

Narcissus

The Last Days of Lord Byron

A Drama in Two Acts
by Robert Joseph Ahola

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6M/5F. RUNNING TIME: 115 Minutes

NARCISSUS:

The Last Days of Lord Byron

Synopsis

George Gordon, Lord Byron—poet, satirist, raconteur, phenomenal athlete, duelist, political revolutionary, bisexual incestuous womanizer, loyal loving friend and generous philanthropist—also seems to have become, in his own time, the very invention of Celebrity. Vain, flamboyant, indiscreet and yet surprisingly self-aware, Byron is perhaps the first man to raise the question: “Can a man live too much of a life at the expense of all else?” Even though impelled to be this creature, he loathes and resists it, and longs for the respectability that is somehow determined to elude him.

NARCISSUS takes us to the last days of Byron where his innate understanding of his limited time on this earth brings him to become a factor in the Civil War in Greece. It also places him in a transcendental conversation with the ghost of his dear departed friend, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. In that cross-dimensional interaction, Shelley becomes Byron’s Virgil, as he is guided at last to meet his fate...and the shortfall of his ideals.

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Character Breakdowns

The Men -

George Gordon Lord Byron. In flight from England and his own reputation, he is in the last of his thirty-seven years, finding himself a focal point in the Greek War for Independence.

Shelley's Ghost/Shelley. The specter of his recently departed friend Percy Bysshe Shelley visits Byron to give him sober reflection, as well as glimpses into the other side of the veil. At various times, in retrospect, he is Shelley, the living man, and can, and should, be differentiated by different attire.

Edward John Trelawny/"Mad Jack" Byron. Byron's (and Shelley's) steadfast friend, Trelawny is, in equal parts, hero-braggart-scoundrel-liar. "Mad Jack" Byron is in equal parts, gambler, adventurer and drunken ne'er-do-well.

Dr. John William Polidori/ Lord Castlereigh. Dual role covers Byron's dashing, scandalous "private" physician, as well as his Nemesis in Parliament.

Fletcher (Byron's Adjutant)/ Entourage/ /A Second. One Actor assumes many roles including others in the ensemble. They include soldiers, a helmsman and men in the tavern, and Byron's Nemesis in Parliament.

A Helmsman/ Members of Parliament/The Conte di Carvalo/ Surgeon(1-3). One actor assumes many roles. All actors in the male ensemble may assume spot roles in Parliament and his entourage. These are generally voices and seldom require costume.

Loukas Khalandritsanos/ Byron the Boy. Byron's young consort in Greece, and Byron the boy, may never be on the stage at the same time.

The Women -

Augusta Leigh/ May Gray. Augusta Leigh is Byron's half-sister and lover...and mother of his illegitimate child. May Gray was the boy Byron's abusive nanny.

Claire Clairmont/Catherine Gordon/ The Earle of Claire. Claire Clairmont is Mary Shelley's stepsister, mother of his illegitimate child. The "Woman" is one of his many conquests. The Earle of Claire, a teenager, is an androgynous non-speaking role.

Mary Shelley/ Lady Caroline Lamb. The first was his friend, his best friend's wife, and his intellectual Nemesis. The second: a scandalous affair and a vindictive ruinous relationship, she was one of the reasons he left England for good. The ultimate woman scorned, she did what she could to ruin him.

Annabella Millbanke /A Greek Woman/Woman in Gossip Circle. Byron's wife and mother of his only (legitimate) daughter, remains the paradox.

Countess Teresa Guiccioli/ Woman in Circle of Gossip/ Woman of No Importance. The former was Byron's Italian lover and consistent force in his life, she represents the force of reason as well as the idealized Byron.

Synopsis of Scenes

Act One*

Scene 1. Byron's HQ and hearth during the coming Greek conflict. This includes a series of Tableaus—pocket sets, drawing rooms and boudoirs • A "Haunted Week" at the Villa Diodati. • "Mad Jack" Byron

Scene 2 Catherine Gordon's Office.

Scene 3 Tableaus of Contessa Teresa Guiccioli. • Byron's military quarters

Scene 4 On Shipboard. A Storm on the Flyspace.

Scene 5 Below Deck Guest Quarters. Tableaus include pocket sets of • Men at a Tavern Hearth • Byron with the Earle of Claire. • Lady Caroline Lamb • Annabella Millbanke

Act Two*

Scene 1. Shelley and Byron in Limbo • Tableaus include • Byron's Military Headquarters • Lady Caroline Lamb • Byron and Augusta Leigh

Scene 2. Byron in Flyspace, remembering "Gus."

Scene 3. Shelley in Limbo • Tableaus include Lady Caroline Lamb's Circle of Gossip • Byron in Parliament.

Scene 4. Limbo. Tableaus include Teresa Guiccioli • Byron with Trelawny and Surgeons • Shelley in Limbo.

Scene 5. Limbo. Tableaus include Byron and Polidori and Annabella Millbanke

Scene 6. Tableaus include • Byron with Shelley in France • Annabella

Scene 7. Byron in Limbo. Tableaus include Byron with Annabella • Four Women • Byron and Shelley's Ghost • Shelley and Mary Shelley .

Scene 8. Tableau. Shelley Byron and Polidori.

Scene 9. Tableau. Byron, Trelawny and The Duel • Shelly's Ghost and Byron in flyspace remember Shelley's Death.

Scene 10. Tableau. Shelley's Funeral.

Scene 11. Tableau. Contessa Guiccioli • Byron and Fletcher.

Scene 11. Tableau. Trelawny's Epilogue • Byron's exit.

*Production Considerations**

Set Design and Tone: There is one basic set: Limbo. *Several tableaux or pocket sets will be created out of this* by using a Godspot, cone-lighting, furniture accents and props. A flyspace would be desirable but not necessarily essential.

Although there are frequent scene changes, any creative set designer can create the proper atmosphere with a few key accents and a rearrangement of furnishings. Furniture should be of the period is possible, and use of pocket sets can be emphasized with judicious use of key lighting and “god spots.”

Since the production is in a kind of netherworld, part of which takes place between dimensions, *an acute sense of lighting accent and proper costumes of the period can dictate much of the flow, mood and tempo of the piece itself.*

As a production, *NARCISSUS: The Last Days of Lord Byron*, tends to be a bit more action-driven than many plays, and that kinesis in itself lends a certain mood and strength to the play. Production values and set design are left to interpretation, and can be adapted to fit any budget or sense of set design.

Although an astute sense of “period” would lend mightily to an effective production, it is not absolutely necessary to accomplish either the message or the tone of the drama.

Lighting: This will be the most critical element of the play. Since limbo settings with accent pieces such as sofa, bed, desk and chair are the best solution, the use of Godspots, accent lighting, and tracking spots are crucial to the effective mood and dramatic impact of what the audience will see. Again, the “funeral pyre” for Shelley that appears near the end of the play would be easily handled by a table covered by a few incidental pieces of wood and a play of multicolored lights.

