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Bloody Poetry

Howard Brenton

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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www.SamuelFrench.com

www.SamuelFrench-London.co.uk

FOR PRODUCTION ENQUIRIES

UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Info@SamuelFrench.com

1-866-598-8449

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Bloody Poetry was commissioned by Foco Novo Theatre Company and was first presented at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester on October 1, 1984, with the following cast:

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY Valentine Pelka
MARY SHELLEY.....Fiona Shaw
CLAIRE CLAIREMONT.....Jane Gurnett
GEORGE, THE LORD BYRON.. James Aubrey
DR. WILLIAM POLIDORI ... William Gaminara
HARRIET WESTBROOK, later her
GHOST Sue Burton
VOICE a member of the company

Director Roland Rees
Designer Poppy Mitchell
Costumes Sheelagh Killeen
Composer and Musical Director Andrew Dickson
Lighting by Richard Moffatt
Sound by Paul Bull

Bloody Poetry was presented by the Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center on December 18, 1986 with the following cast:

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY ... Thomas Gibson
MARY SHELLEY..... Laila Robins
CLAIRE CLAIREMONT..... Jayne Atkinson
GEORGE, THE LORD BYRON.. Daniel Gerroll
DR. WILLIAM POLIDORI Keith Reddin
HARRIET WESTBROOK, later her GHOST
..... Denise Stephenson

Director Lynne Meadow
Sets by John Lee Beatty
Costumes by Dunya Ramicova
Lighting by Dennis Parichy
Sound by Scott Lehrer
Production Stage Manager Peggy Peterson

PLACE

The play takes place between the summers of 1816 and 1822 in Switzerland, England and Italy.

“Shelley’s life seems more a haunting than a history.”

Shelley: The Pursuit, Richard Holmes

ACT I

Scene 1

SCENE: BYSSHE. Flickering shadows, the window of a coach.

BYSSHE. The Alps. Switzerland. The coach.
Aching bones.
Dirty clothes. Hotel rooms we cannot afford.
Above us—

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky
Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy and serene—
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
Blue as the overhanging heaven—

Bump, bump, bump—dejected thoughts. In exile.
(*HE laughs.*)

The flight out of England, Mary! With little
William, and Claire, what an unholy, holy
family! We little band of atheistical perverts,
free-lovers, we poeticals—leaving England.

England. England.
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field.

Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Til they drop, blind in blood.

Bump, bump, bump—

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?

Bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump!

The living frame which sustains my soul
Is sinking beneath the fierce control.
Down through the lampless deep of song
I am drawn and driven along

Bump, bump, wave on wave—

This world is the mother of all we know,
This world is the mother of all we feel—

Waves.

The shore of Lake Geneva. The 25th of May,
eighteen hundred and sixteen.

Scene 2

Beach. Lake Geneva. BYSSHE, MARY and CLAIRE. MARY and CLAIRE looking out. BYSSHE pacing back and forth at the back.

CLAIRE. There! In that boat! His head against the light.

(BYSSHE stops, looks briefly, then continues to pace.)

CLAIRE. The head of a god, the head of Lord Byron.

MARY. *(Winces.)* It is the head of a local fisherman, out for the fish that will be fresh on the menus of expensive restaurants tonight. I do not think the Lord Byron is out catching with his own hands what he may well pay excessively to eat.

(A silence.)

CLAIRE. It was you and Bysshe who wanted this meeting. It was you who encouraged me to engineer it. It was you who wished to throw yourselves at the feet of England's greatest living poet.

(MARY glances at BYSSHE who snorts angrily.)

CLAIRE. I knew he would come to this hotel. It was I who sat up late last night, and heard his coach.

MARY. His Lordship's coach. It is—an ostentatious vehicle.

CLAIRE. I have ridden in it. It has a bed!

MARY. For two, of course—

CLAIRE. Shelves lined with books and is, naturally, very well stocked with wines.

MARY. Naturally. A library, bedroom and bar-room on wheels. What more could a poet desire?

CLAIRE. I sent him a letter. At two o'clock this morning.

MARY. Claire, you did not—

CLAIRE. I sent a letter to my lover, yes.

MARY. Oh Claire my dear, my dear.

CLAIRE. I am not ashamed.

MARY. No.

(*A silence.*)

MARY. No, you are not.

CLAIRE. I told him Bysshe and we were here.

MARY. He did not rush to meet us at breakfast.

CLAIRE. His footman said he had gone into Geneva, to shop. For— (*SHE picks at her nails.*) For his dogs.

