

Creating Monsters

by Owen Robertson

CREATING MONSTERS

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For my loving wife, who helps me create my monsters every day.

*For Kathryn and Chrissy, who remain loyal sisters, friends, and believers
in my work.*

*For Buzz, who started the journey with me, his sage advice kept me going
in the early phases of the journey.*

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CHARACTERS

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT GODWIN: 19, blonde, small and thin, complicated and burdened, future wife of Percy Shelley, daughter to William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.

CLAIRE CLAREMONT: 18, Buxom, voluptuous, dark-haired, dark-skinned stepsister to Mary.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY: 24, slight frame, long lean muscles, striking beauty, beautiful locks of long blonde hair, high pitched voice, the picture of male sexuality.

GEORGE GORDON BYRON (LORD BYRON): 28, thin powerful frame, olive complexion, dark long curly hair, lame left foot that he hides with great care, physically very fit.

DR. JOHN POLIDORI: 20, a doctor, handsome, tall, dark short hair, fair complexion

SET REQUIREMENTS

Because of the variety of scenes within this play, it is suggested to keep the scenic design more to the feel of the scene rather than a realistic approach. Suggesting the location is deemed ideal and more feasible for production rather than trying to create extensive changing sets. This play's feel and look can be attained through the happy marriage of lighting and set designers. However, should designers have the budget to allow a grand design, by all means, proceed.

TIME AND PLACE

SCENE 1	Tomb of Mary Wollstonecraft	Late afternoon, April 1816
SCENE 2	Kitchen, home of Percy, Mary, & Claire	1 hour later
SCENE 3	Bedroom of Percy & Mary	Midnight
SCENE 4	In the Kitchen	Early morning
SCENE 5	Study	Later in the morning
SCENE 6	In the Kitchen	Noon
SCENE 7	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	3 weeks later, late May 1816
SCENE 8	Garden, villa of Percy, Mary, & Claire	4 weeks later, late morning, Jun 16, 1816
SCENE 9	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	Later that afternoon
SCENE 10	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	Late that same evening
SCENE 11	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	The next morning
SCENE 12	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	Late afternoon
SCENE 13	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	A short while later
SCENE 14	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	Hours later
SCENE 15	Switzerland, garden, Shelley Villa	4 weeks later, late July 1816
SCENE 16	Switzerland, Villa Diodati, the study	A week later
SCENE 17	The Shelley Kitchen	Early December 1816
SCENE 18	Tomb of Mary Wollstonecraft	Late December 1817

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Creating Monsters was originally produced at LAB Theater Project in Tampa, FL directed by Roz Potenza, featuring the following cast:

Newt Rameta as Marry Wollstonecraft Godwin

Emma Hurlburt as Claire Claremont

Shaun Memmel as Percy Bysshe Shelley

Maurice Parker as George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron)

Cody Farkas as Dr. John Polidori

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ACT 1

SCENE 1

St. Pancras Cemetery, dusk, MARY is at the tomb of Mary Wollstonecraft, her mother. She sits on the tomb with an open book in her hands. She is writing in a journal and referring back to another book as she sits.

MARY. *(She begins reading from the book in her lap)* “The perfection of our nature and capability of happiness must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual and direct the laws which bind society?” *(pause)* Truly, mother? If your words are all that I have, might you have considered writing less so as not to intimidate your child so monstrously? How is a child of the great Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin to escape from your shadows?... I hear you, Mother, I swear I do. I read your words every day. Here I sit with you and talk to you... No! I am not being foolish; do not say that to me. *(She reads a little more)* The truth, mother? I came here to read your words, to find inspiration. What if I shall never amount to a fraction of the writer you were, or Godwin, or Percy... I lack the words—the vision—to tell a story, and so, I come to your tomb; to talk to you and hear you, and now, I return to my life trying to find something hidden and unseen that I cannot name. *(Lights fade)*

SCENE 2

The kitchen in the home of PERCY, MARY, and CLAIRE. Percy is sitting at the table. The home is not of high stature. It is dim, dark, and it lacks warmth. Mary enters through the door from the outside.

PERCY. Ah, there you are. Did you have a pleasant walk? A nice visit with mother?

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MARY. Yes. *(She hangs her cloak and places the book on the shelf.)* Is William asleep?

PERCY. Our son is sleeping comfortably, well fed, and well a bed. *(He rises and puts his arms around Mary, who leans back into him.)* And what of you, sweet Mary? How do you find yourself this damp evening?

MARY. I'm well. Are we alone?

PERCY. *(He nods.)* Why? Are you considering some mischief?

MARY. No, and you can stop smiling. *(She pulls away from him and sits.)* Sit Percy. I wish to resume our discussion of Claire. We must—

PERCY. *(Sits opposite of her.)* Again? We have chased the tail of this cat repeatedly, Mary. She is part of our family as much as you or William. Why do you continue to try to cut out your stepsister? Why push her aside?

MARY. Why? Percy, are you truly so ignorant of her manipulations? Do you not see how she comes between us? How she pits you against me at every turn? How she controls you and bends you to her whim?

PERCY. Nonsense! No woman can manipulate a reasoned mind such as mine.

MARY. No? I am not so convinced, sir. I believe you are a slave to your ever-hardened member, and you allow desire to overwhelm reason too often. You capitulate to the whims of women, particularly our little raven-haired companion, who understands this and is all too willing to facilitate passion over reason if it gets her what she wants. You men are far too foolish. You believe that you have control over us, sir, but women are equal to men in their sexual desires. The only difference is that we do not allow reason to escape us when—

PERCY. Truly? Do you not understand? Very well. I shall explain again. I, like your mother, like Godwin, do not believe in traditional marriage. It is a societal trapping that I have fallen into once before and shall not do so again. Your mother and Godwin resisted it until you came along; it was for you that they got married, that you would not be born without title nor privilege, born of legal parenting, which is a construction of the church for controlling the masses. We are engaged in an open and free “marriage” or family, as I prefer, that is free to love whomever, whenever we want. This freedom is the exact type of freedom your mother would have wanted and,

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certainly, your father wanted. So, we are living in a family that honors your mother's dream of equality between men and women. Is that clear to you? (*MARY nods understanding.*) Do I oppress you? Do I prevent you from expanding your knowledge?

MARY. No, but—

PERCY. At any time, am I cruel to you? Do I restrict your movements? Do I not encourage your continued education? Do I not always express delight as you expand your knowledge, as you continue to develop your mind?

MARY. No. (*Weakening.*)

PERCY. Then why do we continue to have this discussion?

MARY. Percy, please. She is not like you and me. She is...

PERCY. Are you threatened by her? Jealousy cannot be accepted within a reasoned family. Where is she to go? Home to Skinner Street? Godwin will not allow her back into his household; she has tainted her reputation with her relationship with Byron. Plus, Godwin is convinced that she shares our bed, which is not untrue, but is beside the point. She cannot go anywhere else, so what would you have me do? Turn her out upon the streets? (*She shakes her head.*) Then what is the point of these discussions?

MARY. There is none. I see now that there is no use following this line of reason with you. As always Percy, you're right.

PERCY. Do not give in, Mary, if you feel you have a reasoned argument. Please share it with me, but so far you have not presented one. And it would be better, if you do not have one, to accept this subject as closed.

MARY. So, she stays a part of our family, and I must accept it. I am without a voice on the subject. I am left with little choice or course of action.

PERCY. Where would you go? As much as Claire's reputation is tarnished, yours is worse. You have a child out of wedlock, you have eloped with a married man, and your own family has cast you out.... You have but one reasoned choice, which is to stay a part of this family. Mary, am I so terrible? (*He slides across the table and sits before her.*) Am I so awful?

MARY. No, no Percy. You are not. It is Claire that...