** All sets may include an entire array of different designs, or may spring as pocket sets with accents (or tableaux) to distinguish them from one another, given an individual playhouse’s size, fly-space and production budgets. We may, in all cases, entertain the option of stepping in and out of Limbo settings during several metaphysical conversations between Byron and Shelley.*

NARCISSUS

The Last Days of Lord Byron

Props and Costume Plot

Proper costumes of the Regency Era (1795-1825), heavily influenced form-fit paramilitary garb for men, a general lack of facial hair (beyond sideburns). Styles in Britain forced their way into the rest of Western Europe, featuring the stylizations of [George Bryan] Beau Brummell—trousers, perfect tailoring, and unadorned, immaculate linen as the ideals of men's fashion.

For women, styles were a triumph of undress or informal styles over the brocades, lace, periwig, and powder of the earlier eighteenth century. The high waistlines of 1795-1820 styles take attention away from the tight "wasp-waist" corseting often considered fashionable during earlier periods. Inspired by neoclassical tastes, short-waisted gowns should feature soft, flowing skirts that are frequently of white or off shades of white, almost transparent muslin. These notably drape loosely like the garments on Greek and Roman statues, fitting of the Era's obsession with neoclassicism.

Two changes of costume should be adequate for the entire cast (in some cases redefining the dual roles some of the actors must play). *And appropriately handled, the costumes themselves can create both set and sense of period required to make this dramatic vehicle work.*

NOTE: It is absolutely essential that Shelley's Ghost and Shelley (the man) are differentiated by a striking change in attire—and Byron in his last days, and Byron in earlier circumstance, be costumed in striking contrast to one another. (With Byron this would logically be contrasted by his wearing of a military uniform.)

Specific Props should include the following (accent pieces): 1) Two desks and chairs, 2) a bed, 3) dueling pistols, 4) a walking stick, 5) sabers, 6) a helm of a ship, 7) a riding crop, 8) and a [funeral pyre] draped platform topped with wood.

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The Last Days of Lord Byron

Act 1. Scene 1. Limbo. *Through a fog in a flyspace upstage left, the Ghost of Percy Bysshe Shelley emerges. Although he a specter, he is dressed like any other man of the Regency period—cutaway coat, high starched shirt, jodhpurs and high leather boots.*

SHELLEY'S GHOST

George Gordon Lord Byron—it is his time. He has outlived his peers, and yet he senses an end to things just as he knows I've come. In some small way, I think he's relieved. The drones of convention weigh upon him even more than his tattered reputation. Can a man live too much of a life? The question claws at us all: Can someone drink so deeply that there's nothing left to taste?

Shelley steps downstage, revealing himself in full.

Answers very seldom come from this side of the veil. So, I wait for him—as a rebuke of my own atheism and support of his belief in all those folds of consciousness that slip between Heaven and Hell.

(Lord Byron enters stage right. Gliding gracefully despite his limp, he pauses for a moment to note the apparition, and then greets it with an almost paranormal delight.)

BYRON

It is written that the warrior sees his end before it comes. Is that why you're here, Shelley, old friend—to show me the way across?

SHELLEY'S GHOST

A Purgatory for my arrogant soul—my future remains to be seen.

BYRON

And mine as well?

SHELLEY'S GHOST

All futures in the hard world of flesh are insecure. And since you've never been certainty's fool, accept this as the blessing it is.

BYRON

But I'm here to fight for Independence, as the future "King of Greece." We throw off the yoke of the Turk at last, after 400 years of oppression. At last, I have a revolution that comes with the Grace of God!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Sadly you believe it. Well, you wanted a war of your own. And this is the one place in the world that would build an Army around you.

BYRON

Regiments wait at my disposal. What a glorious end—to die as the General in a great cause, the spearhead of an ideal!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Death! It still holds your fascination. There are better places, I can tell you, than this netherworld on the periphery of time.

BYRON

“Fascination,” I admit, though I do not rush to meet it. I love this life so much. It’s slow death that I loathe—that dread, dull drudge of daily subsistence. Let it be my singular fate to be a martyr to passion, that I may die of my wounds—the Quest Knight fallen in battle.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

So, if Death means Glory, it has your permission? Vanity has no limits. Well, that explains your choice of venue in this valley of dying things.

BYRON

These mountains are our “Wall of China” against the Turk. Missolonghi is no work of art, but the town is a tactic, a clever bit of strategy—that and nothing else.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

You come to a nation of tourmaline seas, of white rock crystalline islands, and you pick this pox of a furrow surrounded by stagnant lagoons. You think you’re the god of great momentum, yet you flirt with Calamity. And now you listen to politicians, the creatures that you despise.

BYRON

So, you’re my conscience? What punishment for the consummate free thinker—I miss the moral relativism of the most radical mind of our time.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

It comes as a burden, I must admit, to carry the chains of portent.

BYRON

Virgil to my Dante—what ironies exist! My harbinger, I must surmise.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Your angels are still in convention, Gordie. You are a child of fate. And as long as your faith holds strong, you may remain, or so I’m told.

BYRON

Do angels exist? Are you here to tell me? Have you finally come with answers?

SHELLEY'S GHOST

"O man! Hold thee on in courage of soul
Through the stormy shades of thy worldly way,
And the billows of clouds that around thee roll
Shall sleep in the light of a wondrous day,
Where hell and heaven shall leave thee free
To the universe of destiny."

BYRON

You answer in a conundrum. Is this the fate that awaits me—to end with more questions than answers? Now that would be damnation indeed!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

And yet we talked of all this a thousand times at the Villa Diodati: eternity, the hereafter, haunted souls that wander between dimensions, and The Contest—that intrepid probe into the mind's recesses, based in bleak myths and riddles!

BYRON

For you it was an exercise; for me a matter of faith. A quest to uncover dark corners of the spirit as a means to announce the Light. As I believe in everything and you believed in nothing, we're bonded like two sides of the Coin, forever...I miss you, Percy.

(He reaches out to touch Shelley, but Shelley backs away.)

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Then do not try to materialize me, or you'll lose us both forever.

BYRON

But I never had you, or Mary either. And I loved you both so much. It always seemed so incomplete that we didn't...

SHELLEY'S GHOST *(interrupts him)*

That you didn't have us in the way that you had practically everyone else? Passion, desire, rapacious rapture leading to ennui—you were so predictable with everyone you loved, like a randy hare racing against the clock. Not with us, thank you very much; certainly not with her!

BYRON

Does she still hate me?

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Nothing so vile; that's the curse of your charm. We've all loved you in spite of ourselves.

BYRON

You use the past perfect.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

All things past are imperfect by definition.

BYRON

Except for dreams.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

A luxury of the living.

BYRON

And we once shared them, fantasies replete—on those rainy nights in June.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Lake Geneva. Your concept!

BYRON

And your triumph, or the triumph of your lady, hers and that thanatoptic alchemist who posed as my physician...

SHELLEY'S GHOST

He was a friend once, was Polidori. We all were, and you know it.

BYRON

Of course I do. He was simply too handsome to be good at his profession.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

We all were. It was no bar to brilliance.

BYRON

But a burden of a different kind...

(Shelly looks upstage. Bryon steps back stage left to observe the Upstage Tableau while. Downstage blacks out. Upstage [Past] Tableau of the Villa Diodati. Mary Shelley, the dashing Dr. John William Polidori and the moody, voluptuous Claire Clairmont all sit in semi-circle. Two empty chairs remain to be filled by Byron and Shelley.)