MARY. For dog food?

CLAIRE. But if we walk on the beach he will come off the lake. I saw him, putting out in a boat. He will come off the lake, he will!

MARY. We wait ten days for him in a hotel, at a ruinous price. The Olympian god of English poetry arrives, ignores us and goes to buy dog food—

CLAIRE. He is most anxious that, after a journey, his dogs be fed fine meat.

(MARY sighs and looks out over the lake.)

CLAIRE. Mary?

(Nothing from Mary.)

CLAIRE. This is not like you, to be so—uneasy.

MARY. I—

CLAIRE. What?

MARY. No matter.

CLAIRE. What?

MARY. I—still have dreams of the journey here.

CLAIRE. The mountains were beautiful.

MARY. They were desolate.

CLAIRE. *(Irritated.)* Oh we must not—! Be dejected, spiral down, fall into dejection and—hurt each other, we must not.

MARY. No.

(A silence.)

MARY. No.

CLAIRE. We are privileged to make this journey. We are privileged to stand on this beach, and see George Byron and Bysshe Shelley meet. It will be history!

MARY. Well. We will all write it up in our diaries, surely. And read each other's accounts, secretly. What else is there to do? (*Looking out over the lake.*) Drifting across Europe. Spying on each other's confessions.

CLAIRE. The two poets meet on a beach. Light blazes off the water, behind them. In their exile, they embrace. It will be like a statue. And I have been the lover of one, and am the lover of the other. (*A toss of the head.*) All of us, we will become magnificent. The men and the women of the future will thank us. We are their great experiment. We will find out how to live and love, without fear.

MARY. If the money does not run out.

CLAIRE. Your sarcasm's horrible Mary, I hate it, I hate it, I have never heard it before.

MARY. I told you—the journey has made me—cold. Inside.

CLAIRE. Horribly unfair! When you heard that George and I— (*With a toss of her head.*) The Lord Byron and I had made love, your first thought was— "Oh good. Claire will arrange a meeting between Bysshe and him." No, "sister"? Did you not have, at once, that scheme? In your notoriously strong, womanly mind—

MARY. Forgive me, Claire. Yes.

CLAIRE. Yes! Then keep in mind, I lifted my skirt, for this. (*Bitter, suddenly near to tears.*) In a hotel room, ten miles from London, I lifted my skirt. For the good of English poetry? Long live poetry, yes, Mary? He has very bad teeth, George Byron, you know. His teeth, they are not good. And he has the scar marks of boils on his body, from something he caught from little boys in Turkey, he told me.

MARY. Claire, I do want them to meet, I want us all to meet. The attraction is too strong, a like-mind. In England they want to hang us all. Bad reviews are not good enough for our enemies, they would like a public execution. (*SHE looks at Claire.*) You do know that the Home Office has set up secret committees. That they are investigating Bysshe.

CLAIRE. Oh, he'll love that. (*To Bysshe.*) You'd love to be last seen, shouting before a firing squad on Tower Hill. Wouldn't you Bysshe!

(*BYSSHE turns away.*)

CLAIRE. (*Quoting.*) We tread
On fire! The avenging Power his hell on earth
hath spread!

MARY. Quite. They want to hang, draw and quarter what we stand for. And the loneliness is great, is it not, my dear? So— (*A shrug, a laugh.*) Let us play at gods and goddesses, moving in brilliant light on a beach by a lake in dresses of white silk flowing about limbs, we statues. But we

must not forget that statues—do not eat, they do not have bank accounts overdrawn by thousands of pounds, they do not— (*With a glance at Bysshe.*) have lungs of mucus and blood, they do not—(*SHE looks at Claire, pauses.*) have women's wombs.

CLAIRE. I don't care, I don't care, I don't care.

MARY. Nor do I.

(*THEY glance at each other, a giggle.*)

CLAIRE. I am going to live it.

MARY. Yes.

CLAIRE. I am going to be loved, happy and free.

MARY. Yes. (*Depression.*) Yes.

CLAIRE. Let us draw courage from our appalling reputations. How the world sees us is, like it or not, how we are condemned to live. I think we have no choice in the matter. Good I say, good, good! (*SHE laughs.*) Remember what the *Daily Mail* called us?

MARY. All too well.

CLAIRE. "Shelley's ball girls?" Quote— "Mr. Shelley is a bad poet. Like a bad tennis player, his verses forever smash into the net and fall to the ground. But Mr. Shelley is lucky. Two beautiful girls crouch on the sidelines, waiting to pick up his balls."

MARY. Gutter journalism.

