, half-fascist demagogues of the time." Yet here was someone who sincerely tried to change the South's social structure. Perhaps Long's attacks on the New Deal explain such a harsh judgment. It seems odd to dismiss completely someone who in part changed society in a way Berthoff believes essential.

All this is not to say that *An Unsettled People* is without value. Berthoff's thesis, as suggested in the subtitle, is certainly suggestive. Succinctly stated, it can be found in his "The American Social Order: A Conservative Hypothesis."

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SHELLEY'S "Cenci": SCORPIONS RINGED WITH FIRE,
by STUART CURRAN, Princeton University Press.

It is difficult to imagine the reader for whom all parts of this book would hold equal interest. Mr. Curran has not only given us detailed discussions of the imagery, diction, characters, tragic vision, structure, sources, and critical reception of *The Cenci*; he has also attempted to see the play in the context of early nineteenth-century theatre practice, and has exhaustively traced its stage history through 1959.

The lavishing of such thoroughness upon a work usually scanted produces mixed reactions. On the one hand, there is practically no aspect of the play where Mr. Curran does not reason or shame us into abandoning the conventional wisdom. The diction is not "neo-Elizabethan," but "unforced and natural"; the secondary characters are not weakly rendered, but rendered so as to reflect their weakness; the structure is not mindlessly imitative of Shakespeare's, but thoughtfully recreative of the Greeks' (an important correction of our perspective, that). The play's vision of total evil is not an exception to the spirit of Shel-

ley's other works, but a dark potentiality present in them also. Thus briefly summarized, some of these arguments may sound like rationalization; as developed and buttressed by Mr. Curran, they are persuasive. Occasionally, the borders of rationalization are crossed ("the problem with the second act is that nothing happens: that is also its point"). But, generally speaking, it is only in his argument for the dramatic effectiveness of the play's imagery that Mr. Curran seems to go beyond the evidence. He claims that "[b]y the shifting combination of his image patterns Shelley is able to create an intricately textured fabric in which the themes are continually bridged, the plot ramified, a moral cosmos verified." However, the individual images which he cites to establish these patterns mostly give the impression of having been, as costumers say, "pulled from stock"—the common stock of accepted rhetorical heightenings to which all playwrights of the period had access.

But if Mr. Curran's thoroughness encourages thorough reevaluation, it also encourages suspicion. Is the author perhaps not so much exploring every avenue as defending every front? The book's manysidedness seems, at least in part, a tactic to draw as many admirers to the play as possible. Those who aren't sold on the structure may allow the profundity of tragic vision; those whom the diction still troubles may admire the psychology, etc. Therefore, Mr. Curran seems to have reasoned, every claim that conceivably can be made for the play, better had be. This is an understandable strategy for a critic trying to revive interest in what he considers a masterpiece. But Mr. Curran goes to the extreme of attempting to affiliate Shelley's play with practically anything that, in some reader's scheme of cultural referents, is likely to do it good: Kierkegaard, Beckett, Pinter, Camus, Albee. And on some topics this practice of claiming everything that can be claimed becomes

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simply saying everything that can be said. The history of the play's critical reception, for example, which occupies Mr. Curran's opening chapter, contributes remarkably little to his argument or our understanding (of what work's critical history in the twentieth century could it *not* be said that "Victorian exaggeration at last surrenders to the dol-drumms of nonevaluative evaluations"?), yet is included on the grounds, presumably, that every response *The Cenci* has ever sparked must have some place in a whole book on it.

The apparently watertight division of the book into two roughly equal halves, "The Poem" and "The Play," does not do justice to Mr. Curran's distinctive critical achievement. He is a gifted expounder of romantic poetry and an enterprising theatre historian, but his real excellence lies in his rare ability to make literary and theatrical materials

illuminate each other. Familiar generalizations about nineteenth-century stage conditions take on new specificity and substance as Mr. Curran shows how they impinged on a particular poet's planning of a particular play. And the chapter on the stage history of *The Cenci*, which takes up nearly a quarter of the book, is not a sterile recital of facts but a compelling demonstration of the thesis that "the most penetrating students of Shelley's tragedy have been, not . . . professional critics . . . but . . . visionary men of the theatre." Thus Robert Edmond Jones's designs are recognized as "not merely striking in stage effect, but objectifications of the basic image patterns of the play"; and the use by the Brothers Capek, in their production, of pools and flickers of light on a pitch-black stage is seen as an attempt to spatialize the play's psychic cosmos.

A key question which Mr. Curran

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never considers is what kept Shelley from drawing the kind of spatial inferences from his dramatic conception that these directors and designers, and Mr. Curran himself, later did. Of course Shelley had never seen any but an early-nineteenth-century stage. But imagining visionary spaces was something of a specialty of his. Why, as a playwright, did he never try reimagining *stage* space? It is unlikely, to be sure, that any theatre available to him would have accepted a proto-Expressionist play (though technically, as Mr. Curran reminds us, the London theatre of Shelley's day was capable of just about any effect ours is, with the big exception of electric light). But the point is, it never seems to have occurred to Shelley that he might write one. It may be unpardonable hindsight to berate him for this, but the claims Mr. Curran makes for Shelley's dramatic innovativeness in every other respect entitle us to wonder why he never thought to innovate a dramatic mode.

Whatever combination of personal and historical factors might turn out to be the answer to that question, the very need of raising it is enough to exclude Shelley from the ranks of the dramatic innovators. The truly original dramatic imagination recreates the stage as the spatial implication of its vision of experience. In this regard *The Cenci* is, as Mr. Curran recognizes, "Janus-faced." In its vision of experience it may be up with Artaud and Genet, but in its vision of the possibilities of the stage it is back with Kotzebue and Joanna Baillie. Shelley neither transformed nor discarded, but simply failed to see past, an exhausted stage iconography; and it is for this sin of omission—not the many alleged offenses against structure, diction, and so forth, from which Mr. Curran effectively clears him—that the author of *The Cenci* stands condemned. Shelley's failure to rank among the creators of the modern stage consists, precisely, in his failure to create a modern stage.

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