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PERCY. *(Puts his fingers to her lips.)* Shhhh, Mary. No more. *(Holds her, gently kissing her.)* Let us to bed for a frolic, for I am aroused at the sight of you and would seek you with less upon your small frame and fair skin. *(He kisses her hands.)* It is for you always that I live, Mary. You and I will always be the core of this family, and you will always be the inspiration of my work, the light that shines upon me every day. *(Continues kissing her.)* You are the heart of my life, Mary. You are what keeps me calm and rooted in this world. You help me return to the world when I sojourn to the metaphysical. It is for your love that I always return. I love you as a complete woman. Your mind and your body are both so a part of my desire for you that they are inseparable. Do you not feel the same for me? Does your heart not race as I touch you, as I kiss your soft skin, as I consider your beautiful eyes?

MARY. I love you, Percy...*(He kisses her neck, and then kisses her upon the lips. She succumbs.)* Percy, please...

SCENE 3

Lights rise upon the bedroom of Percy and Mary. They are upon the bed, disheveled.

PERCY. I'm famished.

MARY. How can you think of food? Such is the nature of man, and you, sir, are a prime specimen. How is it that we all look to you to be the champion of Romanticism? We have sex, and the first thing you think of is food.

PERCY. Well, my love, I must keep the fires burning. Besides, am I not responding to nature? *(He reaches for her across the bed, she slips off the bed throwing the pillow at him.)*

MARY. No! You've had your fill, good sir. You must wait.

PERCY. Now, that is not how I understood things a short while ago. Was it not you who said you wanted me more and again?

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MARY. Perhaps, but you have ruined that moment, and now it is gone. Go! Go and get yourself something to eat. While you're about it, I would like something as well.

PERCY. Ha! See, the fire must be fed.

MARY. Go!

(Percy starts to rise. Mary sits back down upon the bed, when silence is broken by a blood curdling scream.)

MARY. What in heaven's name? *(Mary bolts for the door. Percy moves to the door. He gets there first, yanks it open, only to find CLAIRE at the door. Silence. She is having a waking dream. She is unaware of Percy or Mary. Percy steps back. Mary has moved back as well.)* Claire?

CLAIRE. *(Enters the room slowly, eyes wide in terror, she cannot speak. She does not seem to be present in this world.)* "Turns no more his head...he knows a frightful fiend doth close behind him tread...a frightful fiend...a frightful fiend doth close behind him tread...A FRIGHTFUL FIEND!!" *(She screams again, then falls to the floor. Neither Percy nor Mary moves for a moment, then Percy crosses to Claire.)*

MARY. No, don't! It's just one of her nightmares.

PERCY. Hush, Mary. Speak softly. She may still be in the throes of it.

MARY. I don't care. This is what I keep trying to get you to see, the ways she manipulates our relationship. *(Claire begins to stir.)* Oh, look. Not so asleep after all.

PERCY. Do not be cruel, Mary. I will not abide this behavior from you. It is intolerable in this family.

MARY. No, what is intolerable is the way you give her whatever she wants.

CLAIRE. What? How did I end up here? What has happened? *(She begins to rise slowly, unsteadily.)*

PERCY. *(Helping Claire to her feet, he has taken a very comforting posture toward Claire.)* Easy, sweet sister; you have had a terror.

MARY. See! Again, you place her before me. Can your eyes not stay focused upon me? Can your heart not see and hear me? I am here before you, Percy—

PERCY. I know that, Mary.

CLAIRE. What happened?

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PERCY. It's alright, Claire. Look at me. Do you feel well?

CLAIRE. I'm parched and weak. May I sit?

MARY. No. Please return to your room.

PERCY. *(He glares at Mary, there is a silence in the room. Claire is looking only at Percy and Percy at Mary.)* No, Claire. It's alright. Here, sit upon the bed. *(Percy helps her to the bed.)*

CLAIRE. Please don't fight over me. I shall only be a moment.

PERCY. Sit, Claire. You shall sleep here tonight. *(Looking at Mary.)* We shall keep you safe. I will fetch water. *(He exits without waiting for a response.)*

(Silence as Claire and Mary look at each other.)

MARY. *(Breaking the silence.)* It won't work.

CLAIRE. What?

MARY. You're not going to take him away from me.

CLAIRE. *(Laughing.)* Oh, is that what consumes your great mind, sister? I am delighted to report that I shall only be your concern for a short while longer. I am promised to Lord Byron.

MARY. Oh? How does Lady Byron feel about that?

CLAIRE. He is freeing himself of Lady Byron so that we can be together. He and I plan to elope, just as you and Percy have. I shall have my own poet, one more famous than yours.

MARY. Percy is not mine, Claire. We are equals to each other.

CLAIRE. Yes, I see that clearly.

(Silence. Percy reenters the room with a pitcher of water and a cup. He pours some water for Claire.)

PERCY. Are you feeling better?

MARY. Percy, please let me sleep elsewhere.

PERCY. No. We are a family, and we care for each other.

CLAIRE. Thank you, brother.

PERCY. Shush, sister. You just lie back. Come, Mary. Let us to bed.

MARY. *(Glaring at Percy and Claire.)* As you wish, my husband.

CLAIRE. I am so fortunate to have such a family as this.

(Percy climbs into bed. Lights begin to fade; as they do, Claire turns towards Percy. They begin to kiss as Mary lies in bed staring out with her back to them as they begin to become more involved.)

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SCENE 4

Lights rise on the kitchen again, it is early morning, before sunrise, MARY enters carrying her journal, pencil, and a candle, she looks around for Percy. She sets the candle and journal down upon the table, then tends the fire.

MARY. Not here?... Will it ever be warm again? I wish this rain would stop. It seems that this year will be the year without sun.... Am I the only one who is concerned about keeping this fire going? *(She stands before the fire warming herself. She goes to the table and sits, opens her journal and begins to write.)* I had the nightmare again, mother, about Clara... my sweet lamb.... I dreamt that she came to life again.... I dreamt I was holding her again. Percy and I were standing before the fire warming her, rubbing her with love, with love and life. She was small but breathing, her little chest rising up and down. She could feel the warmth of the fire, the warmth of our love for her.... But then the dream changes and the nightmare begins.... Claire walks into the room. She is there with us, and no longer is my sweet lamb warm and breathing in my arms, but now she is cold and blue against my skin. I hold her small body, her tiny blue-lips cold against my breast. Our chests no longer rise together but mine alone. Percy looks away; he cannot look at me nor our lifeless child... It seems like he... I wonder if he thinks I am cursed, that because I was the cause of my mother's death... in this nightmare, my sister comes to us with a small box to place my child in, a cold wooden box.... Claire tries to be caring, but I hate her for being there. My child has left this world for a better place; she has gone to God, if there be a God.... Funny that... that I would drop to the refuge of religion. Is there a God? If so, how could he be so cruel as to let me carry this child only to have her die two weeks after she is born? What kind of God is that... Percy stands away, he looks elsewhere as Claire and I place my little lamb into the box... and then the nightmare is over... Now I have a healthy boy, William; he is so strong. But I am afraid, mother, I am afraid that I will not allow myself to truly love him. I am afraid that in an instant he will be gone too, just as his sister was, and again I will fail to be a mother. What is to become of me, mother? *(Rain*

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starts to fall. She sits; she starts to write in her journal again but soon stops.) How can I tell a story when I cannot find the words? How am I to fill my supposed potential? I have no stories living within me that must be told. I have no place in this world, no voice to be heard. I AM MUTE!

SCENE 5

Lights up, in the study, Percy is sitting in the window seat reading when Mary enters.

MARY. *(Holding her journal in her hand.)* Is this your doing?

PERCY. *(Still reading.)* Of what are you accusing me of now?

MARY. Altering my work?

PERCY. Now you are making foolish accusations—

MARY. Do not discount me, sir. I am here before you fully invested in this inquiry.

PERCY. I see very well. *(Sets the book down.)* You have my attention madam. About what are you inquiring?

MARY. Did you alter my writing?

PERCY. You left your journal out. I happened to notice a misspelled word and corrected it. Bad spelling is a horrible thing, Mary. I would think you would be grateful for my interest in bettering you as a writer.

MARY. You did more than correct my spelling; you adjusted the intention in my story.

PERCY. Well, now that you mention it, I did notice some foolish flights of fancy, far beneath your talent, and felt that you needed...guidance.