CLAIRE. The real world.

BYRON. (*Shouting at the back.*) Damn you, sir—your destiny may be to be eaten by crabs and fishes, but mine is not, sir! You are no sailor, sir!

(*The weak voice of POLIDORI is heard.*)

POLIDORI. My Lord I do protest—

BYRON. Blast you, do you? —There are people of quality upon the beach, go off, sir!

POLIDORI. My Lord!

BYRON. Go off and drown, damn you! I will have none of your damn foolery? (*Storms down onto the stage. HE limps. HE turns and shouts.*) Off! T'Neptune! A watery trident up your arsehole, sir! (*Turns to Claire. Charm.*) Claire, my dear.

(*CLAIRE and MARY curtsey. BYSSHE stands his ground at the back.*)

CLAIRE. My Lord—

BYRON. No request, no word! I am lathered, horribly. (*Eyeing Mary.*)

CLAIRE. Mrs. Mary Shelley. Mary, My Lord Byron.

MARY. (*Another curtsey.*) My Lord.

BYRON. (*Takes her hand and kisses it.*) I am cursed with a fool of a boating companion. The Lord keep us from the fantasies of our sycophants. There are some people who are like leeches, they hang on, you flick at them to brush them off, but they stick!

(CLAIRE, looking round for BYSSHE, who hovers as far away as he can, glowering.)

CLAIRE. And my Lord, this—

BYRON. Yes.

(BYSSHE and BYRON stare at each other.)

BYRON. A younger poet.

(A horrible silence. MARY and CLAIRE attempt to intervene.)

CLAIRE/ MARY. We—/Mr. Shelley—

BYRON. *(Ignores them.)* What do you write on?

(BYSSHE about to reply, but—)

BYRON. I write on gin and soda water. At night, 'til dawn. Damn important to pace yourself, I find. As the sun riseth so doth the gin in the glass.

(A silence.)

CLAIRE. Mr. Shelley does not drink.

BYRON. Not another damn Wordsworth! I do distrust a sober poet who writes of nothing but ecstasy. Like a virgin writing hymns about the delights of a brothel. God's teeth! Bysshe Shelley

the wildman does not drink? What do we scribbling poets have in common? Sir, you are silent. (*A silence.*) Sir, I do not know whether you are beginning to bore me, or to make me laugh. (*A silence.*) Sir, I have met this silence from fellow scribblers before. It usually means they think I am a bad poet. If that is why Miss Clairemont has effected this introduction then—I thank you for your spite. As a satirist, spite and hatred are meat and drink to me—

BYSSHE. (*Interrupting.*) My Lord, you are a great poet.

(*MARY and CLAIRE start and glance at each other.*)

BYSSHE. But you are an abominable sailor.

BYRON. Sir, what do you mean by that?

BYSSHE. I cannot see why you abandoned your barque in the hands of a fool.

BYRON. Ah. Ah. *That*—does call for an explanation. (*Looking out.*) That is my official biographer. Foisted upon me by John Murray, my publisher. Is Murray touching your stuff?

BYSSHE. (*Clipped.*) No.

BYRON. (*Airly.*) He will, he will. Commerce in the end hath every talent, raped up against a wall. Particularly when the talent is in the throes of divorce proceedings. A predicament that, I gather, is familiar to both of us?

BYSSHE. I do not hold with ...

BYRON. (*Shouts out over the lake.*) Polidori! Polidori! (*To the company.*) The young shit hath a wonderfully ludicrous name, no? (*Over the lake.*) Polidori! (*To the company.*) He is also my personal physician. I am his sole patient. He has killed off all the others. (*Across the lake.*) To the bottom, sir! Let the mermaids chew your bollocks off!

POLIDORI. (*Off, at the back.*) I am trying hard, my Lord—

BYRON. (*To Bysshe.*) Are there?

BYSSHE. My Lord?

BYRON. Are there mermaids in lakes?

BYSSHE. If a rhyme is needed, no doubt there can be.

BYRON. Indeed. (*HE laughs.*) Indeed! I see I am talking to a fellow professional! So, you sail?

BYSSHE. Yes.

BYRON. Well?

BYSSHE. Yes.

BYRON. Excellent. You swim?

BYSSHE. Yes.

(*MARY starts.*)

BYRON. Well?

(*BYSSHE, a shrug.*)

BYRON. Excellent.

(*THEY stare at each other.*)

BYRON. You called me great. One is always pleased to receive a good review. For writers in our position, a good review is as rare as a double-yolked egg at breakfast.

