Beatrice Cenci and her Role in Italy’s Fight for Equality

Ghosts are increasingly intriguing creatures in today’s society, and currently reign as media phenomenon’s. Dangerous or helpful, vengeful or angelic, the idea of spirits and other worldly creatures exists in almost every culture, spanning centuries of texts, paintings and more. Yet, while ghosts seem today to be fantasies designed for television and campfire stories, in years past ghosts have held astounding power over not only people, but entire structures of society. Beatrice Cenci was one who held such power. The ghost of Beatrice Cenci, through the unintended political, emotional, and psychological manipulation of her image, helped to unite the lower class of Italy in a rebellion against the aristocracy and the injustices done unto the poor, all by becoming part of a ghost story.

Beatrice Cenci, when she lived, was a young, wealthy Italian noblewoman in the sixteenth century. At the age of 16 or 17, after being abused emotionally and physically by her father, Francesco Cenci, Beatrice attempted several times to report him for abuse. All reports, however, were ignored due to Francesco’s influence, power, and statue in Italy. In 1598, Beatrice could not put up with it anymore, and decided to murder her father. Her stepmother and two brothers were included in the plot, along with two servants who were close to the family, and together the six of them worked out their plan. The two servants would give him a series of drugs to render Francesco unconscious, then Beatrice and her family would kill him. There was an unexpected change in plans, however, when the drugs failed to put Francesco to sleep, forcing Beatrice’s family to hold down her living father while she bludgeoned him to death with a hammer. When he finally died he was pushed out a window to make his death appear accidental. Despite this attempt, the papal police were unconvinced, and arrested the entire Cenci family for murder (Abdullah et al. “Beatrice Cenci”).

Around this time, word began to spread through Italy regarding the lavish trial that was taking place, and support for Beatrice Cenci’s release began to grow. The lower class people of Rome, where the trial was being held, felt Beatrice was justified in her actions, and that if the papal police had taken action to prevent the abuse, the murder could have been prevented. The aristocracy, however, took the opposite stand, and claimed murder was illegal, and she should be punished according to the full extent of the law. In the end, Beatrice, and her family, were found guilty of murder, and all besides the youngest brother, were executed on the bridge of the Castel St. Angelo (Clegg, “The Legend of Beatrice Cenci”).

Politics in Italy during the sixteenth century were difficult and divided. The Renaissance had begun and breakthroughs in science and astrology were beginning to appear (Oresko, “Power and Politics in Modern Italy). The most prominent issue pressing the Italians, however, was the class gap. Since the early Middle Ages, the wealthy aristocrats of Italy wielded immense power over the people (Gascoigne, “History of Italy”). This difference in wealth and power was a concerning reality that dictated a majority of Italian life. The upper-class had control over nearly every aspect of life, from the civil office to the papal police. Meanwhile the lower classes were forced to put up with the injustices of the hierarchy, for they had no way to challenge the oppression and had no real inclination to do so, despite evidence suggesting “political decisions made during the time made the residents of rural areas suffer intensely, as they bore the burdens of the warfare and economic reorganization that the competition between nations and internal struggles brought” (Jeong, “The Economic History of Italy During the Renaissance”). Their lives were not excellent, but the majority of the Italian lower class had enough to get by, and though not satisfied, remained content enough to remain silent. Still, the gap between the wealthy and the poor continued to grow throughout the century, and tensions between the classes were high enough that should a serious act of injustice be inflicted on either class by the other, a war between the two could be ignited.

The death of Beatrice Cenci enraged the lower class of Italy. They felt the aristocracy had abused their power, and given Beatrice no other choice besides murder. While the trial took place, talk of Beatrice traveled across Italy, many people eager to hear word of whether she would live or die. This conversations sparked debates regarding the class gap across the country, lead almost entirely by the lower class, as “the driving forces behind both the political and cultural changes of the period were the citizens” (Jeong, “The Economic History of Italy During the Renaissance”). Despite Beatrice Cenci being an aristocrat herself, she had become, during her trial and after her death, a martyr for the people fighting against the injustice of the Italian authority, for taking charge of her life after being denied help based on her father’s position. She was a figure to marvel at, being, a “damsel in distress, a brave heroine, a virgin sacrifice, and even a femme fatale all at once” (Hester, “The Femme Fatale Whose Tragic End Festers In Rome”).  But after her death, the conversation started to wane, and the fear of those with a political agenda feared the people of Rome would again remain silent against the oppressive hierarchy.

Beatrice Cenci’s case evoked an emotional response from the people of Italy that could not be disputed. In addition to being the subject of debates on the class gap, the idea of Beatrice herself was fascinating. P.B. Shelley, the author of a play based on Beatrice, commented in the preface “The story of the Cenci was a subject not to be mentioned in Italian society without awakening a deep and breathless interest; and that the feelings of the company never failed to incline to a romantic pity for the wrongs and a passionate exculpation of the horrible deed to which they urged her who has been mingled two centuries with the common dust. All ranks of people knew the outlines of this history and participated in the overwhelming interest which it seems to have the magic of exciting in the human heart” (Shelley, “The Cenci: A Tragedy in Five Acts”). None of this was shocking, as she was young, only seventeen, beautiful, and fabulously wealthy. Even to those unaffiliated with politics, a respectably young lady brutally murdering her father intrigued and captivated. So when the case ended, and Beatrice was executed, new information which started pouring out was eagerly absorbed by a desperate audience. This “new” information consisted of plausible theories pertaining to the case, but none that had any supporting evidence. These potential falsehoods included Francesco having a forced incestuous relationship with Beatrice, which lead to her deciding to kill him, one author describing Beatrice in his romanticized version of the story as being between the “two most horrible crimes possible to civilized humanity — incest and parricide (Shelly, “The Cenci”). Another was the sensationalized story that one of the servants involved in the murder, Olimpio Calvetti, was the secret lover of Beatrice. There is no evidence to support either claim, or any of the dozens that came out after the trial, but the new information kept the story fresh in the minds of the masses.