MARY SHELLEY

Hideous, saturated gothic night! Foreboding and filled with dread! Ideal for the macabre sensibilities of us all.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

Not mine, surely. I long for the warm country climes of a summer in Surrey.

POLIDORI

You long for the vampiric charms of the lascivious Baron of Rochdale.

CLARE CLAIRMONT

He's not a vampire.

POLIDORI

But he longs to be one: the seducer's fantasy—to drain every virgin's blood from her body and use it as fuel for his groin.

MARY SHELLEY

No wonder all your patients die, Dr. John! You are a stealer of souls. What a perfect companion for a night like this; and I'm certain this place is haunted.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

Besides, you know Gordie hates that title: George Gordon Lord Byron, the Baron of Rochdale.

POLIDORI

How can any man hate a title?

MARY SHELLEY

I don't know. He has a few I'm sure he'd like to be rid of: homewrecker, adulterer, duelist, braggart, brawler, debaucher of women; pederast, political exile, and refugee from debt. No wonder he's chosen the rest of this life to conquer the Continent. He can't go home again for fear of the posse lying in wait.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

I think you all are most unfair—and far too clever for me. Besides, you should never denounce a man to his back.

BYRON (*enters on his line*)

Then they may do it to my face.

Not waiting for approval he kneels at Mary's side and kisses her hand. She holds it out to him, willingly.

MARY SHELLEY

When have I ever spared you, Gordie, when you so much seem to cherish the golden hammer of my truth?

BYRON

Your truth is seldom a hammer, dear Mary. You cut me to the quick. But your wit is a razor that I am willing to endure.

POLIDORI

It's this constant rain that vexes us all. And to think I left England for this!

MARY SHELLEY

The irony of all this is that you're the only one who didn't have to.

SHELLEY

Well, what is life without a price on your head?

POLIDORI

At this point, at least. I have no scandals savaging my reputation. And my creditors have learned to be patient.

BYRON (*Goes to the mantle.*)

Ah, good doctor, hold court with us. We'll find a way to corrupt you.

POLIDORI

You already have. My fingers grow numb in the scrawling—those certain prescriptions that you require, more and more it seems.

BYRON

Laudanum is the only thing that works for those times when I fast. It makes starvation tolerable.

POLIDORI

And other things as well...

SHELLEY (*enters on his line*)

Perhaps I should take some to get through these wretched Alpine downpours. It's the nape of spring, and here we all sit trapped like mice in a maze. Perhaps, it would unleash me...

MARY SHELLEY

As if you hadn't been "unleashed" already.

SHELLEY

Only as an experiment.

MARY SHELLEY

And how you love your "experiments," repeated time and again.

SHELLEY

Well, this is one I can do without! This retreat is becoming a prison!

BYRON

We're in a Villa for heaven's sake, overlooking Lake Geneva—a paradise by any definition!

SHELLEY

I've never cared that much for the Swiss. They're simply too good with money. A man can never trust anyone so obsessed with thrift. And the weather makes it worse. We're cursed!

BYRON

Then let's make the most of it. If we're going to be haunted, then let's do it right. The contest!

POLIDORI (*To the others*)

The opium makes him fantasize.

BYRON

Ah, but you loved my Tales of the Vampire—Creation's only civilized monster; the only one who articulates the darkness in the soul.

MARY SHELLEY

That lascivious Romanian folk monster that you've managed to turn into a vain and narcissistic aristocrat? I've heard better. In fact, I could create better.

POLIDORI

In fact, so could I. Your rantings are merely a metaphor for your own lusty lack of restraint. Shards though they are, they're good! I like them.

BYRON

Polidori you do delight me! You used to be such a toady! Have I created a monster here?

SHELLEY

It seems we've created several.

BYRON (*to Claire*)

And what would yours be, my lady?

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

I have a story called The Idiot.

SHELLEY

Not grotesque enough.

BYRON

Except, perhaps, for the clunky prose.

(Crestfallen, Claire looks away.)

MARY SHELLEY

Bryon! Try some tact. You might actually come to like it.

POLIDORI

Besides, we need real monsters—deplorable and frightening!

MARY SHELLEY

Like the monster of science and industry: the hideous two-headed apparition. They'll manufacture a machine to replace us, you know. Just give them enough time—these dark, vain, focused little men who create all these ogres of invention.

BYRON

Yes, well...God save us from any more DaVinci's. The world couldn't stand it.

MARY SHELLEY

You're being sarcastic, but I believe that all this industry's become a monster in the making. And that will be the thrust of my tale: about a doctor who tries to play God by recreating life from a cadaver. I'm naming it after that scandalous Austrian physician: Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus!

SHELLEY

Prometheus: the Titan tortured for bringing the gift of fire—I like it!

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

Wretched!

BYRON

No, no! Compelling! So the contest is on! Whoever creates the most grotesque and original story of pure gothic terror shall be declared The Winner!

SHELLEY

And what will they win?

BYRON

Why, fame! And Publication! Something against which we shall all press our efforts.

SHELLEY

Something you have already.

BYRON

I? I have infamy! That's my claim to membership among "The Illuminati!" Most of my best writing is spent defending myself.

MARY SHELLEY

Your "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" is certainly a favorite of mine.

BYRON (*Strikes a pose, quoting*)

"Behold—ye tarts! One moment spare the text—
Haley's last work, and worst—until his next.
Whether he spin poor couplets into plays
Or damn the dead with purgatorial praise,
His style in youth is still the same,
Forever feeble, and forever tame."

MARY SHELLEY

I think that was meant for us.

BYRON

All true poetry is entirely personal.

POLIDORI

The only man who quotes himself ad nauseum...and should.

BYRON

Damned with faint praise, yet again. So, I shall be the arbiter of this meeting of great minds!

POLIDORI

What about your story? Though it comes in fragments, the Vampire tale is yours.

BYRON

I give it to you "Polly Dolly," old friend: I entrust the story to you. Make something extraordinary from your ordinary life!

POLIDORI

Very well, I will!

BYRON (*turns his attention to Claire*)

And what about you, young mademoiselle? You've shown a penchant for such things.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

Not now. Not any longer. Now, I must think of fairy queens, of butterflies and spring. I must keep my thoughts as pure as snowflakes falling from the sky.

MARY SHELLEY

But you love all things of gothic and horror. It sends you screaming into the night, and yet you do so with a sense of such delight as I have never seen.

SHELLEY

Yes, dear cousin of my heart. Share a tale with me. We can ride the muse together. You have a fascination with horror. We've walked that edge so often. Let us plunge into hallucination!

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

Not now, Bysshe! I can't think of such hideous apparitions. I have...other considerations. Trust me, and leave me out of this. I ask you as a favor!

BYRON

(mocks his own gravity)

No exceptions! If you stay, you play. Those are the rules of the house.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

No, my Lord! You of all people should set me free from this. Please!

BYRON (*Crosses his arms defiantly.*)

No, I insist! As your host, dear lady, I think I deserve that much. A little accommodation, if you please.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

And I ask this: consideration for me, at least for this one small thing.

BYRON

And why should I, my impetuous girl? You come here unannounced...but welcome. So for your sudden untoward arrival, this is the fee that we extract.

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

The first of many, I have to reveal. There's something I need to tell you. A matter of privacy, I think, if you'd grant me a moment or two.