BYSSHE. (*Bitterly.*) For me, yes, but not for your Lordship—

BYRON. (*The airy wave.*) The praise of critics is bought, bought and sold. It is all to do with fashion. When you have some fashionable reputation with critics, cash it in. Foist an outrage on the bastards. It may, sir, come as a surprise to you that—(*Looks down, thinking. Then continues.*) That the epithet “great” is contrary to my nature.

(*MARY scoffs. THEY all stare at her.*)

BYRON. (*With a bow.*) Madam?

MARY. I am sure, my Lord, that no one of this company is foolish enough to confuse “greatness” with “arrogance.”

BYRON. Ah. I will think on that. (*A sexual look at Mary.*)

CLAIRE. (*Trying to get over the hiccup.*) But there is a touchstone. Shakespeare was “great.”

BYRON. (*Up again.*) I am loath even to apply it to Shakespeare. A grotesquely talented little shit in the pay of royalty. (*To Mary.*) And yes, yes, I am in the pay of my publisher, Mr. Commerce.

*(The look from BYRON again, MARY dead still.
BYSSHE sees nothing of this. HE flares.)*

BYSSHE. Shakespeare did not go far enough! Further than any of us can go but not far enough! King Lear himself, not Gloucester, should have been blinded, and by his own hands. Then in his darkness he should have turned on God himself.

BYRON. But at least the bugger wrote a great deal! The greatest sin in a poet is anal retention.

BYSSHE. Explain—

BYRON. I have heard of this habit that certain madmen have from the pathetic Polidori. *(To Claire.)* It would seem that some mad people are obsessed with their own shit.

(CLAIRE, mouth open, MARY takes a step forward but she says nothing.)

BYRON. *(To Bysshe.)* They tighten their arseholes day and night, to retain their turds. Which they do, for weeks.

BYSSHE. *(Enthusiastically.)* I have heard of this too! What could release them from the infirmity, is the shock of electricity—

BYRON. *(Ignoring this.)* Yes yes, but certain poets are turd retainers. When, after months, their bowels squeeze open, all they lay is a turd. Which they invite the public to see as a fertilized egg. With the purity of pure hatred, shall we name names?

BYSSHE. Why not?

BYRON. William Wordsworth! Robert Southey! We all, of course, write for love. But love can be a soggy dough. A little hatred is yeast and salt—

BYSSHE. You are wrong about Wordsworth.

BYRON. Yes yes, it is boring to be so wonderfully wrong about so wonderful a poet. I hate his guts. But—I give up. He has sold too many books. The poison of his works has, irredeemably, infected the bloodstream of our literature. You disagree. You know his poems, no doubt by heart.

BYSSHE. Those written before 1802—

BYRON. Ah! Before reaction got him! Before he went religious. The rats! The rats! The rats that leave the revolution's ship! For the comfort of the Church, or some concocted mysticism, or good reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, or the Oxford Chair of Poetry! Sir! (*HE stares at Bysshe.*) You are serious. But a bit of a bitch, too. There may be something in you. Dinner! Tonight! (*Turning.*) All of us, in my rooms.

CLAIRE. George—

BYSSHE. (*Over her.*) Thank you, my Lord.

BYRON. Eat fish, d'you? Being vegetarian?

BYSSHE. No.

BYRON. Damn pity. Hired a man to catch trout in the lake for you. The lazy fella's at it now out there, if Polidori's not scared all the fish to death. No matter. (*To Mary.*) Maybe the women'll fancy a peck at it.

MARY. (*Curtsies.*) My Lord.

BYRON. My dear Shelley, you may have all the nuts and broccoli you can devour. (*HE pauses.*) I have read you, sir.

(*BYRON extends his hand. HE and BYSSHE shake. BYRON holds on to Bysshe's hand.*)

BYRON. I particularly admire your entry in the register of the hotel. "Name: Percy Bysshe Shelley. Profession: Democrat, Philanthropist and Atheist. Home address: Hell." I know you wrote it in Greek, but do you want to be eaten alive?

(*BYSSHE wants to withdraw his hand, but BYRON still holds it. Then BYRON kisses Bysshe's hand. BYSSHE recoils.*)

BYRON. (*Bowing to all in turn.*) My dears! Dinner! Dinner! Dinner! Tonight, tonight! (*A gesture at the lake.*) If my biographer's body is washed up on this beach, drowned, send it back to England, suitably decomposed. (*HE has a hip flask in his hand. HE strides away, drinking from it.*)

CLAIRE. (*Runs after him.*) George, my dear—

BYRON. (*Viciously, into her face.*) Dinner, dinner, at dinner!