MARY. *(She moves close to him.)* Why? Because I'm a woman? Because I lack a man's reason to understand how to create a story.

PERCY. Certainly not! Nothing of the sort. You simply were too flowery, too soft in your word choice. I gave you some options that enhanced your story, stayed from religious overtones, and focused more on the natural aspects that should enhance the draft.

MARY. Simply put, you didn't like it, so you changed it to suit your sensibilities. Does that properly describe your motives?

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PERCY. Like many writers of your ilk, you are too focused upon sensibilities that are not necessary. They do not truly appeal to the more seasoned reader.

MARY. My ilk? Are you foolish enough to attempt to claim that because I am a woman...

PERCY. No, Mary I was—

MARY. Oh, I see. How foolish of me to think I might be capable of writing something to appeal to the masses. Might it occur to you Percy, in your infantile perceptions, that I was writing something for myself, simply writing to write, to explore, to—

(Claire enters the room, silently.)

PERCY. To explore what? It was not worthy of your talents, Mary. It needed guidance. That is why we are together, is it not? *(Pause.)* Part of our love is my guidance to help you free yourself from the shadows of your parents; to help you find your voice.

MARY. How will I find my voice if you alter my words? Then it is not my voice. It is not my words. They are your words with my name on them. I will have none of that, and you shall never touch my work again without my permission. Am I most clearly understood, sir? *(Turns to leave, sees Claire.)* Oh, how natural you should be here lurking in the dark like a creature of the night. *(She exits.)*

CLAIRE. That was interesting...

PERCY. I should go to her...

CLAIRE. No, brother, stay. Stay with me. I'm cold. *(She moves to him, and he embraces her.)*

PERCY. My, you are cold. *(Percy pulls Claire closer. They begin to kiss. It is a hungry kiss, and passionate. Then she pulls away.)* Why do you retreat?

CLAIRE. She should not treat you so, Percy.

PERCY. Oh, do not fret, sister.

CLAIRE. It is not right, Percy. She does not respect what you give her. The gift you impart to her. *(She pulls him close again, begins kissing him again.)* I know your gifts and your brilliance. I would never treat you in such a way. *(She arouses him.)* I shall always be true to you, my brother.

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Ours is the perfect love and the perfect family. (*She is pulling him into her breasts.*) Wouldn't you agree?
(*Percy is enraptured by her. He is consumed with her body. He is passionately taking her.*)

SCENE 6

Lights rise slowly. It is noon. Percy and Mary are sitting at the table. Mary is drinking tea and reading. Percy is reading letters. As he finishes each one, he throws it into the fire, watches it burn, and then goes to the next letter.

MARY. Burning them will not make the notices go away.

PERCY. But it does give me a certain pleasure watching the pages burn.

MARY. What do you plan to do?

PERCY. I am unsure.

MARY. Perhaps if you stopped giving away what we have, we would have more—or at least enough to keep the letters away.

PERCY. It is my responsibility to help those less fortunate than myself.

MARY. But at what expense, Percy? You have given monies to others, and yet you continue to borrow. You are so extended that we have a constant barrage of creditors and demands upon us. Will we move again? Will we keep moving to evade them and their collectors? Is that the life you want for us?

PERCY. No, it is not. I want... It is the responsibility of those with money to give it to whomever has the greatest need of it....

MARY. I know...

PERCY. At least I am standing by my views.

MARY. (*Rises and crosses to hold him.*) But at what cost, Percy?

PERCY. I am weary of these notices.

(A knocking is heard at the door, again and again, several times. Percy and Mary freeze, looking at the door in fear.)

MARY. Be calm. Do not rage. You will draw him back. (*PERCY nods. They wait for a moment; nothing further is heard.*) I love you, Percy! It is

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time for a vacation away from England. We need to go somewhere that inspires us, full of beauty and love and is not run by greed.

PERCY. I curse all merchants! They are the downfall of this great country. This new class of people whose sole focus is the purpose of making money. Greed is a horrible vice; it leads to the end of civility and to the destruction of the nation as we know it. Credit is a trap, true I have overextended myself, but I did it with the purpose of helping those in need who could not gain credit. My name is worth a great deal, but I would trade it all for peace, for a place that is beyond the reach of greed.

MARY. I know, my love, I know.

PERCY. How can we escape this? I cannot move us again, three homes in 8 months. I find only nightmares when sleep does come. And what of you and William? Mary, I am sorry. And poor Claire...my poor family...

MARY. Do not weep, Percy. Please do not let emotion overcome you. We shall find a way.

PERCY. But how?

MARY. It is time to travel again...to Calais, to Austria, no? I know, ITALY. Imagine sitting in the library in Venice again, reading the works of Plutarch, feeling yourself swept away by poetry, by love. To walk in the gardens, to see the lovely mountains of Italy and feel the power of nature, to see the sun again. I miss the sun, Percy. Can we go and see the sun again?

PERCY. Yes, my dear, yes...a wonderful idea.... We shall take a family holiday. We shall escape from this dreary island that the sun has forsaken, and we shall walk in the sunshine.... Italy shall be perfect for all of us.

MARY. Not all, Percy.

PERCY. What?

MARY. Please, let this be a trip that does not include Claire.

PERCY. Oh, Mary.

MARY. Percy, please, if you truly love me, you will grant me this. Take us to Italy: take William and I to Italy. We shall live there as long as you like. I have no reason to stay here. Godwin will not speak to me, and mother is with me as long as I have her words. She will be happy for me, especially if my life does not include Claire.

PERCY. Things have been better of late, haven't they?

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MARY. Well, yes.

PERCY. And why is that?

MARY. *(Resigned.)* Because she has found the theatre and Byron.

PERCY. She is finding her way. She will soon spread her wings, perhaps not as soon as she spreads her legs and then she will lose interest in us.

MARY. Percy, it won't work. She will never let us get away from her. *(The door flings open; it is Claire. She is out of breath.)* What on earth? Claire?

CLAIRE. *(Claire goes to the pitcher and drinks from it.)* I am in love! *(Kisses Mary on the mouth.)* And he loves me. We are soon to leave for Switzerland. *(Kisses Percy on the mouth.)* I am going to be a Lady. I am going to be a member of the elite.

PERCY. Well, this is news. Claire, sit down and explain.

CLAIRE. News like this calls for wine.

MARY. Well, that is likely true, but beer is what we have, Claire. It is affordable, and wine is not.

CLAIRE. Very well, but soon we shall always have wine.

PERCY. Indeed, we shall *(winks at Mary.)*. So, tell us, Claire, of your news.

CLAIRE. Byron told me this evening that his separation from Lady Byron is final and that he is leaving England forever. He is going to Switzerland for the summer.

PERCY. Interesting and worthy news. And he has invited you to join him in Switzerland?

CLAIRE. He told me he has grown fond of my company. He calls me his little fiend. I have pledged myself to him, and, for that, he has taken me under his wing at the Drury Theatre. He has been giving me most excellent instruction on being an actress.

MARY. Oh, surely you did not need much training there. *(Pouring beers for all of them.)*

CLAIRE. Oh, but I did, Mary. Byron said so. I have spent many hours upon hours of instruction with my Lord Byron, many hours, indeed.

PERCY. You are a fiend indeed, Claire. So, Byron has told you he loves you, that you are his one true love?

CLAIRE. Surely that is what he feels.

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MARY. Ah, what a man feels in the folds of a woman's dress **is** not nearly as clear when he is standing tall, proud, and full of his enlightened mind.

CLAIRE. Don't say that Mary. He loves me. I know it as a woman. Just as you know Percy loves you, I know that Byron loves me.

MARY. Yes, Claire. Percy loves me. He loves a great many people, but he does love me.

PERCY. I love you first and most, Mary.

MARY. Perhaps you do, Percy, but what I am sure of is that my heart sings to yours as no other. The melody played between us is sweeter than any of your other tunes.

PERCY. *(He kisses Mary on the head.)* How does Byron plan to affect this elopement?

CLAIRE. Well, I was telling him about how you and Mary eloped, how you went to France and Switzerland for six weeks...