BYRON

Speak your mind, woman. We're all friends here. Tell us your inner secrets. This is a time for sharing such things on these dark and stormy nights!

MARY SHELLEY

For pity's sake Byron, don't be so obtuse! My sister is heavy with child.

BYRON

Oh, lovely. Well...congratulations! And who is the lucky chap?

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

Oh, Byron! How could you!?

Claire bounds from her chair and bursts away, stage left.

MARY SHELLEY

George Gordon Lord Byron, you invented outrage! You're a horror story in itself, and the most insensitive man who ever had his way with a woman! I would encourage you to show some sense of obligation, but how could you?! You impregnated your wife and your own sister...

BYRON (*Corrects.*)

More or less...

MARY SHELLEY

And you never showed one trace of responsibility toward them.

BYRON

How dare you?! Of course, I did! This is hardly the same. Those were women to whom I bonded, to whom I gave my soul. This was a bloody bull rush; a trifle and you damn well know it!

MARY SHELLEY

Everything's a trifle to you! You spread your allure like a practiced dancer. Your victims wilt at your charm! I think I'll write about you, with poison in the ink! You're the assemblage of monstrous parts—of vanity and prowess, of honeyed tendrils like the flower that traps flies in its grasp. You only care for whatever feeds your swagger! We love you, and yet you use us like food to fill the empty places! What unbridled vanity!

(Disgusted, Mary Shelley too bounds out of the room, leaving the men to pick up the pieces of the moment.)

POLIDORI

Well there's an icebreaker for you.

SHELLEY

Byron, you really should apologize...to someone.

BYRON

Apologize—for what? I've never professed my love for this woman; not once. When you and Mary haven't flung her at me, she's been flinging herself, coming into my bedroom at all hours! What, pray tell, was I supposed to do?

SHELLEY

Try a little discretion. Some courtesy might help. For once live up to your title.

BYRON

My "title" does not entail perfection! I'm a man and, by nature, flawed! At least I admit it. At least I'm not awash in some disingenuous self-deception!

SHELLEY

And what are you implying?!

BYRON

I imply, nothing! I say it aloud. It was a legitimate question—that of parenthood. I have been where you would be, the proponent of "free love." You practice it, and yet condemn it when someone does it better.

SHELLEY

So, the horror stories have begun already. And what a model you make. All we have to do is paint a portrait of your soul.

(He thinks about it.)

Oh well, all honeymoons must come to an end. I've always admired you, Gordie. But now I see: you as truly tragic! The fall from Eden is complete!

(Shelley too makes his resigned if measured exit.)

BYRON *(Turns to Polidori)*

Care to make it unanimous?

POLIDORI

Not at all, I sympathize. From what I can see, this nymphet came prancing in at full gallop, succumbed without a second thought, and promptly yielded a foal. Now she wants to swap lust for honor. Well, caveat emptor.

BYRON

How can I feel an obligation to someone so easily gotten? A woman must be like a castle-keep to be worthy of the quest. My needs are simple. To let romance take its amorous course, not be run down by some wolfhound desperate for a meal.

POLIDORI

Such is the price of celebrity—this bacchanalian frenzy. They've drunk the wine of your renown, and for that there's a price to pay. They try to shame you into decorum when you, in fact, are shameless.

BYRON

Not shameless! Generous! I'm a docile fellow, really. I simply hate to turn them down when they've made such work of it all.

POLIDORI

As for me...I think I shall work on the book. "The Vampire" somehow inspires me. He is the only monster I've ever thought made any sense. Just start me on my way if you would. You who toss off new ideas the way you would flick a fly, let me feast at least on the scraps of your genius.

BYRON

I bequeath you whatever I have. No strings. It's just the fetus of an idea, as long as we're on the subject—a few scant passages, the rantings of a claret filled night, faltering glimpses of a man condemned to his soul.

POLIDORI

Is it autobiographical?

BYRON

You ask the rhetorical question! On your way, good doctor! Just leave the "wee bottle" behind. It eases the pain of abstinence, and I'm swearing off women forever.

POLIDORI

You trade one drug for another; how quaint. Well, what else is life about, but a quest to alter one's consciousness at the expense of everything else?

(Polidori pulls a small bottle of laudanum from his coat pocket, sets it on the table, and exits. Byron takes up the bottle. As he does, Shelley's Ghost reappears).

BYRON

Care to share this? We did it before.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

I'm beyond such earthly desires. The "doors of perception" are thresholds that I've already crossed.

BYRON *(picks it up)*

Is that what this is about, my ghostly companion—a show trial of my follies? Why haunt me with them? I've never cared. Guilt is so...Calvinistic.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Not my purpose at all, my lord.

BYRON

Then why on earth are you here?!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

To help you reconcile yourself with all that truly matters.

BYRON

What a bore! When have I ever tried to reconcile myself with anything? Besides, what about you, friend Shelley? That could have been your child. You consummated your bond with that woman many more times than I. Did Mary know? Of course she did. How many secrets are buried there?

Byron pivots behind Shelley's Ghost to recite the words.

"Constantia turn! In thy dark eyes a power like light doth lie,
Even though the sounds which were thy voice, which burn
Between thy lips, are laid to sleep..."

SHELLEY'S GHOST

The bitter taste of irony. You taunt me with my own verse!

BYRON *(takes a swig)*

You wrote that for Claire, didn't you? All those poems to Constantia were written to her, and the whole world knew it.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

I suppose I should thank you for holding it in all these years. She filled a place...

BYRON *(anticipates)*

...In your bed. Well, I always did imagine Mary to be a chilly dancer between the sheets.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Hers was always a journey of mind. Her body seemed a distraction.

BYRON

In that way, you were the perfect match.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

It has occurred to me. In the early days, we were bliss. It was a communion of Oversouls, and our bodies were marionettes.

BYRON

I didn't think ghosts could feel pain. But then I realize, dear disembodied spirit, that this is why you're here—not for my unfinished business, but entirely for your own. I miss our mornings and days together. Those walks along the lake, fencing for truth like two knights questing in search of the vanished Grail.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

We were all such children then. I idolized you.

BYRON

And I took it away with one stroke.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

No longer a god, merely a man with flaws that numbered in legion—the conquests, the bravado, the incest, the buggary, the romps with married women and pretty young boys that you've interchanged like garments. Cast away—all of them—without so much as a laundry to wash them clean.

BYRON (*Steps away, as if to run, but stops himself.*)

Would I be who I am as a slave to convention?! I've done some good things, you know. Look beyond what I used to be, and see me for what I am now. Look at the sum of what I've become. Don't freeze me in time, I pray!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

There is no "freezing," because there is no time. It's our gift on this face of the curtain. And it pains and delights me all at once to note that we became history's fools. All your work and mine together won't gain a scintilla of the acclaim of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or Polidori's Vampire. You and I will be whispers of praise among the intellects and the lovelorn, quoted from rumpled tweed and lecterns in the halls of academe. While they—My God!—Their works will become cults beyond measure; objects of obsession for the vast unwashed of the world...

Observations made, Shelley's Ghost exits upstage center. Unaware, Byron pulls the top of the bottle of Laudanum and takes a swig, addressing the absent Shelley behind him.