(*THEY stare, faces close. MARY and BYSSHE have seen and heard the exchange.*)

BYRON. (*Airily to them.*) Life goes on! (*HE goes off.*)

(*CLAIRE at the back, looking at the ground.*)

MARY. Drunk.

BYSSHE. Brilliant.

MARY. Brilliant.

BYSSHE. Drunk.

MARY. And silly.

BYSSHE. But himself.

MARY. And—(*A nod at Claire.*) Brutally cruel.

BYSSHE. But we have met.

MARY. Yes! Now it has happened we can make it all mythical!

BYSSHE. Quite! We met naked—

MARY. At sunset—

BYSSHE. Maidens twined flower about our hair—

MARY. Autographs were given to mermaids—

BYSSHE. Byron left on the back of a dolphin—

MARY. And Shelley?

BYSSHE. Ah! Shelley—erected an electrical machine and sucked the soul of Byron into a bottle! Screwed tight! Which he then did mix with a magic liquid, and drink, so Shelley too could have fame and money—

MARY. Embellish the scene!

CLAIRE. (*Turns, flushed.*) Did you see how he did love me, wonderfully?

(*A silence.*)

BYSSHE. Claire—

MARY. My dears, I think it best in matters of love, that— (*SHE pauses.*) That we have a good time? Introduce pleasure, and who can tell the taker from the taken?

CLAIRE. Mary, sometimes you are most matronly and sensible, at others you are a dirty-minded bitch—

BYSSHE. The school rhyme! We heard the children sing!

(*THEY look at each other, then come together and embrace in a triangle, dancing round, chanting.*)

ALL. "Oh Lord Byron loves his sister
His sister his sister
What a dirty mister, dirty dirty mister
Lord Byron loves his sister
And they both lie *down!*
Oh—"

(*POLIDORI steps up onto the stage, soaking wet. THEY stop in mid-song looking at him.*)

POLIDORI. Ah! Mr. Shelley. I—er—have read your *Queen Mab*. Some of it is very well done, some of it slapdash.

(*A silence.*)

BYSSHE. (*Whispering inside their circle.*) A critic! A critic!

CLAIRE. Ugh! Ugh!

BYSSHE. Ugh! Ugh!

CLAIRE. A slimy thing.

BYSSHE. Out the slimy sea.

CLAIRE & BYSSHE. Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!

MARY. (*Through giggles.*) Doctor Polidori, sir?

POLIDORI. Madam—I—who the pleasure—do I—

CLAIRE. We are Mr. Shelley's concubines, sir.

BYSSHE. Run sir, these women have drunk the milk of paradise! No man's spunk is safe!

POLIDORI. Indeed—

MARY. Forgive us, sir, our high spirits—(*SHE leaves the circle.*)

POLIDORI. At once, madam, of course. Though it is not advisable to cavort so on a public beach. (*HE looks around.*) There are tourists with spy-glasses. Er—(*HE puts a hand out.*) William Polidori.

MARY. Miss Claire Clairemont.

(*CLAIRE curtsies.*)

MARY. Mr. Shelley.

(*BYSSHE walks away.*)

POLIDORI. I seem to have—(*HE shakes his arm, it drips water.*)

CLAIRE. Lost Lord Byron?

POLIDORI. (*Turning in panic.*) Oh my Lord!

BYRON. (*Limps and stumbles back on. HE ignores Polidori. To Bysshe.*) This damn hotel—we will move! I will take the Villa Diodati. The poet Milton stayed there, perhaps the wallpaper is conducive to good verse. There is a smaller house, five minutes walk away. I suggest you, Miss Clairemont and Mrs. Shelley take it, that Polidori here will do the business arrangements, a summer lease—

BYSSHE. I—

BYRON. No no no, we will summer together! It has hit me, sir, an idea, sir, we will all go communist. We are upper class renegades, we can afford it. More tonight! Plans, plans, of changing the world, of ripping human nature apart, love and summer, tonight! At dinner! (*HE turns to go.*)

POLIDORI. My Lord, you abuse me.

BYRON. My abuse is a gift. It will enrich your diary. (*HE goes off.*)

POLIDORI. I share his Lordship's confidence, you see. I do share it. Anything you wish of him—ask me. (*Going off.*) My Lord— (*And HE's gone.*)

CLAIRE. Can we—afford a house?

MARY. No.

BYSSHE. No.

MARY. But we will! Life—

CLAIRE. Goes?