MARY. Do not speak of that time Claire...you may not.

(Silence.)

PERCY. Mary. Mary, look at me. It is the past, and we shall not dwell there. Please, sit down. Claire. Go on.

CLAIRE. My Lord Byron said that it was an interesting story and an interesting idea. He even mentioned how wonderful it would be to meet you, Percy. Isn't that fantastic? It's going to be a perfect summer. We shall all be in Switzerland together and shall have the most wonderful time together.

MARY. We are not going to Switzerland for the summer. Percy and I are going to Italy.

CLAIRE. What? No, you can't. You have to accompany me to Switzerland. Don't you see? Byron wants you both there for our elopement.

PERCY. Claire, Mary has a notion, an idea that Italy—

MARY. I have "an idea?" What is that Percy? What do you mean by that?

PERCY. There is no hidden meaning. I was simply stating...

MARY. You are hiding behind me instead of taking a stand in defiance. That is what you are doing.

CLAIRE. Mary, you and Percy have to come to Switzerland. You have to. That's how this plan works. It's the only way. I need you both there to help

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me, to ensure that Byron follows through and doesn't change his mind. With you two there, seeing your happiness, he cannot but decide to follow your example.

PERCY. From what I know of the man, Claire, I suspect that you—

CLAIRE. Have perfectly understood his meaning. I know he is so clever. He didn't speak it out so that no one could know ahead of time. But I am his love, and I understood precisely what he meant.

PERCY. Not exactly what I was going to say.

MARY. Not even close.

CLAIRE. You must come with me, Percy. You have to. I must have my brother there to see me through, to protect me and give me strength. I am embarking upon a new journey. Don't you want to see me off in this new life?

MARY. Yes. We will see you off at the docks and be done.

CLAIRE. I know you don't mean it, Mary. I know that deep down you are excited for me; you are hiding your elation for me.

MARY. Hiding my elation? Hmmm, I somehow doubt that Claire.

CLAIRE. But I know you want to share in this journey with me.

MARY. No, I don't.

PERCY. Mary let's not be too rash in how we respond to our sister.

MARY. Not too rash? Are you so blinded by your thick column that you have lost all reason?

PERCY. I have not.

CLAIRE. Oh, don't fight. Not tonight. *(Pulling Mary in close to her and Percy.)* Surely, we can express our frustrations in a more intriguing way. *(Starts to kiss both Mary and Percy.)*

PERCY. Well, I'm not one to turn down such an offer.

MARY. *(Responding to kisses from Percy.)* Percy...Italy.

PERCY. We shall go, I promise. But first, we shall stop in Switzerland. We shall see Claire well and safe with Byron, and then, to Italy we shall go.

MARY. Swear it, Percy. Swear to me: we shall not stay in Switzerland.

PERCY. *(He holds her face in his hands.)* Yes, my love. We shall not stay in Switzerland long.

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CLAIRE. Only for a brief while, Mary, just long enough to help me plan my elopement with Lord Byron.

PERCY. Then it is settled. Now...I find myself very interested in breaking the bed with you both before we leave.

CLAIRE. Oh, Percy...*(She runs out of the room. PERCY chases after her.)*

MARY. *(Silence. She sits again.)* Alone...again.

SCENE 7

Lights rise on the parlor of Villa Diodati. Doors lead to a sumptuous garden. POLIDORI is sitting on the settee, and BYRON is doing a handstand.

POLIDORI. My Lord Byron, now that we have arrived and are settling in, perhaps we might discuss your regiment of exercise?

BYRON. *(Tumbling into a forward roll and springing to his feet.)* What is there to discuss, my young physician? Do I appear to be in need of altering my regiment? Am I not the picture of health?

POLIDORI. Yes, but perhaps you should eat more? I am, rightly, concerned that you are not providing your body with enough sustenance.

BYRON. *(Claps Polidori on the shoulder.)* The devil arrives through plumpness. I drive him away with exercise and hunger. I will not be a slave to my appetite. My mind is sharp and keen because I will not allow him to take hold.

POLIDORI. Yes, Byron, I understand that, but you must eat. You must have food in order to feed your mind.

BYRON. For a physician, you have little grasp of what the mind truly needs. No, Doctor. I will eat when I choose too, and, at the moment, I choose not to consume.

POLIDORI. Well, would you mind if I did? I cannot exist on the pittance you call a meal.

BYRON. By all means, Doctor. Please help yourself. *(Polidori rises, crosses to the door. There is a knock at the garden door. They both stand*

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looking at the door, then at each other.) Perhaps you should open the door, Doctor?

POLIDORI. Ah, well, I thought that... Well, it is your villa, after all...

BYRON. And you are in my employ, Doctor... (*Motions him to the door. He remains standing.*) Oh, for love of the poet. (*Crosses to the garden door. Opens it.*)

CLAIRE. (*Flinging herself into Byron's arm.*) Oh, my love, you are here. It's so wonderful. Aren't you delighted to see me? I know you are. I have come as we discussed. I am here with you. We are together. (*Claire begins kissing on Byron who pushes her away.*) My lord, I know this is a surprise, but I hope it is a pleasant one.

BYRON. It is a surprise. At the moment, not one that I find much delight in. (*Crosses to the desk and sits.*) How have you come to be here, Claire? (*Percy and Mary now enter the parlor.*)

PERCY. That, Lord Byron, was my doing, I'm afraid. I provided for her transport here. I am...

BYRON. (*Rising and crossing to Percy.*) Shelley. And this lovely vision must be Mary. I am delighted to make your acquaintance. Shelley and Mary, it is my profound pleasure to meet you and welcome you both to my villa. Are you staying nearby?

PERCY. Yes, we are—

CLAIRE. Just a short walk away, my love.

BYRON. I see. Well, again I am delighted to welcome you both to my villa. Enter, and be welcome in this house.

MARY. You are very generous to take us unannounced, Lord Byron. I trust you knew of our coming.

POLIDORI. Hello. I am, that is to say, well, what I mean is that it is my great, great honor to meet you, sir, and your lovely wife. I have long admired your—

BYRON. Yes, yes, Doctor. Thank you for stammering all over my guests. Now, kindly step back and allow them to sit and join us. No, Mrs. Shelley, I was not previously informed that you would be joining me here.

PERCY. Lord Byron, my most sincere apologies. We were led to—

BYRON. Please, just Byron. It is I who am delighted to meet you at last, a writer of such wonder as yourself. I have long wanted to meet you and

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discuss the ever-changing tide in England. Your “Necessity of Atheism” was a fantastic work, sure to bring the church to its knees.

PERCY. Well, it certainly didn’t please many who read it. I actually meant it as a joke.

BYRON. A grand one, at that.

CLAIRE. Yes, my brother is very clever, isn’t he? *(She sits by Byron.)* He is a wonderful writer, but he pales in comparison to you, my love. Doesn’t he?

BYRON. Does he? I wonder? I must say, your latest work certainly caught my eye. Delightful, how you attacked the old man. *(Laughs.)*

PERCY. *(Smiling)* Well, I’m glad you enjoyed it. Our vacation comes at a good time to get away from the motherland. Wouldn’t you agree?

CLAIRE. Yes. They were kind enough to bring me here, so that we might be together, my love.

BYRON. Pray, tell me this, Claire. What makes you think I am welcoming you to my villa? I am delighted that you have brought your sister and her husband, who are both of enlightened minds, but what makes you think I am excited by your presence? *(Mary stifles a laugh.)*

CLAIRE. Oh, I know you, my lord. I know your growing admiration and desire is enlarging even now. Shall I prove it?

MARY. No! That will not be necessary, thank you.

BYRON. Pity. It was an interesting beginning to our day.

POLIDORI. I’m curious, what exactly did she mean? Did I miss something?

PERCY & BYRON. Yes.

MARY. It’s alright, Doctor. It is customary of the times that few people speak directly and say exactly what they mean. Those of the overly intellectual think themselves terribly clever to speak in metaphor and see who understands them. Claire was offering to perform a sexual act.