BYRON

Well, sink me in the revelation! I'm amazed that you're amazed. Matthew 7:6, old man; Mathew 7:6! I've always maintained that poetry is lost upon this world. I've felt it in my gut every time I put pen to paper. Well, never mind, I'm a warrior now. I have a soldier's purpose. At last, like a latter day Lancelot, I have one last chance at redemption... Shelley?

(Byron finally realizes Shelley's Ghost has gone. In his place, Byron's Adjutant, Fletcher, enters, followed by old friend Captain Edward John Trelawny. Trelawny is a burly, athletic man, armed with saber and pistols.)

ADJUTANT

Colonel, good news! Our Suliote troops have broken the Turkish blockade at Kefalonia. We can join up with the Prince Alexandros while he's there. But we have to move immediately. Your troops...

BYRON (*anticipates*)

Will sack the city, rape the women and steal everything in sight, if I don't intercede.

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

You're the only one they respect, my lord; the only one they respond to.

TRELAWNY

You hold the purse strings, Gordie. Money's the only leverage here, and they're anxious to be paid.

BYRON

Then let's get our ad hoc militia on the road. I'll join you in a moment.

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

Yes, Colonel.

(Fletcher salutes, and departs stage left.)

BYRON

At this point, I don't know which is worse, the Albanians or the Turks. It seems, our mercenaries are even more dangerous than our foes.

TRELAWNY

The Suliotes are merely tribal and greedy; easy to control. The Turks invented brutality. I think I've come just to kill them. It's like ridding the planet of vermin.

BYRON

That's why I invited you here. I'm glad you came along

TRELAWNY

No man's life is complete without at least one good war. Besides, Scotland is a tomb this time of year.

BYRON

Ninety percent of the world is stark raving mad.

TRELAWNY

And the rest is on the brink.

BYRON

Oh well! Any decent revolution requires a bit of madness.

TRELAWNY

(Amused at the thought of it.)

Then we both more than qualify. And that is why I'm here!

BYRON

But you were Shelley's friend.

TRELAWNY

And yours. We're much more alike, you and I. Warriors first and poets second—to live life; not just observe it.

BYRON

I saw him; at least the appearance of him. I know I can tell you this, because I know you'll understand.

TRELAWNY

I'm a man of this world, dear Gordie! This we share in common, although I suspect you have more fondness than I for the world that lies beyond.

BYRON

Oh no! I love this life so much. I feel somehow as if all that has taken place up to now is but a prelude to what's ahead. Finally in this just revolt I've found my métier—my cause célèbre, the reason I still breathe. We live in the Age of Revolution! And now at last I'm in it—a War of Independence set against the yoke of oppression! At last I arrive—with gratitude—at a point of critical mass!

TRELAWNY

Be careful, my lord; the greatest peril is a sense of Destiny! Just do your best. There'll always be purpose and martyrs to the cause.

BYRON

Then why are you here?

TRELAWNY

Why of course, to rub up against your genius. Everything you do is a work of art.

BYRON

You never loved me in the way you did him.

TRELAWNY

I never pretended to. The bond we share is that we cheat death more often than not—that and our love of adventure for its own sake.

(Byron eyes him, suspicious of his motives. But just as suddenly he shifts tempo.)

BYRON

Ah, yes! It is "the craving void," that drives us to the battle. Join the ranks, Captain! I'll see you shortly. And know this above all else: I appreciate your undying support, in spite of what you are.

TRELAWNY *(Mocks the comment.)*

Why, my lord, whatever do you mean? I'm a man with simple desires. The battle, unlike life itself, is clean in its intention. You win or lose, live or die—and resolution is swift!

(Trelawny, salutes ironically and exits stage left. Byron speaks to the empty room behind him, as if he knows Shelley's Ghost will return to fill it. He does.)

BYRON

There is a light that surrounds that man; he'll outlive us all. He's one of those rare, unkillable creatures who've struck some bargain with longevity. Is it a pact with the Devil he's made, or simply the Devil's own luck? Whatever it is, I hope it rubs off.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

That's why you keep him around.

BYRON

I keep him around, because he will not go, because he's stuck to fame like a glue.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

You invited him, if you'll remember. At least, acknowledge that much.

BYRON

But not you, Shelley! I didn't invite you, although I'm happy to see you.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Send me away, if you don't want me here. I'll leave without trouble, I promise.

BYRON

No! I need what friends I can get! Even that wicked fellow.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

...Especially that wicked fellow. You thrive on Trelawny's company, because he has even less scruples than you. You're kindred spirits, after all, and fathers of many bastards.

BYRON

You had to do it, didn't you?

SHELLEY'S GHOST

I'm envious, I suppose. I left this world estranged to my issue. You've left your offspring scattered like spores upon the wind. And of course they all adored you, until...

BYRON (*rhetorical*)

Until I've managed to disenchant them, as I have so many others...

SHELLEY'S GHOST

I wonder at the paradox: Why you—who understood all the sordid, sullied edges of a childhood—would not endeavor to create a paradise on earth for those who bore your name?

BYRON

I love a specter who upbraids me for the slightest of offenses. I wasn't made to be the doting parent, and you know it. And neither were you, might I add.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

Well, that's the issue, isn't it? You never know when the gods of war will strike you down. After all, let's face it, my friend. You have so much to atone for; if for nothing else than the innocence you've let float into nonexistence! For Allegra, that poor deserted child!

BYRON

I loved Allegra! I cherished her, even though I detested her mother! I never blamed her for Claire! I adored the girl! She touched the child inside me. I kept her with me day and night! We had such times together. Allegra was my heart, and my heart has been broken!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

So much so that you shunted her off to some cold, dark parochial school where she perished from a simple lack of love!

BYRON

Think before you speak, Shelley. That woman...

SHELLEY'S GHOST

...Petitioned to see her. She was Allegra's natural mother, and wanted the best for the girl—not the sinister fate that seems to befall all bastards.

BYRON

Convents are supposed to care for children. Instead they, smother them in convention. They drown them in soulless piety and blame us for what's left.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

You could have kept her. You could have fought for her. But instead you put her out of sight rather than let her find happiness with someone else. If anyone had an overdose of pride it would be you.

BYRON

What was I to do? The girl had a Devilish Spirit. And her mother was a succubus to suck the blood from my soul!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

The poor girl died because you tired of her, just as you do everything else. You charmed her into hero worship then broke her heart with indifference!

BYRON

Perhaps you're right. Perhaps you should leave, you piss poor Doppelgänger! Shelley—my true friend Shelley—had demons of his own: deserted families and "open marriages" that no one wanted but he. But Bysshe would never pass such judgments. He was above such things. So, I call you for what you are—a fraud!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

But that is my burden, like it or not, to atone for my own misgivings. I must bring you the Truth, my friend. And the truth is that you were cruel to your children with the worst wounds of all, indifference. You who were granted everything—privilege, beauty and wealth—could you not have shared it with the tiniest of creatures?

BYRON

The Truth?! Whose truth?! Your truth, you landed gentry, you pampered baronet's son who never wanted for a thing?! My first ten years were spent in want and the pain of a withered foot, with armies of quacks and randy nannies who played with my privates and beat me for the sin of living. I knew the meaning of abuse before love was ever mentioned. Those were the early days of my life—the formative marrow of me.