BYSSHE. On! On! On!

(THEY move toward the circle again.)

Scene 3

But BYSSHE walks away between the two women and goes off.

Bright sunshine, green leaves. Pathways and vines between the Villa Diodati and the small house, Montalégre.

MARY. You were with him, last night, up at the big house?

CLAIRE. Oh, yes!

MARY. Slept with him?

(Nothing from CLAIRE.)

MARY. We go back and forth upon these paths between his Lordship in Milton's old house and our—modest abode, every time of the day. But what do we say to each other?

CLAIRE. It is lovely this summer! It is lovely!

MARY. Have you told my Lord Byron?

(Nothing from CLAIRE.)

MARY. Have you told him you are to have his child?

(Nothing from CLAIRE.)

MARY. Claire, my dear, my darling, your mother married my father. That makes us sisters, yes. Also we are in love with the same man—

CLAIRE. Mary, now—

MARY. You deny you slept with Bysshe?

(Nothing from CLAIRE.)

MARY. You deny you still sleep with him?

CLAIRE. You—are with him every night!

MARY. But we all walk out, in the daytime, in the fields, along the shore, in an infinite combination of couples—

CLAIRE. Yes! *(A silence.)* We make love in the open air. Among the vines. On the stones. Or no, Bysshe and I do not make love, in the open air, among the vines, on the stones.

MARY. All I want to say is that, because of the higgledy-piggledy jumble, tumbled confusion of the state of our affections—I do not think I can bear—to have to be your mother too, my dear Claire.

(THEY look at each other. Then laugh.)

CLAIRE. Mary, Mary—

(*THEY embrace.*)

MARY. He—

CLAIRE. He? Which “he?”

MARY. George Byron. He is the father of your child?

CLAIRE. Oh, yes! (*Realizes.*) Oh, yes, Mary.

MARY. Tell him.

CLAIRE. I will.

MARY. Then claim the child.

CLAIRE. Oh, no. George Byron will make me his wife. I will claim *him*.

(*A silence.*)

MARY. Claire, claim the child. For his or her sake, for your sake.

CLAIRE. But he will marry me!

MARY. How do you know that?

CLAIRE. Because of the manner in which I oblige him.

MARY. Claire, Claire—

CLAIRE. You will see tonight, at dinner, how his affection hath deepened.

MARY. How we do trust “our affections.”

CLAIRE. What else can we do, all of us, in our predicament?

MARY. (*To herself.*) He hath no affections.

CLAIRE. (*Withdraws.*) Do not speak of George that way.

MARY. No, I do not mean George Byron.

CLAIRE. Who then?

MARY. A figure.

CLAIRE. Mary, what is the matter?

MARY. Nothing, it's silly, silly. I am writing the story of a monster. Very very silly!

CLAIRE. Monster?

MARY. He lives up in the snow, in the mountains.

CLAIRE. And he does not love us?

MARY. No.

CLAIRE. Maybe we will summon up your monster tonight, after dinner! Or Bysshe will, with electricity!

MARY. Or—he will come of his own accord.

CLAIRE. Mary! How beautiful you are, beautiful and strange.

(*THEY link arms, and—*)

Scene 4

Night. LIGHTNING, THUNDER, RAIN.

Then, with candelabra standing about the stage,

BYRON, BYSSHE, CLAIRE and MARY lounge on the big cushions.

BYRON has a large brandy glass and decanter, which HE dangles and pours from throughout the scene. MARY and CLAIRE drink wine. BYSSHE drinks water. BYSSHE is reading. HE knows it by heart, and looks up after a few

lines, to give himself time to think of what they say.

BYSSHE.

There was a time when meadow, grove and
stream
The earth and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream.

(A silence.)

It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,

(A silence.)

The things which I have seen I now can see no
more.

Shades of the prison house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy—

(A silence.)

At length the man perceives it die away,
And fade into the common light of day.

(*BYSSHE closes the book, pushes it from him. A silence.*)

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

(*A silence.*)

BYRON. Yes yes yes, yes yes yes—but! (*HE pours a large brandy.*) God's teeth, Bysshe, must you after every dinner dish me out these great slabs of Wordsworth? Like the slap of a cold fish in the face?

MARY. It is your medicine, my Lord.