The most important tale which started to spread was the story of Beatrice’s ghost. Allegedly, on the bridge she was executed on, exclusively on the anniversary of her murder, Beatrice Cenci appeared, carrying her own head, which she lost when she was beheaded (Clegg, “The Legend of Beatrice Cenci”). Beatrice was dead, but her story found a way to live on. Unlike her brother and mother, Beatrice, youthful, beautiful, and abused, had an emotional tug on Italy, in addition to political ties. When she died the supporters, who had grown in numbers, needed her story to carry on longer, and further than it had. The interest the emotionally invested would show in the trial once it ended was limited and their care for the class gap would cease as well. Perhaps it was one person who began the rumor, or a politically charged group searching to keep Beatrice’s case fresh, but somewhere the story of Beatrice’s ghost gained momentum. People across Italy traveled to the bridge of Castel St. Angelo to see the place where Beatrice Cenci died, and where she might still be residing.

The story was clever, and well thought out, but likely untrue. There is no recorded evidence of anyone in the sixteenth century claiming to ever see any ghost on the bridge. But the idea of a ghost was enough emotional tug to reclaim interest from the public, and enough political charge to gain supporters against the elaborate powers of the aristocracy, because in addition to being a fascinating ghost story her image was interpreted as a message to Italy to avenge her death and fight for justice from the upper class.

The public needed Beatrice Cenci. Dead or alive her influence was the long awaited event which would spark the war between classes, and should she have faded into history, such a fight for justice might never have taken place.  The public’s “fascination with her story indicates several important psychological as well as social themes” (Hoeveler, “Beatrice Cenci in Hawthorne, Melville and her Atlantic-Rim Contexts”), those psychological themes being the combination of all other aspects of her appeal. It never mattered if her ghost was real, or fake, or somewhere in between, because the Italian peoples psychological need for her ghost was great enough for them to suspend disbelief. The people needed a symbol to rally behind in order to gain support and momentum (“Rome’s Ghosts”). Alive Beatrice could not rally the support necessary, as no wrong would have been committed unto her, but dead she would be forgotten at a rapid pace. Still, the people desired some sort of rebellion, so instead they created a variation of her image that could be dead and alive at once. True or false, all that was required was that her story continued, and that she continued existing, in any form necessary.

Beatrice’s ghost provided psychological relief because there was enough rationale behind her ghost for belief to occur. For starters, she was a legitimate person. Popular ghosts are rarely based on fictitious characters because they lack the emotional grasp of a true person. (Goldstien, 183). Additionally the story of her death held political implications matching those people were already searching for. The people of Italy, though complicate at the time, still desired equality, but obtaining it needed an event of substantial influence for both sides to create friction. A ghost who was a real person, but lacks political ties or implications makes for a nice story, but a country will not rally behind him or her, for they have no reason to do so. Beatrice Cenci, however, had both. But furthermore, the public which created her was desperate for her existence. On a psychological level, the lower class of Italy had such a heavy desire for someone to evoke a response from the rest of the country so the issue of the class gap could be addressed and challenged that they willed a ghost into existence. They needed her, so they created her, showcasing a powerful side to the human minds effect on society; the capacity to create life after death.

Additionally, there was a more interesting instigator to using a ghost story instead of a regular historic retelling. According to Diane E. Goldstein “narrative tellings are always shaped and reshaped by the narrator’s skill, context, audience, topical links, and many other factors and are therefore always varied and emergent. Supernatural experience narratives, on the other hand, tend to share a common highly detailed, cautious, and sometimes even defensive structure” (Goldstien, 70) For reasons only understood in the human mind, the detail of a regular story get lost, and altered, while a ghost story, perhaps because it is so specific, remains intact. Beatrice’s story still represents the cruelty of the Italian aristocracy, and is has survived through centuries because it was crafted to appeal to all members of society, and remain constant so long as it was relevant.

In the end, Beatrice herself never did anything to help the poor people of Italy. She was in reality just the type of person the Italians used her image against; an aristocrat with wealth and power, just not as much power as her father. But she made for an excellent story, and her image could be distorted just the right amount by the public to turn her into a martyr instead of a murderer, all through the idea of an apparition on a bridge. Beatrice Cenci’s story continues to be told today. Her image is held up as a symbol still, as the class gap continues to grow in modern Italy, and her popularity has not waned at all. She still exists, in earnest or in psyche, because she was too well developed, too easily agreed with, and too relevant to be forgotten. With her ghost, Italy’s lower class found common ground then that it still finds now. With so many people acknowledging her image, perhaps even if her message against the class gap one day becomes irrelevant to the Italian people, she will not be forgotten, for her evolution of the Italian society’s pre-established institutions is too important for the future to forget.

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