As Byron speaks, he looks upstage as a Godspot comes up on a tableau of his father, Mad Jack Byron. Holding a riding crop, he takes note of the invisible child.

MAD JACK BYRON

Good God woman! I ask you to bear me a son, and instead you give me this deformed wretch of a creature! His foot's as withered as a tamarind, and he's clumsy as a toad. If he's ever able to walk at all, he'll be some disgusting dwarf, bound from hip to ankle in some kind of contraption. I can't stand the sight of him! He's a blemish on our clan. And to make matters worse, he's defiant as a demon, and with a temper to match! Don't glare at me with those sloe-doe eyes, you nasty little frog! Avert your gaze, or I'll throttle you like a wag!

(Mad Jack raises a crop to strike at the [invisible] child, just as the tableau goes dark.

Shelley's Ghost and Byron split downstage, stepping back into right and left wings, as another tableau illuminates center stage.)

Act 1. Scene 2. *Tableau past. Godspot on Byron's mother, Catherine Gordon, seated at a table while an attractive but unrepentant governess, May Gray, stands before her.*

CATHERINE GORDON

My son has welts from head to toe, and you dare to tell me he fell?!

MAY GRAY

He's clumsy, he's lame, and his foot's an issue. I do the best I can. I tend him night and day!

CATHERINE GORDON

Including spending late hours in his bed, or so I've come to learn.

MAY GRAY

He's frightened of the dark! I give him comfort.

CATHERINE GORDON

I can just imagine you do.

MAY GRAY

He's frail but tricky.

CATHERINE GORDON

He's eleven years old, and becoming a man—more quickly than I'd hoped. And he's terrified of you!

MAY GRAY

I'm strict with the boy, that's true. But he's unruly and needs a tight rein!

CATHERINE GORDON

The scullery maid saw you whipping the boy within an inch of his life and reported it to our solicitor, John Hanson. And, according to Mr. Hanson, it wasn't the first time, he has told me! Do you deny it?!

MAY GRAY

I caught him stealing from my personal items, too delicate to mention!

CATHERINE GORDON

Miss Gray, my son may be many things, but he is not a thief! If he wants something—from anyone—he can usually just charm them out of it.

MAY GRAY

Well, that's his whole problem, isn't it?

CATHERINE GORDON

The real problem is that this wasn't the first time, according to staff. You've been doing this for months! For God's sake woman!

MAY GRAY

The boy is incorrigible! I have tried gentler ways!

CATHERINE GORDON

When?! When have you tried them?!

MAY GRAY

Many times!

CATHERINE GORDON

Young woman, you have abused my son for the last time! You are dismissed, without reference!

MAY GRAY*(steams but holds back at last)*

Madam!

(May Gray exits in a huff. Catherine Gordon buries her head in her hands. Just as quickly, she pulls a quill and paper in front of her and begins to pen a letter.)

CATHERINE GORDON

My dear, disregarded son: Our long dark night of the soul is over. Such penury and ill-repute will no longer plague us again. We have had a striking reversal of fortune in the form of a stipend from your great uncle the fifth Lord Byron.

CATHERINE GORDON (*Continuing*)

I know this may come as a shock to you, for you have expected so little. But try to accept that God is kind, and his justice is resolute, however late it may be in the arrival...

As she finishes her thought, her words fade as the Godspot darkens on the scene.

Blackout.

Act 1. Scene 3. *Tableau upstage right, time present, on the young beautiful Italian Countessa, Teresa Guiccioli, ardently penning a letter to Byron.*

CONTESSA TERESA GUICCIOLI

"Don Juan, Cara Mia: I remember, when you first swept me away from my husband early into our marriage, you told me that you had already wearied of what you called, "the tyranny of love." Even then, I promised you that I would never place that kind of burden upon you. I promised you that we would have an open hand and that, above all else, I would be your friend, your consigliore and your safe haven..."

A Godspot flicks on Byron as he returns downstage stage left, apparently reading The Contessa's letter.

"I still hold to that vow, and yet I too confess to my weakness as a woman. Even though you have not yet called me over to your camp, I know you will because I know in my heart that I am the muse that inspires you. I am your unfailing faith in all that's good in this world. We can never lose that, my darling, any more than we can lose one another, even though the rigors of your noble campaign rob us of precious days..."

As her words fade, her tableau darkens and blacks out.

Byron, comes center stage, tossing the letter on the table before him.

BYRON

Teresa! Contessa! What are you to me? I feed on your adoration! It's like a drug, and yet I'm afraid that I tire of it as well. Do I love you because you present the Law of Pure Potential—that I long to be what you see in me, Apollo with a pen? How we pursue the mirage of fulfillment, the wine that sours the mouth. How time does manage to kill everything except our need to dream.

(As a second thought, Byron picks up the letter back into his coat. As he does, Adjutant Fletcher reenters with a sense of urgency.)

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

My lord, the battalion is assembled and ready for review.

BYRON

Just in time. But let's not stand on formalities. Let's set off—to the Turk!!

(Hesitant, Fletcher ponders a difficult announcement.)

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

There is a small matter...That woman from the village.

BYRON

Woman?

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

The one you've been "helping." She's here. She insists upon seeing you. I ordered her away, but she just won't leave. I thought...in order to avoid a scene.

BYRON

No, no, Fletcher. That was the right decision. Send her in.

Adjutant Fletcher motions stage right, and a peasant woman of no particular beauty steps forward.

GREEK WOMAN

My Lord! My Lord!

She kneels, taking Byron's hand to kiss it. Fletcher exits.

BYRON *(lifting her to her feet)*

Get up, woman. I'm not The Pieta.

GREEK WOMAN

You, my Lord, have done so much, I don't know what to say!

BYRON

A simple, "Thank you," will suffice.

GREEK WOMAN

I am your slave, for life! I'm here to offer you anything you desire—myself, if that be your wish.

BYRON *(hides his disappointment by turning away)*

And...desirable you are, sweet lady. But that was not my intent. Your quarters are comfortable?

GREEK WOMAN

Yes, my lord. It's the first roof we've had over our heads in years.

BYRON

And your son...is well?

GREEK WOMAN

Yes, my lord! As well as can be expected.

BYRON

He's walking, I trust.

GREEK WOMAN

Yes, my lord. The doctor has fitted him with a device. He can get around.

BYRON (*turning back to her*)

Good! Then, I have my reward.

(He kisses the woman on the top of her head.)

I'll check on you from time to time.

(Just as he releases her, Trelawny reenters the room.)

TRELAWNY

Colonel, we're losing the tide!

BYRON

Yes, of course.

(He helps the woman to the door.) Go with God.

(Weeping, the woman runs from the room.)

TRELAWNY (*Taking note.*)

My friend, Byron, the paradox...

BYRON

Let's off to battle, good man!

TRELAWNY

The Turks outnumber us two to one. They have us blockaded as well.

BYRON

Then we'll tack North and outflank them by sea! We'll come in from behind.

TRELAWNY (*likes the decision*)

The man who's swum the Hellespont can certainly tame the Turk.

BYRON

Finally, a taste of combat! We were born for this Trelawny!

(Trelawny nods and exits. Byron grabs his helmet, ponders his departure, quoting from Prometheus.)