POLIDORI. Oh...

BYRON. Doctor, you’re embarrassed. Oh, this is delightful.

POLIDORI. No. It’s just that I am unaccustomed to people speaking so openly about such things.

BYRON. What, that she was offering to prove that I am engorged? Here, I’ll prove it myself. *(He stands and begins to remove his pants. Claire*

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jumps up and starts to help him to which Byron pulls away and redresses himself.) No, not if it is what you want, Claire. I will not be satisfying you tonight.

CLAIRE. But why, my love? Your intention is most clear.

BYRON. Are you sure it's you? Hmm, perhaps my fancy sways to Percy tonight.

PERCY. A flattering offer, Byron, but I prefer the curves of Aphrodite to the trident of Poseidon. However, I must admit that I have never been opposed to sharing my family with friends. *(Mary turns and looks at Percy, rises and crosses to the window.)* Ah, however it seems that tonight Aphrodite does not wish to favor us.

CLAIRE. I have always thought her more an Athena type, but if you would take a dark-haired—

BYRON. Confound you, fiendish little imp. You are a dalliance for me, nothing more.

CLAIRE. You say that now, but there are pleasures I have not given you, as yet; I could show you both. *(She begins kissing Percy before Byron.)*

BYRON. Well, Percy, this is interesting. So, the rumors are true.

PERCY. *(Pushing Claire away.)* Rumors are curious things, Lord Byron, as you well know. I prefer not to give them credence. But Claire is part of my family, as is Mary.

BYRON. Well, family is important, without question.

MARY. Percy, I am not feeling well, and I wish to check on William.

BYRON. William?

PERCY. Our son. He is at our house with a nurse.

POLIDORI. Is he ill? I would be happy to examine him.

MARY. No, Doctor, he is healthy. It has been a long journey, and I just wish to make sure he is comfortable with his new nurse.

POLIDORI. I understand. If you should need anything, please do not hesitate to ask.

MARY. Thank you. That is very kind.

PERCY. Mary, if you are concerned, perhaps you should return to the house.

MARY. You will not accompany me?

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PERCY. I see no need. The weather, while gloomy, is not that different from England. It is, in fact, a beautiful day. Take in the countryside, the wonder of nature that surrounds us, as you return. Perhaps it will lift your spirits, walking among nature, and brighten your demeanor for this evening.

MARY. Very well. Doctor, would you be a gentleman and accompany me back to my villa? I am unfamiliar with the area and fear getting lost.

POLIDORI. I would be delighted to—

BYRON. Perhaps you should consult your employer before offering your services to others and escorting other men's wives.

MARY. Forgive me, Lord. I did not realize that the doctor was in your employ. I assumed he was a companion.

BYRON. A companion? (*Laughs.*) What a notion. No, the doctor is here to ensure I eat properly and to help restore my constitution to what I deem an acceptable level.

CLAIRE. I can help restore your constitution—

BYRON. Woman! I am not interested in you tonight. Must I be cruel to make my point?

CLAIRE. Oh, would you?

MARY. I apologize, Lord Byron. It was my error.

POLIDORI. But I should like to escort her back to her home. She should not travel alone.

PERCY. I would be most grateful, Byron, if you would allow it.

BYRON. For you, my newfound friend, anything. Go, Doctor. Mary, I do hope you will feel better, that young master William is well, and that you return to join us this evening for heated debate and storytelling.

MARY. I should be delighted, I'm sure.

POLIDORI. Thank you, m'lord. Madam? (*Polidori holds open the garden door for Mary and they exit.*)

CLAIRE. I am so happy they have gone. Now we can have some fun. (*She slides to Byron attempting to kiss him. He pushes her to the floor and threatens to strike her.*) Yes, my lord, let loose your passion upon me. Let me feel the fury of your love.

PERCY. (*Percy grabs Byron's arm.*) Now, Byron. I cannot have you hurting my family, can I?

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BYRON. No, you cannot. But this fiend is infernal and insatiable. *(He lifts Claire from the floor.)* Go! Go upstairs, go outside, go to the kitchen, to the garden, to the library, to the conservatory, go anywhere else within this villa, but, above all else, just GO!

CLAIRE. Only if you promise I may stay the night.

BYRON. Yes, fine, anything. I promise.

CLAIRE. Alright. *(Kisses him.)* I'll go. *(She exits.)*

PERCY. Respite, at last.

BYRON. Agreed. Wine?

PERCY. I thought you would never ask.

BYRON. May I inquire how you manage your family? It appears Mary is not so fond of it, and Claire is over-eager to leave it.

PERCY. Claire is anxious to find her own way in the world, and I believe she thinks herself in love with you, and you, her.

BYRON. She would not be the first to have that error in judgment and, likely, not the last. But what of Mary? Surely, she is your prize.

PERCY. Without question. I rescued her from a terrible home with Godwin and his wife, for which he was none too pleased with me. Not that I care for Claire any less, she is less complicated than Mary and more open. But Mary and I have such moments that define and overshadow everything else.

BYRON. I admire what you have, my friend. *(Pause.)*

PERCY. Claire informed us that before you left you signed a separation letter between you and Lady Byron, and, frankly speaking, you are no stranger to scandalous rumors.

BYRON. Oh, I'm sure the gossips like to say all manner of statements about my life. They write about me because I am exactly what I am accused of being. And you know what, Percy? I do not apologize for it. I am selfish. I am brooding. I am in a relationship with all my faults, and, in that relationship, I openly embrace them. I enjoy them, for my faults allow me to be more open and real than any other person you'll encounter. It is interesting, those who cannot embrace their faults must find interest and blame in others more noteworthy than themselves to dissect.

PERCY. You, sir, are all that I have heard of and more. It is my pleasure to know you. We are kindred spirits, I think.

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BYRON. I share your sentiment, Percy. I truly do. If you should fancy some exploration, do not hide your interest. Feel free to allow me the honor of appeasing your curiosity.

PERCY. I—

(Polidori enters from the garden door.)

POLIDORI. Sir, I believe that you should return to your villa. Mary is not feeling well and requests you return.

PERCY. Ah, very well then.

BYRON. Return this evening. I would very much like to discuss the nature of life and from whence it comes.

PERCY. I shall. Till later this evening. *(Percy exits out the garden door.)*

BYRON. Is the fiend gone? Has she left as well?

POLIDORI. I saw her heading to the Shelley villa as I was returning.

BYRON. Oh, did she offer herself to you as well?

POLIDORI. No, I hid from her sight so she might not accost me as she did you and Percy earlier.

BYRON. You hid? How prudent of you, sir. It is always best to hide from fiends when they walk the roads. *(Byron throws the pitcher of water across the room.)* How did Claire find out where we were staying? *(He advances on Polidori.)* Who did you tell about our journey?

POLIDORI. Me? Sir, I do not understand. Are you blaming me for—

BYRON. Of course, I'm blaming you! Is there anyone else in the room? *(Drinks more wine.)* It is without question your fault for I did not reveal our plans to anyone except you! You are without question the most useless doctor I have ever had in my employ. I should crush your dull brain for revealing this detail. *(Shoves Polidori.)* Shall we settle this with boxing or wrestling? *(Drinks more wine.)*

POLIDORI. Neither sir. I do not wish to engage in a fight with you—

BYRON. "I do not wish to engage in a fight..." *(Drinks more wine.)* I am not giving you a choice, you simpleton. You will fight me. I am only offering by what form or style you wish to receive your punishment. *(Slaps Polidori, drinks more wine.)* Well, go ahead, sir. Engage me, for I have engaged you.

POLIDORI. No, sir. I will not. *(Backs away.)* I would not want to hurt you.

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BYRON. *(Drinks more wine, which is beginning to affect him.)* Hurt me? You would never have the opportunity, sir. I am an excellent combatant. Have you looked at the specimen you have before you, have you? I swam the Hellespont, sir!! Did you know that? *(Now clearly feeling the effects of the wine, he sits on the settee.)* I wish to sleep now.

POLIDORI. Perhaps that would be best, sir.

