

# *Dead Poets*

*Christian Lanciai (1989)*





# *Dead Poets*

by Christian Lanciai

translation from the Swedish "*Prometheus, Lucifer och oskulden*" (1989)

## *Dramatis personae :*

An old lady (Claire Clairmont as very old)  
A young journalist (André Maurois)  
Headmaster at Oxford University College  
His woman secretary  
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)  
Thomas Jefferson Hogg, his fellow student  
Harriet Westbrook, Shelley's first wife  
Old Westbrook, her father  
Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)  
Rogers, banker, poet and bachelor  
Thomas Campbell, poet of Scotland  
Thomas Moore, merry poet of Ireland  
Lady Melbourne och Lady Heathcote, wallflowers  
Lady Caroline Lamb, one of Lord Byron's mistresses in England  
Lord Grey and Lord Sheridan, English society lions  
Annabella Milbanke, later Lady Byron  
William Godwin, free-thinker, father of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley  
Lady Jersey and Lady Elphinstone, wallflowers  
Two more wallflowers  
Lady Augusta Leigh, Lord Byron's half sister  
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Shelley's second wife  
Leigh Hunt, writer and editor  
Mrs Marianne Hunt, his wife  
Lord Eldon, judge at trial against Shelley  
John Keats, poet, previously apothecary and doctor (1795-1821)  
Marianna Segati and Margherita Cogni, two of Lord Byron's mistresses in Venice  
George and Tom Keats, John Keats' brothers  
Fanny Brawne, John Keats' fiancée  
Countess Teresa Guiccioli, Lord Byron's last and youngest mistress  
Count Guiccioli, a rich old man  
Count Gamba, Teresa Guiccioli's father  
A doctor  
Claire Clairmont (as very young)  
Thomas Medwin, old school mate of Shelley's  
Captain Trelawny, old Irishman with a great past  
Captain Edward Williams, Shelley's ship mate  
Jane Williams, his supposed wife

Captain Roberts of Livorno harbour  
A servant of banker Rogers  
A servant of lady Jersey  
A servant of Margherita Cogni  
A servant of Count Guiccioli  
A servant of Lord Byron's  
A servant of Count Gamba's  
Other servants of Byron's and Gamba's  
Leigh Hunt's six children  
Police inspector of Pisa  
Eleven policemen under his command  
Maid servant in Palazzo Lanfranchi  
Italian soldiers

The scene is England, Geneva, Italy and Greece 1811-24,  
the prologue and epilogue 1879.

*Prologue.*

Florence, 1879.

An old eccentric lady who has suffered from long periods of mental distress  
is found isolated in the webs of a great mystical past  
when she is visited by the young journalist.

*Lady* Young impudent fellow, what do you want from me?

*Man* I just wanted to ask you a few questions.

*Lady* As they all want, the nosy vultures who can't respect an old lady who  
outlived her age, herself and even her ideals at an outrageous age.

*Man* It's for the sake of your ideals I dared to visit you.

*Lady* You are here to mock me by making a funny spectacle of me.

*Man* On the contrary, I only wish to honour you, as I wish to honour Byron  
and all his friends' memories.

*Lady* They were all insolent ladykillers.

*Man* You didn't think so at the time.

*Lady* Well, young man, if you know that much about me you know it all.  
And why then do you wish to torture me by asking any further questions?

*Man* Because I want to know the truth.

*Lady* It has already been told a thousand times and been published in too  
many brutally scandalous novels.

*Man* But I want to know the whole truth.

*Lady* That's just what the whole world already knows. Every gluttonous  
reader of cheap romance nonsense knows that I offered me freely to that  
Byron and begged him to abduct me, and the world knows that he took me  
seriously and gave me a daughter in Italy, and for that world literature will  
despise me forever.

*Man* That's not...

*Lady (interrupts)* That is the whole truth. There are no further disgusting  
details for a drivelling sexist Frenchman like you to extract from that story. It

was no less compromising for me than the world already knows, and the only result was my being afflicted with mental illness for twenty years; – for the girl, who was my and Byron’s daughter, died. (*disappears for a moment in her memories*) It was in the monastery at Bagnacavallo outside Ravenna, a terrible place. My lord Byron gave her that as a prison for life. A child of five years! What harm had she done him? She wasn’t even given a life! But that’s the kind of father he was. Everyone fell to him although he ruined them all. The Countess Guiccioli of sixteen years was bereft of her husband, the richest patron in Romagna, who was exiled for life, she miscarried with Lord Byron, her completely innocent parents were banished to Switzerland for his sake, and her life wasn’t restored to her until she was given back her poor count, while Byron went off to die in Greece. And she was only one among many whose lives he utterly ruined, since he was a failure of no character. He was only good for poetry and only while he was still young. When Shelley died he was more exhausted and burnt out than if he already had been dead.

*Man* That’s not the whole truth.

*Lady* It certainly is!

*Man* You knew Shelley better than Byron, since you lived more with Shelly than with Byron.