"His wretchedness and his resistance.

And his sad, unallied existence

To which his spirit may oppose

Itself—and equal to all woes."

(As Byron exits upstage right, Shelley's Ghost enters downstage left, looking toward the wake Byron has left.)

SHELLEY'S GHOST

How thin the line between woe and glory, how perilous the crossing! Oh, Byron, it is your time. I would that it were not.

Blackout.

Act 1. Scene 4. *Limbo. The flyspace. A Storm at Sea. The afterdeck aboard ship. As a Helmsman mans the tiller, Byron stands with his young consort, Loukas [a young man of 15] and Trelawny brave the weather, calling out over the wind.*

HELMSMAN

The storm is too much! It forces us North!

TRELAWNY

Into the Jaws of the foe...

HELMSMAN

And certain destruction, if we do!

BYRON

Press on! Press on, my brave companions! Fortune favors the bold!

HELMSMAN

If we continue we'll be certain to be dashed upon the rocks! And the Turks will find us upside down—exposed like turtles' eggs ready for the plucking.

BYRON

Courage, men!

HELMSMAN

It will take more than courage! We are Nature's pawns! Let us wisely go with the flow and fight another day.

TRELAWNY *(Thinks about it.)*

Perhaps he's right. If we take a hard tack, we can get back home. Let's do so before these claws of the sea catch us up for good!

LOUKAS

They're right! My instincts tell me that we'll crash upon the rocks. I'm afraid, my Lord, that we will die, and I lack the courage to brave it!

(Byron beholds the trembling boy and relents.)

BYRON

Such wisdom for a lad so young! He has an Oracle's senses. I will yield to the collective. But tides are like the fates. Once you miss them, you may never catch the wave again.

LOUKAS

My Lord, I'm afraid! I fear for my life. The storm has overcome me. I am wet to the bone, and lack your iron constitution.

BYRON

Then I'll take you below and get you warm, and regale you with tales that cry out to the warrior's soul.

LOUKAS

A warm dry room and a cup of soup is all that I desire.

BYRON

And how could I refuse such a simple request?

(Byron folds the young man in the lapels of his storm coat, kisses him on the forehead and whisks him offstage left. Observing, the Helmsman struggles with the tiller.)

HELMSMAN

So, it's true what they say. The Colonel's tastes are Greek in every sense. He runs to young boys as much as every lovely maid within reach!

TRELAWNY

Not as much as one might think. He's driven by a new set of demons—a need to embrace immortality through random acts of kindness.

HELMSMAN

Is this his son, then?

TRELAWNY

One never knows. With Byron, one never knows for certain. By spirit if not by blood, I think he desires but will not covet. The loves of his life have all been tainted by boredom and obsession. And that is something he can no longer afford. So, this time I think he loves from afar and in the Platonic tradition.

HELMSMAN

(preoccupied)

The Storm!

TRELAWNY

The Storm will pass! It always does; the catch comes in the awareness. Do we view it as a right of passage or the very end of our days?

HELMSMAN

You seem to be fearless!

TRELAWNY

That much I have. I hold this world in no awe. Therefore it lets me slip in and out of these doors they call "events."

HELMSMAN

And what of my Lord?

TRELAWNY

He is the event! His every breath brings heat! Even if he does not want it so, Life follows him like a dog.

HELMSMAN

And death?

TRELAWNY

He feels that he's cheated death, and therefore payment is due! But how it will come and how he will pay it is anybody's guess!

*(Trelawny crouches from the ravages of the wind and rain, and ducks offstage.)
Blackout.*

Act 1. Scene 5. *Limbo. A tableau downstage left reveals a Guest Quarters Below Deck —a table and bed. Byron sits and drinks while Loukas sleeps. As he does, The Ghost of Shelley reappears from stage right.*

BYRON *(Addresses Shelley without turning to look.)*

He sleeps the sleep of the just. It is the blessing of youth.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

You didn't.

BYRON

It wasn't allowed. All innocence was denied me. I was tainted by scandal before I came out of the womb.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

And that is why you seek innocence now—to reunite with it, purely and unspoiled.

BYRON

Thank you at last for understanding, although the world does not.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

I knew you Byron while I lived. You were beguilingly simple: all desire and appetite; you devour life by the yard.

BYRON

I'm a private man.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

And a public menace, with a jongleur's penchant for gossip. You played the braggart when it was the last thing you needed to do. Were you so hungry for validation? Did you not know we knew? Did you have to plead to us for the approval you already had?

BYRON

Self-justification is a fool's gambit. I've never been hypocritical enough to defend my every flaw; I'd go dizzy in the process. Certainly not with some specter of the man who was my friend—visionary, compassionate and freed moral agenda.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

It's not your morality but your indiscretion that I mock—more than once, and in endless repetition, so it seemed?

BYRON

I was young, and by that definition, wicked—constantly interwoven in some fabric of self-deceit. But of course, you're going to play it all like some cherished minuet.

SHELLEY'S GHOST

I don't play it. I'm merely the agent. Someone is doing it for me: your own conscience perhaps; perhaps a Higher Power...

The tableau below-decks blacks out.

Upstage center forms into a Tableau of time past— a gathering of poets and rakes to celebrate the moment. Trelawny, Polidori, Shelley and others sit in a semi circle drinking and laughing at the tide of current events. Byron with a cane, strides before them as he speaks.

POLIDORI

Childe Harold has brought you to the zenith of popularity. At twenty-five, you are the most celebrated poet in the world.

BYRON

Notoriety comes upon us with a start. I awoke one morning and found myself famous—to the chagrin of my family and half the readers at Cambridge.

POLIDORI

A verse!

BYRON

Perverse! To ask a man to parrot his own lines, reeks of tainted vanity.

POLIDORI

And a certain ready response.

BYRON

"There they shall rot—Ambitions honored fools!
Yes, Honor decks the turf that wraps their clay.
Vain sophistry! In these behold the tools.
The broken tools that tyrants cast away."

SHELLEY (*Enters on his line*)

You have to admire it. He uses his own rhyme to denounce all appeals to self-conceit and honor them in the same breath.

BYRON

Would you have me to stop all breathing? I suspect some of you would. You disdain all things that I would do to climb out of the swill.

TRELAWNY

No! Just stop the mimicry of all that high intention. Women! Let's talk of things that matter; of conquests met and mastered—ladies who would sell their souls for a single night of bliss!

MAN IN ENTOURAGE

Let's hear it! We all want to know all the gritty details—every last cry of a maiden defiled, every last stain on the sheet.

BYRON

Ah yes! Bawdy trivia! The sensual tie that binds. And since my star is on the rise, women find me food for fancy whether they like me or not.

TRELAWNY

Ah, but they love you—by the hundreds.

BYRON

Your words, not mine, but accurate since numbers seem to matter. Something less than a regiment but more than a battalion.

POLIDORI

Details!

BYRON

What would you have me say to please you? They fell from the sky upon me—like leaves floating down on a gusty autumn day.

(Sensing the anticipation, he breaks into a verse. The men eventually start to clap in rhythm to his meter.)

“Nannies, nymphs—The Bacchae!
And Duchesses deceiving
Barmaids, virgins, succubae
And ladies of the evening!
Charring women, cleaning girls,
Were shot with Cupid's arrow,
Governesses, nurses, churls...