BYRON. *(Rises, starts to walk out, comes back for the rest of the wine, and heads for the door.)* I'll not be leaving you with the wine; it is far too good for the likes of you. Good night, doctor, if that is truly who you are.

POLIDORI. Good night, Lord Byr....

(Pause. The sound of rain starts. Claire enters from the stairway.)

CLAIRE. What is it that compels you to stay here, to work for him?

POLIDORI. What? I thought you had returned to the Shelly Villa.

CLAIRE. I saw you and decided to return, to get to know you better. So again, I ask, what is it that compels you to stay?

POLIDORI. I stay because I am paid well, because I am living with Lord George Gordon Byron, the most famous and infamous man of our time. And I am his personal...

CLAIRE. Personal what? You are not considered his equal. You are not considered a friend.

POLIDORI. What you say is true. He talks to me out of boredom. He does not listen to my medical advice, yet that is what he pays me for. He is insulting. He is crass. He emasculates me at every opportunity. And what am I to do? I cannot strike him. I cannot engage him. To do so would be certain death or at least imprisonment. If it were not for the money, I am getting for journaling all of my time with Byron from his publisher, I would not stay. I even considered abandoning his employ until today...*(Flash of lightning followed by thunder.)*

CLAIRE. Today? What has changed today?

POLIDORI. May I confide in you, madam?

CLAIRE. You may trust me with your inner most secret. I shall take it to the grave.

POLIDORI. Today the world is brighter, and my tormentor is less powerful, all because of her, because of Mary Shelley.

CLAIRE. Mary?

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POLIDORI. The curl of her hair, the length of it, the way it hangs so perfectly about her shoulders, dangling just beyond.... The color is so bright and perfect that even gold would blush in comparison. And her hands so delicate, so gentle.... How I wanted to touch them, to hold them, to pull her close... (*Thunder and lightning.*)

CLAIRE. But you should not think these thoughts. She is married to Percy.

POLIDORI. I do not understand their relationship nor your part in it...but you are Mary's sister.

CLAIRE. Stepsister. We do not share blood.

POLIDORI. I am unclear how that makes a difference, but it seems most unnatural.

CLAIRE. Does it, Doctor? Does our family offend your sensibilities? Or is it that you wish to offend Mary's sensibilities and cannot figure out how to do that?

POLIDORI. Mary is an angel.... Walking her home was pure delight. She was kind to me and listened to me. With her by my side, I could.... She even said she was delighted by my company.... I'm sure she felt the same twinge of romance that I felt at the first sight of her.... On my honor I shall bestow upon her all my affections. I shall sway her affections from Percy to me. I shall care for her and William as my own. I shall give her the life she so clearly desires (lightning and thunder loudest yet) and in the end, Mary and I shall leave Switzerland together. (*He exits.*)

CLAIRE. Perhaps you shall, Doctor. Perhaps you shall. (*She crosses to the settee and sits.*) Byron or Percy? An interesting choice...

SCENE 8

Mary is sitting in the garden of their Villa. It is early the next morning. She is writing in her journal, and then she stops, picks up the journal, rises and begins to read what she has written.

MARY. "...we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunderstorm. It advanced from behind the mountains and the thunder burst at once with the frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens." Yes, that shall

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do nicely. (*Continues reading.*) “I remained, while the storm lasted, watching it progress with great curiosity and delight. The flash of lightning against the mountains seemed as if Zeus himself had returned and was announcing his return to the world; moreover, each flash of lightning was greeted with powerful and deafening roars cascading across the mountain tops and down into the valleys below.” (*She sits, smiling. Claire enters the garden unseen by Mary*). That is, indeed, the writing of a Romantic. I can write, mother. I can. You were right. I need only believe in myself and observe the wonders of nature around me to see—

CLAIRE. Who are you talking to?

MARY. CLAIRE! Must you sneak up on me like that, always peering at me in silence? Your visage hidden but always watching. Do you not realize that nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change?

CLAIRE. I’m sorry, sister. Did I frighten you?

MARY. No. I was deep in thought.

CLAIRE. And conversation it would seem. The question is: with whom?

MARY. What do you want, Claire?

CLAIRE. I wanted to tell you I am most grateful, and I wanted to express my thanks to you for agreeing to come to Switzerland. This has been the most wonderful time away from London; these past weeks have been sublime. I do believe Byron is soon ready to express his unyielding love for me.

MARY. You’re welcome, Claire, but I did not have a choice in accompanying you and Percy to Switzerland. Percy decided it was what he wanted to do, and despite his promise, which has now been all but forgotten, we are still here.

CLAIRE. Have you not enjoyed the evenings? The discussions?

MARY. Yes, of course I have. They have been of a most enlightened discourse.

CLAIRE. And the admiration of the young doctor?

MARY. Ah, of course, you would notice. He is nice, but he is callow.

CLAIRE. Perhaps he is, but he is rather striking, isn’t he?

MARY. I shall not disagree with you. He is fetching, albeit, in a rugged fashion.

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CLAIRE. He fancies you.

MARY. I know, but I do not fancy him. But I cannot hurt his feelings. It is nice to have the attention, and if, perhaps, Percy should notice, and decide that he needs to assert his affections upon me further, the doctor has served his purpose.

CLAIRE. Tell me, Mary, you are enjoying being here, aren't you?

MARY. I am writing, and my morning walks have provided me with inspiration. And the discussions at night have allowed me to express opinions I could not say in England. Yes, I am enjoying our stay, but you should not take credit for it.

CLAIRE. Good. Percy said you are planning to stay here tonight.

MARY. I was considering it, yes.

CLAIRE. Please come with us tonight, Mary. I need your support tonight of all nights.

MARY. Why?

CLAIRE. I am going to unburden my mind, and tell Byron that I am with child, his child, to be specific.

MARY. You are? Oh, Claire—

CLAIRE. Don't sound sad, Mary. This is the news that will make Byron accept me as his true love. It is what will bring us together.

MARY. No, Claire, it will not. Byron will not embrace you nor the child. You cannot tame him, Claire. "Mad, bad and dangerous to know" is not just an expression for Byron. It is his way of life.

CLAIRE. You're wrong. You do not understand love.

MARY. I understand the love you are trying to create, and it will fail you, Claire. If you are truly with child, you must consider this very seriously.

CLAIRE. I have Mary. I have. You are wrong about Byron. He will accept me, and he will accept our child.

MARY. (*Pause.*) Can I tell you what I used to think about when I was first pregnant with William? After Clara died and I became pregnant with William, I would have terrors about my child. Even if it survived, what if it was deformed, a freak, a moron, a "hideous" thing? Could I still love it, or would I be horrified and wish it were dead? What will happen if I cannot love my child? Am I capable of raising a healthy, normal child? Will my child die as Clara did? Could I wish a deformed child to die? To destroy

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itself. Could I kill it to prevent it from going into a world that would shun it, that would hate it because it was not beautiful? Could it kill me as I killed my mother?

CLAIRE. Those are horrible thoughts Mary—

MARY. No, they aren't. They are the thoughts every mother has. Every woman must consider these things, even the dark thoughts. My mother worried about them. We bring a child into this world! Fathers rarely nurture children. Mothers barely nurture their children. They are raised by others, by nurses and governesses. The child is expected to be well-mannered, well-educated, and, if it is pretty, then it may often receive the benefit of good social standing. But what happens if your child is deformed, is hideous in the eyes of others? What shall you do, Claire? What shall you do?

CLAIRE. Mary, stop it. You're scaring me.

MARY. You should be scared. You have to be scared. Motherhood is terrifying. But it is also a joy, rewarding, and a burden, all at once. I worried that my child would be born, and I would die and leave it to be raised by—Who? Percy? Percy is disinterested in his progeny. He acknowledges William, but he is not a parent. Godwin was my everything, but he tossed me aside for your mother. I fear for a child raised without the influence of a woman. What would happen to it? If a child is raised without parents, then it shall become monstrous. And what will you do if Byron rejects you? Have you considered that?

CLAIRE. I... no... He won't reject me. He loves me and he will love this child.