BYRON. S'truth, I love they who love my health, but it is hard to take. Why? Why do you admire this dry-arsed poseur's lines so greatly? You are a publicly declared revolutionary. A communistical personality if ever I met one— (*A wave of the glass at Mary and Claire.*) Willing to share your all, with all and sundry—

CLAIRE/MARY. (*Simultaneously.*) George—/My Lord, I do not like that—

BYRON. Brandy, brandy, brandy talking, no offense, but! (*Charm. Smiles.*) This is ridiculous. I sit here in the company of this rabid, militant personage, and he quotes England's most reactionary poet in my face. (*To Bysshe.*) You admit the poem you quote is of defeat?

BYSSHE. (*Carefully.*) Wordsworth does not think it is—but, yes, it is a poem of defeat.

BYRON. No no no, I'll pin you down. Are not the lines you just quoted aching with a middle-aged regret for the loss of youth's fire?

BYSSHE. Yes.

BYRON. You realize the poem argues that a five-year-old knows more than any twenty-five-year-old, let alone a thirty-five-year-old. Did Socrates talk rubbish from when he was six? (*HE groans.*) I can even quote the bloody thing from heart.

Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

(*A silence.*)

BYRON. Why do you not throw up? It is nonsense! I am agnostic, but you are an atheist. It denies experience, the maturity of manhood— (*Another wave at Mary and Claire.*) And womanhood—

(*MARY and CLAIRE nod at each other.*)

CLAIRE. Thank you very much, sir—

MARY. Very very much, sir—

BYRON. (*With malice.*) You do know about Willy Wordsworth, don't you, you know he was a Jacobin, that the light shone from Robespierre's arse for our William, when *he* was young? That he was in Paris, at the height of France's

revolution, and thought the Terror a wonder of human excellence? And while there, got a girl pregnant, in the shadow of the guillotine? Met her once. Thin, long dank-looking black hair, horribly attractive actually, her name was Annette. And the child? Ah! Ah! Ah! If you want to utterly destroy William Wordsworth in conversation, ask "Where are the children of the Revolution now?"—I did. His eyeballs burst with hate and guilt. What, what, what do you admire there?

MARY. Feeling.

BYSSHE. Yes. Song.

(A silence.)

BYRON. You defeat me.

MARY. The poem's argument is wrong, but its song is true. Truer than its argument. So why is there any difficulty—in singing it?

BYRON. Ah! Ah! Ah! Romanticism rears its ugly, look-both-ways, have-it-both-ways head! Though something be nonsense, feel the feeling.

MARY. But you have been called Europe's greatest Romantic poet.

BYRON. Slander! Slander! (*HE looks at his glass.*) It may sell books, but slander! My favorite poet is Alexander Pope.

BYSSHE. (*About to explode.*) Unreadable! Unspeakable, rhyming tinsel to flatter the ruling class, against life, I mean, I mean—the language deformed, prostituted, stuck in obscene corsets—

BYRON. (*Airily.*) Read him every night myself. To clear the air. Yes, he was a deformed little dwarf of a man—but honest to himself. To what he knew.

BYSSHE. So is Wordsworth, in tonight's poem! Honest to himself! Are you?

(*A silence.*)

BYRON. Ah.

MARY. No, Bysshe.

BYSSHE. In what you write tonight, will you be honest to yourself?

(*A silence.*)

BYRON. I do not know, Bysshe. What I write tonight will, I am afraid, write itself. I will not know its worth, let alone its honesty. (*A silence.*) But if you write tonight, you will. My dear Bysshe, my dear, dear Bysshe Shelley. True poet. (*HE raises his glass.*) But I do wish you were a fellow piss-artist. Drunkenness would give you a flair for publicity, if nothing else. And you would not drink water and quote Wordsworth late at night. Eh? Eh? (*HE looks around at them.*)

(*THEY are all looking down.*)

BYRON. God, you radical communards. I fumble a compliment to the poet among you, and I

do not know if you be offended, indifferent, or moved. What matter, what matter.

CLAIRE. Moved. We are moved.

MARY. (*Looking up.*) But what matter?

(*BYRON and MARY look at each other.*)

BYRON. Perhaps, in the end, nothing. Or everything. I could end up believing not this, not that, but that *everything* is true. "Everything is true"—what, pray, is that philosophy?

BYSSHE. Liberalism.

BYRON. Am I that ill?

MARY. You have symptoms, my Lord.

BYRON. A political pox, eh?

(*CLAIRE, looking down.*)

BYRON. "Everything is true." But for tyranny. Against that, I will take up the gun.

BYSSHE. I know you will.

BYRON. Mm. Mm. Mm, mm! I begin to enjoy myself greatly with you lunatics.

(*THEY all laugh.*)

BYRON. Claire, my dear?