POLIDORI

“...And half the boys at Harrow.”

BYRON (*tries to keep it light*)

Not true. Not fair. Not even while I was there...

MAN IN ENTOURAGE (*rhyming*)

Except perhaps for the comely Earl of Clare.

There is an abrupt pause, as all clapping stops. The comment is clearly a faux pas.

BYRON

Careful! If you value your hide...

MAN IN ENTOURAGE

Apparently not as much as you did Lord John Fitzgibbon's.

BYRON

Apologize sir!

MAN IN ENTOURAGE

For what—for advancing common knowledge?!

TRELAWNY

I recommend that you do.

MAN IN ENTOURAGE

Or what?!

BYRON

Do I sense a challenge?! Are you that obtuse?! Get out, you worthless son-of-a-bitch! You're not fit to mention one moment of time spent with that sweet soul...

MAN IN ENTOURAGE (*tries to rally*)

Sweet? Indeed! Elaborate!

Raising his cane Byron rousts the man, driving him from the room.

BYRON

Elaborate! I'll elaborate your head! Get out! Get out! You son-of-a-bitch!!

TRELAWNY (*Coming after*)

He meant nothing by it!

BYRON (*Turning at him, furious*)

He meant everything by it! Everything!! Get out!! All of you get out!! You're blind to love and all it means! You're tepid imitations. The only taste of life you have is what you siphon off from me! Get out! You bloodsucking minions! Go siphon life someplace else!

(Trelawny and Polidori exit hastily, arms around each other, mocking Byron's gravity, as he swears at them. Only Shelley remains, stepping up to calm him. He places his hand on Byron's shoulder. Byron clasps it in return.)

SHELLEY

What an enigma, you are dear friend: a railing braggart one moment; the next, some lovelorn Lochinvar, cherishing a relationship long since by the boards.

BYRON

I was young, and we were in school; our times as fledglings together. I was just out of poverty and suddenly into position.

(As Byron remembers, a tableau forms downstage left. A Godspot follows as the two teenage boys, The Young Byron and the Earle of Claire, walk along shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand.)

Ours was the ingenuous love one finds among public schoolboys—experimental, passionate, and doomed to a very short life. Fitzgibbon was the only friend I'd ever had at the time—the one who accepted me when the rest of the world would not.

SHELLEY

Are you saying it was Platonic?

BYRON

I'm saying nothing of the sort. It was the kind of desperate passion that knows its limitation—that sees its end and cherishes every precious moment that it has.

(At downstage right, they pause to caress one another, embracing tenderly at first, then passionately.)

SHELLEY

I never judge the nature of love. To me, it is sweetest when brief, left in the crux of memory, there to be cherished forever.

(The light on Shelley blacks out, leaving Byron to stand alone, not yet noticing that his friend has gone.)

BYRON

There indeed! And there it remains.

(He looks around to see that Shelley has gone.)

Now that's the Shelley I remember! A man of higher awareness—not this Demon alter-ego set upon to judge me! Specter, specter I ask only this: If you're here to hold up the mirror, let me see myself complete. Let's celebrate the light that pours from every open wound!

SHELLEY'S GHOST

From Parliament!

BYRON

My highest notion, if not my finest hour...

Byron steps downstage into a new Godspot, while the rest of the set goes dark. He holds up a piece of parchment from which he reads his writ. He strikes a pose.

BYRON (*Continuing*)

“My Lords and Members I come before you this day, a humble petitioner in search of justice for our nation’s weavers whose very careers are in peril. Your Frame Breaking Bill condemns to death a man for smashing a machine—an inanimate object of gears and wheels that has taken his livelihood. How does the punishment fit the crime when they have no compensation—None!—for all that has been taken from them? We call these men Luddites!

Pressing into his new role, he moves about appealing to figures in shadows as if were addressing Parliament.

Who are we then to deform a man for crying out in the darkness for his last shred of dignity—for bread for his family, for the only livelihood he has ever known?! Are we not Englishman? I ask you! Are our statutes not to be founded upon compassion and reasoned fairness for those less fortunate than we? Are we instead like merciless Turks who strike to the death all those who cry out for liberty and justice?!

He gestures upward as it to appeal to the back bench.

Some day, machines may come into being that perform our every function. Who is to say then who will be just when our children cry out to be heard!? Repeal this law that sounds more like it comes from the Archbishop of Torquemada than it does any body of reasonable men. Let us be England...not the Inquisition!”

From the darkness “boos’ and heckles descend upon the man, seeming to strike him down like a blow. He staggers for a moment, then recovers himself.

VOICES FROM SHADOWS

Boo! Boo!

(from another sector) No! No! No!
Nay! Nay!

Byron physically steps away from the memory of it, strolling downstage as if to get a grip on himself.

BYRON

Oh well...my finest moments were often met with derision. I’ve come to believe we’re often at our best when bringing out the worst in others. Is that such a wrong? I ask you, Shelley! Once we both agreed that we’d been placed here to shake the ground; to violate convention! Are you such a vapor now that you forgot your purpose?!

(Again he calls out to the absent Ghost of Shelley. His withdrawal seems to amuse him.)

Creature! Do you always flee when I challenge? Are all apparitions such cowards? Or do you run from the steel in me? Do you look upon it as foreign?! I am meant to live forever! I am the Vital Force!

(As if to mock his own arrogance, Byron takes a step, then stumbles. He drops down to one knee as if he's suffered a slight stroke. As he does, the full stage illuminates to reveal his headquarters and hearth, as Trelawny reenters and notes the loss of balance. He rushes to the fallen man, calling out.)

TRELAWNY

Fletcher!

(The adjutant enters the room.)

He...is not himself. I think a fever has struck him.

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

I've noticed. Shall I call in a physician?

BYRON

(rallying)

No! Never! A butcher would be better. At least I'd get some value for my money.

TRELAWNY

The storm did you in.

BYRON

I was weak from fasting. Some food will set me right.

TRELAWNY *(To Fletcher.)*

Let's get him into bed.

BYRON

No! No! It's a dress rehearsal for dying. Death appalls us, while we spend one third of our lives in its imitation. Sit me up for God's sake, Johnny! Do me that much of a favor. This too shall pass. All fevers do. They're the body's tiny trumpets to let us know that we need a moment's rest.

(Trelawny and Fletcher move Byron to a single bed upstage, and set him upright as he sits and stares at the floor.)

TRELAWNY

We're well within earshot.

BYRON

I know you are.

ADJUTANT FLETCHER

We'll be just outside, my lord.

Both men exit, leaving Byron alone, sitting upright in Bed.

As he does, a Godspot opens downstage left, and another cones on downstage right. One woman, Lady Caroline Lamb, enters stage left. And another, Annabella Millbanke enters stage right. Byron notes them with resignation.

BYRON

More ghosts?

LADY CAROLINE LAMB

But we number among the living, my lord. I am the woman who killed you.

ANNABELLA MILLBANKE

And I'm the woman who brought you back. For I've loved you to the bone.

BYRON

Women! I had the world at my feet. Glory immortal was mine. But I had women in my life—the deadliest addiction!

Blackout.

End of Act One.

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