MARY. Are you certain of that, Claire? Can you be certain?

CLAIRE. I'll not stay listening to you. You must be having one of your terrors. You're frightening me. *(Leaving the garden.)* PERCY! Percy, Mary is saying awful things again...

SCENE 9

Entering from the garden is Byron and Polidori. Byron is helping Polidori into the room. Polidori has clearly injured his leg and is limping)

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POLIDIOR. I am a fool!

BYRON. No, certainly not. How could you think that of yourself?

POLIDORI. I should never have leapt from the parapet to try and greet Mary. She must think me a fool.

BYRON. (*Helping Polidori to sit down upon the settee.*) I am certain she feels only concern for your injury and passes no judgment upon the motives for your perilous flight.

POLIDORI. But I thought you said it would be a great demonstration of my abilities to her.

BYRON. Indeed, it would have been had you affected a landing worthy of a delicate swallow as opposed to a thundering cow launched from on high.

POLIDORI. Was it as bad as all that?

BYRON. Let me think...yes!

POLIDORI. It was your guidance. You said such an act would help me win her.

BYRON. Have I not given you guidance that helped to gain her attention? Has she not taken long walks with you in the mornings? Have you not had the pleasure of her company again and again?

POLIDORI. Yes, but I grow weary of these walks. I want to...to be like you, to be a man of action.

BYRON. And indeed, you should, but you must recognize your limitations. Equally important is to know when one is being played with and when one should listen with every fiber of their being to the advice being given. I offered a suggestion, a possibility. You took it upon yourself to take that leap, that tragic moment of near levitation until nature exerted her power and brought you back to earth. Like Icarus, you tried to fly too close to the sun. What result did you expect, especially without wings?

POLIDORI. She is like the sun, isn't she? She rises with such shine, such glimmering beauty. She is so radiant, and her beauty is such that I must almost avert my gaze.

BYRON. She rises with such... "shine?" (*Smiles*) Indeed, she does my good doctor. I have a thought: perhaps you might write your feelings down? A poem, perhaps?

POLIDORI. Oh, would you write one for me?

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BYRON. I could but my words would only pale in comparison to your own alacrity. I am a dark and brooding creature, Doctor. Would you have that woo the sun? No, it is better that the poem is written in your own hand; however, I would offer to be your vessel for its delivery. I would humbly offer myself as your voice so that there be no hesitation, no—

POLIDORI. Oh, you are indeed a true friend Byron—

BYRON. Lord Byron! Remember, Doctor, you are in my employ. I will help you; I am a champion of love. I will help you in this imprudent action. She will be yours. We shall find a moment this evening. Perhaps, after supper? Would that allow you enough time for composition?

POLIDORI. Oh, yes, I'm sure I will find the perfect turn of phrase to open her heart to me.

BYRON. You will explore the weaves of fabric in her dress in no time. Doctor. I am sure of it.

POLIDORI. You are a true friend, m'lord. Others may say all manner of ill against you, and, at times, I have had my doubts. But your willingness to help me in this noble venture is truly a testament to your compassion.

BYRON. I am touched. I hope that I am worthy of such respect.

POLIDORI. Thank you m'lord. Thank you. *(They clasp hands.)*

SCENE 10

The lights rise. It is late at night. An enormous bust of a Newfoundland dog sits on the table. A storm is raging outside tonight, greater than any heard before. All are all in the room. Thunder)

MARY. I would wish these storms to end.

PERCY. *(Holding Mary close.)* I know, my love, but such is not to be the case: sunshine in the morning and horrible storms at night. That is the way of the summer this year, cold and damp.

BYRON. It is the year without a summer.

PERCY. Indeed, it seems so. So where had we left off, Byron, before nature interrupted us?

BYRON. What is the origin of life?

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PERCY. Dr. Erasmus Darwin has made some rather startling discoveries and makes some even wilder suppositions.

BYRON. Yes, true, but the question remains: what is that moment when life begins? When does the soul infuse the body?

PERCY. You join the convention of belief in a soul? Is there such a thing?

BYRON. Of course. There must be, Percy. From the soul, we create.

PERCY. Do we? Or is creation a part of man's drive to continue life?

BYRON. Are these not one in the same? Tell me, Doctor. You are a man of science. Where does life come from? What is the moment at which the spark of life ignites?

POLIDORI. (*Rising.*) Well, if we are to believe Dr. Darwin and consider the work of Galvani as being accurate, then, perhaps, life is truly a spark, a transference of energy to a form that then animates and becomes life.

PERCY. Doctor, are you a follower of Galvanism? Do you believe in such a spark?

POLIDORI. No, I cannot say that I do. I believe that there is more than just a spark of energy...

PERCY. Is there? Is it not possible that life begins just that simply? A spark within a mother's womb brings life to the growing creature within her which then becomes alive?

POLIDORI. Science is certainly trying to answer that question, Sir, but, to date, it is believed that there is little mystery to life that science cannot discover.

BYRON. But what of the soul? Do you discount that all creatures are possessed of a soul?

POLIDORI. Science has not discovered proof of a soul in man, let alone in animals.

PERCY. Byron, do you believe that all creatures possess a soul?

BYRON. I do. (*Rises and crosses to the bust of the Newfoundland.*) This is a rendering of my most loyal companion, Boatswain. A more loyal, faithful, and loving companion, I could not have asked for. I tell you, to look into his eyes was to see a soul looking back at me. It is my fervent belief that all creatures possess a soul, just as man does, and that we can connect to them, that we can earn friendship and companionship with them. Boatswain was far superior to many a man I have tried to call friend.

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His loyalty was without question, his friendship uncompromising, and his love for me without fault. So, yes, I absolutely believe that all creatures possess a soul.

POLIDORI. *(To Claire.)* I had wondered why this bust was here.

CLAIRE. So had I, a hideous looking creature.

BYRON. *(Steps to Claire.)* You would do well, Madam, not to speak of Boatswain in that manner ever again.

PERCY. Byron, I'm sure she meant no harm.

BYRON. Perhaps I should feed you to the animals and see if they devour your soul?

CLAIRE. *(Pulling away from him.)* Why would you say something so horrible?

POLIDORI. Sir, I must request you refrain from—

BYRON. You may request nothing. You're fortunate that I don't feed you to my bear, Doctor, just to see you wrestle with him. And who would win?

PERCY. *(Rising, crosses to Claire.)* Be at peace, Claire. Byron likes to say things that shock, don't you, sir?

BYRON. I do. It's true. I so love to upset the apple cart. *(Crosses and sits.)* So, what of the spark of life? Mary, you must provide us with insight here, if you would be willing, as you have given birth. You must have an insight that we men lack.

PERCY. Indeed, Mary, you must have given thought to this.

MARY. *(Rises and crosses to the window. Thunder.)* I often think on this subject.... I believe, as Byron does, that we have a soul and that all creatures must have one. To envision a creature without a soul, but alive, would indeed be a horror.

PERCY. Very well, Mary, then at what point did William gain his soul within you? Was it when he was born? Did "God" infuse him with a soul upon birth? Was it earlier? When did the spark occur?

MARY. I cannot say, Percy, nor do I think I should.

POLIDORI. If I may, it is this very question that science is trying to answer. While I do not believe in Galvanism, his work certainly has brought forth the notion that life does require a chemical and electrical reaction. Many believe that science will be able to recreate life.

BYRON. Oh Doctor, is that the limit of your scientific understanding?

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POLIDORI. I think we are not far from a time when man will be able to bring life to an inanimate form, life from lifelessness.

PERCY. Eternal life? Bringing the dead back to life? That didn't work so well on Mr. Aldi's experiment upon the dead form of Mr. Foster.

POLIDORI. Yes, that is true, sir. But perhaps that is only because science has not yet discovered the correct formula?

BYRON. Suppose science can indeed bring life to the lifeless. Is the mind retained? Are memories present? What of the soul? Further, what of education? Will a lifeless being retain all that it learned previously?

PERCY. Perhaps science will discover the means for education to be imparted within the spark, all in one instant. The lifeless will gain the spark and immediately be able to speak, to discourse with its creator, to understand the nature of love and beauty.