(*CLAIRE crawls to BYRON, THEY put their arms around each other.*)

BYRON. "Crawling between Heaven and earth." The shitty Shakespeare's line. (*HE pauses.*) "Crawling between Heaven and earth." The line is meant to be a horror, but it is strangely comforting. I do not know why.

MARY. Because it sings.

BYRON. Ah. (*A silence.*) I do believe I have lost a literary argument.

(*BYSSHE, MARY and CLAIRE glance at each other.*)

BYRON. (*To Mary.*) Madam, last time such a thing happened to me, I fought a duel! Pistols, dawn, a secret field, all formality!

MARY. Name your weapons.

BYRON. Mm—rhyming couplets?

MARY. Refused.

BYRON. Your choice.

MARY. Wait. (*SHE thinks.*) Home truths.

BYRON. I—am dead.

(*THEY laugh. THUNDER, LIGHTNING. POLIDORI comes on. HE stands, swaying over the lounging group.*)

POLIDORI. (*Aside.*) I entered the drawing room of the Villa Diodati. Outside, there raged the storm. No. Outside the storm raged. No. Outside, the storm abated. No. Outside, the storm I had just left, rolled around the gloomy house. No. No. I was wet and miserable.

(HE looks around the group. BYRON and CLAIRE kiss passionately. MARY shifts toward Bysshe, turning the pages of the Wordsworth. THEY do not respond to Polidori's presence.)

POLIDORI. In a flash I saw them, a flash of lightning. The air in the room was heavy with their illicit sexuality, they had been at it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! They had thrown their clothes back on, the minute I came to the door! No. The two great poets, were, I observed, in contemplation, the women observing a discreet silence.

(MARY turns, SHE and BYSSHE kiss passionately. POLIDORI flinches.)

POLIDORI. No. The profligate would-be poets and their, their whores, lounged upon the floor, and felt disgraced at my entrance, for I brought with me the wind and the rain. *(HE looks from couple to couple.)* No. I am so lonely. Why do they assume I am second-rate, when I am not! When I am not second-rate? I mean, has Shelley ever had a good review in his life? As for my life, I have never done one thing that is not decent, to anyone; or going on middling to decent! And look at them. Byron is an overweight alcoholic, Shelley is an anorexic, neurotic mess! The planet is bestrewn with their abandoned children, lovers of both

sexes and wives! Shelley has tuberculosis, Byron has syphilis, and these are the men whom the intelligent among us worship as angels of freedom. No. It was a privilege to be the friend of those two young, beautiful men, in the heyday of that summer. No. Yes. After all, I am paid five hundred pounds, by Byron's publisher, to write a diary of this summer. Dreadful time, no! Time of my life. My decent life. So!

(The COUPLES finish their kisses.)

POLIDORI. I entered the living room of the Villa Diodati, that stormy night.

BYRON. Polly, Polly, Polly Dolly dear, have a brandy.

POLIDORI. Lightning! Over the lake!

BYRON. What, sir, are you watery again?

POLIDORI. I was in it!

MARY. The lake or the lightning?

BYRON. I was about to say that—

MARY. But you did not.

(MARY and BYRON laugh.)

POLIDORI. A storm like that, is like God. His hand, from the darkness, fingering his creation.

BYRON. Do not speak so in this company, Polly. With these free thinkers, they who believe in God go straight to hell.

POLIDORI. I—think the image perfectly fine. The fork of lightning—*(HE dangles his fingers to*

demonstrate.) Playing over the water and the mountains, like the Creator's hand.

BYRON. They who live by images shall die by them. (*Looks into his glass.*) That is the brandy talking.

BYSSHE. Shall we go out? (*Stands excitedly.*) On the lake, tonight?

MARY. Electrical experiments, Bysshe?

CLAIRE. (*To Byron.*) Bysshe once flew a kite in an electrical storm, with a cat tied to it.

BYRON. A cat?

BYSSHE. The aim was to galvanize the animal's nervous system.

POLIDORI. I have seen this in madhouses, in France. There was much experiment in the French Revolution, with the mad. The jolt of electricity—to realign the vital force, through the organs of the body.

BYRON. Ye Gods! You medical men and nature poets! Between you, will you torture us all to death?

CLAIRE. The idea of the cat—

BYRON. The cat aloft!

CLAIRE. Was that the animal be transformed, by natural force—

BYRON. And what was the result of this advanced experiment? Did the dog star bark at the poor pussy?

BYSSHE. The cat fell in the farmyard pond and drowned.

BYRON. A feline Icarus—

BYSSHE. Shall we go?

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