POLIDORI. I'm sure science will strive to find those very answers.

MARY. What if science created a hideous creature? What if it were not pleasing to society? What if it were not a beautiful creation?

POLIDORI. I'm sorry?

PERCY. Oh, that doesn't matter, Mary. A creator always will care for its creation.

MARY. Will it? Just as you do for your children. Or you, Lord Byron?

BYRON. I do care for my children, Madam. I provide for them all that they need.

MARY. You provide, but do you care? Do you nurture them? Do you bring about their education firsthand or is it at the hands of others? And what of you Percy? Do you provide as Byron does for your children?

PERCY. *(Rising.)* Mary, I do not care for your tone nor your question.

MARY. And I do not care for your constant lack of interest in our son.
(Silence.)

BYRON. Well, perhaps it is time for a new direction in our fun this evening. I happened upon a rare and wonderful printing of Thomas Gray's poetry at the local shop in town. May I offer to read one for our entertainment this evening?

CLAIRE. Oh, a wonderful idea, m' lord. I shall hang upon your every word. What is the nature of this story?

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BYRON. A story of two sisters, nothing to terrible, just a little flight of fancy before bed, eh?

CLAIRE. I couldn't agree more. Nothing like a good scare to get the blood flowing and rising to the cheeks.

PERCY. I am intrigued. Byron, please read on.

POLIDORI. Please, sir, at your leisure.

MARY. *(Sits down.)* Yes, Byron, please do. But keep in mind, Claire is most excitable. Are you sure you wish to excite her?

BYRON. I'm sure I shall endure the consequences.

CLAIRE. Oh, we shall see, m' lord.

BYRON. Well then, let us make this interesting. Who shall have the courage to sit in the center of the room blindfolded as I read in their ear? Shall we see if I can, indeed, frighten the listener?

CLAIRE. Oh, how wonderful, I should like to be the one—

MARY. No, that would not be wise nor appreciated.

POLIDORI. I would, but I feel I should like to keep my eyes open to observe this experiment, for science.

BYRON. For science, indeed. Well then— *(Turns to Percy.)*

PERCY. Very well. I am at your service, sir.

(Percy pulls a chair to the middle of the room. Byron removes his scarf and blindfolds Percy.)

BYRON. Comfortable?

PERCY. Quite.

(Byron moves to the table and retrieves the book. He crosses to behind Percy and begins to read. As Byron reads, Percy becomes increasingly disturbed by the poem, its graphic nature, and Byron's reading of it.)

BYRON. Now, take several deep slow breathes...good...and we shall begin.

*See the gristle texture grow
Tis the human entrails made
And the weights of that play below,
Each a grasping warrior's head-*

Shafts for shuttles, dipped in gore,

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*Shoot the trembling cords along.
Sword, that once a Monarch bore,
Keep the tissue close and strong-*

*We the reins to slaughter give;
Ours to kill, and ours to spare;
Spite the dangers he shall live.
(Weave the crimson web of war!)*

*They whom once the desert beach
Pent within its bleak domain,
Soon their ample sway shall stretch
O'er the plenty of the plain.*

*Low the dauntless earl is laid,
Gored with many a gaping wound;
Fate demands a nobler head;
Soon a king shall bite the ground.*

*Long his loss shall Eirin weep
Ne'er again his likeness see;
Long her strains in sorrow steep,
Strains of immortality!*

*Horror covers all the heath;
Clouds of carnage blot the sun.
Sisters, weave the web of death;
Sisters, cease, the work is done.*

*Hail the task, and hail the hands!
Songs of joy and triumph sing!
Joy to the victorious bands
Triumph to the younger king.*

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*Mortal, thou that hear'st the tale,
Learn the tenor of our song.-*

(Percy cries out. He rips the blindfold off his face. He is in a panic. He is enthralled in a waking terror. He rises and begins moving about. He is not present. He is on the battlefield.)

PERCY. I see the entrails. I see crimson everywhere. Oh, the poor young men who have fallen—

MARY. *(Rises.)* Percy, stop. It's alright.

PERCY. NO! The sisters, they are coming for me—*(Percy falls to the ground, cowering.)* I hear them whistling for me—

BYRON. *(Laughs and crosses to the settee. Sits.)* Oh my, certainly not what I expected.

CLAIRE. What's wrong with him?

POLIDORI. He is gripped in a waking terror. Do not wake him. I will help him. *(He exits the room.)*

MARY. Percy, my love—

PERCY. The knight is slain.... Blood is all around.... There is so much blood—*(He is lying on the ground crying.)*

CLAIRE. How could you do this to him? You've put him under a spell. Stop it now.

BYRON. I've put no enchantment upon him. His own mind has taken him to this terror.

MARY. Byron, please do something—
(Polidori returns.)

POLIDORI. Here, I have some medicine. This shall calm him. *(He comes too PERCY with a cloth, places it over his face, slowly begins to pour small amounts of ether upon the cloth. PERCY starts to calm.)* There. He shall be fine. Give him a moment.

(Percy is laying on the floor, silent, but breathing more normally.)

BYRON. Well, that was exciting and a very interesting experiment.

MARY. What was the purpose of that, sir?

BYRON. I wondered, if using only my voice, if I could lull someone into a terror. I guess the answer is yes.

CLAIRE. Well, you have certainly frightened me. But it was fascinating.

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MARY. No, it wasn't. This was cruel Byron, even for you.

PERCY. (*Groggily.*) No, Mary, it wasn't. It was an intense experience. How did you do that, sir?

CLAIRE. Was it magic?

BYRON. Only a simpleton believes in magic. (*Polidori is examining the blindfold.*) No, I only used my words to—

POLIDORI. With the help of laudanum on the blindfold.

MARY. What?

BYRON. (*Laughing.*) The doctor has discovered my trick.

PERCY. (*Laughing as well.*) It was so vivid. The terror was so real to me.... O, Mary, it was such an experience.

MARY. You're laughing about this? He drugs you without your knowledge and forces you into a terror, and you scare us all, and you are laughing about it? This is the height of cruelty from the both of you. (*She crosses to Polidori.*) I thank you, Doctor, for your quick thinking and your level head to take care of my husband.

POLIDORI. My pleasure, Madam.

BYRON. Did you enjoy the journey, my friend?

PERCY. I did, and while the doctor's medicine has relieved me of the vision, I feel very alive, indeed. You're right. A good scare does bring the fire to the cheek. (*Thunder*)

CLAIRE. Oh!

MARY. That may be perceived as a reflection of my mood towards you right now, Byron.

BYRON. Come, Mary, do not be angry with me nor with Percy. Is not your mind whirling at this moment? Are not the creative ideas flowing about?

MARY. I don't know.

PERCY. I am alive with thoughts and alive with ideas.

BYRON. As am I.

POLIDORI. I must admit that I find myself stimulated as well, sir. That was an interesting experiment, one that I should like to repeat in a more controlled environment.

CLAIRE. Well, I for one am feeling creative as well. What says your grace? Shall we go and be creative together?

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BYRON. No! I have a better idea, a much better idea.

PERCY. Truly? Well, do not keep it a secret. Byron, tell us.

BYRON. We shall each write a ghost story!

PERCY. Oh, I like this idea.

CLAIRE. I do not. I cannot write like any of you.

POLIDORI. Oh, come now, Claire. I am a man of science, not of art, and I am intrigued. Surely a woman, who is prone to fancy, can create a ghost story. After all, it is all the rage with the ladies these days.

BYRON. And we shall add rules. No one may leave the villa. We have three days to come up with the premise of our story. Each will share when you have a premise that you find acceptable. It may be in verse or prose, but we shall each write. The game ends when the best story is begun.

PERCY. Well, Mary, are you willing to play this game? This may be the chance, the inspiration you've needed to finally live up to your heritage, to your breeding.

MARY. (*Mary rises and crosses, face to face with Percy.*) Very well, sir, I accept the challenge and the terms of the game. (*Thunder & Lightning*)

END OF ACT 1

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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