*Lady* Shelley was a gentleman who never intruded on me, and he helped me against Byron, who was not a gentleman. Only Goethe was a greater breaker of hearts than Byron. Every woman whom they touched had their lives ruined by them.

*Man* I would have liked to hear more about Shelley, who died relatively unknown. Everyone had enough of Byron who shocked all Europe and held it in terror.

*Lady* No one knew Shelley. Such a belated and lousy gossip scribbler and dirty poser writing for money to satisfy the scandal press like you and a sexist Frenchman at that flirting with the vulgar public to get famous would never be able to understand the untouchable Shelley’s mystical personality.

*Man* But you could.

*Lady* No one could reach him. Shelley was too high on his wings for us petty mortals.

*Man* Explain him to me, please.

*Lady* Are you then not only interested in Lord Byron’s escapades and the sad and sordid experiences of him by his victims?

*Man* I would like to understand the untouchable Shelley a bit more.

*Lady* You can’t understand him without thoroughly entering the unbearable tragedy of John Keats.

*Man* I wish to know all that from you which the world doesn’t know.

*Lady* I don’t know all, but I could give you some insights. I can only offer random glimpses. The rest you’ll have to find out in other ways.

*Man* I am all attention.

*Lady* Listen carefully, then. But mark it well: I experienced them only as human, never as poets.

*Man* We are all only human, whatever masks we carry.

*Lady* For those words I will not conceal anything from you of the vain characters of those three poor poets.

Act I scene 1. Oxford University College, March 1811.

*Headmaster* Are the delinquents here?

*Secretary* Yes, they are waiting outside.

*Headmaster* How do they appear? Guilty? Repentant?

*Secretary* On the contrary. Spiteful and stubborn.

*Headmaster* I shall then have to fight them instead of dressing their wounds, which I rather would have done, especially on that nobler and wilder Shelley, who seems to have been the school's most attractive culprit for beating.

*Secretary* None of them deserve any leniency for what they have done.

*Headmaster* I know. Let them in.

*(Exit the woman secretary, who on her way out shows in two young students, Shelley and Hogg.)* Come, my boys. Sit down.

*(The students sit down gloomily and spitefully.)*

I have here a pamphlet which has been published and publicly sold here in Oxford. The title is "The Necessity of Atheism". Does anyone of you know anything about its origin? *(The students hold their mouths.)* You don't know who has written it? Perhaps you haven't read it?

*Shelley* Yes, I have read it.

*Headmaster* Well, what did you think of it?

*Shelley* It was very good.

*Hogg (after some hesitation)* I agree. I also read it. The author is right.

*Headmaster* Only you two think so, because you have written it.

*Shelley (makes a try)* I couldn't see any name under the title.

*Headmaster* Of course you couldn't, since you published it anonymously.

*Hogg* Nothing proves that I or Shelley wrote it.

*Headmaster* Come on, boys, everybody knows it was you. Wherever did you get such ideas? Is not that totally derailed revolution in France enough? What's the good of publicly preaching against the basic principle of order and justice in our society, which is God?

*Shelley* God is a dogma construction always used for intimidation and terror in the abuse of power.

*Headmaster* Yes, that's what the pamphlet says, but no servant of the society of justice can support such a thesis, who serves a Christian God of love in perhaps the only existing consistent judicial community.

*Shelley* We only turn against the abuse of power and the religious lies and misunderstandings, which constitute that intolerance which dominates all Christian communities.

*Headmaster* So it's you who have written it, Shelley. You admit it yourself.

*Shelley* I mean 'we' as students and readers of this pamphlet.

*Headmaster* It's no use, Shelley. The language in the pamphlet is yours, the ideas are yours and that confounded scoundrel William Godwin's, that modern Socrates and seducer of youths of today, this madman of a thoroughly corruptive idealist who infects all revolutionary minds driving them to senseless fanaticism without reason! We can prove it's you, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who has printed, spread and sold this challenging pamphlet together with your dangerous friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg, and what you've done is unheard of! You have defiled your school, your society, your future and your reputation with unsound blasphemies against God! You have acted like these demented French wild beasts who decapitated the King and Queen of France giving their blood to the mob to drink! You are no better than dogs and parasites, since you have done this in the name of

intellectualism, the free word and the sacred domain of knowledge! You abuse your humanistic accomplishment to violate the very foundation of humanism! It's indefensible and unforgivable!

*Shelley* The future will make this author right, and it's only hysterical abusers of power who turn against the arguments of the pamphlet by solely subjective emotionalism without even trying to understand it's thoroughly material and reasonable contents.

*Headmaster* In the name of the supreme goddess of reason Robespierre cut the throats of hundreds of thousands of innocent Frenchmen. What future are you suggesting? A future to welcome such revolutions to ravage all countries?

*Shelley* I mean an enlightened future which will abolish all forms of bigotry which mark all self-imposed human infallibility established by the abuse of power and intolerance.

*Headmaster* My dear boys, you are both brilliant and dedicated students, and I wouldn't like to lose you. But the whole world turns against any effort to dethrone God, since the whole world order depends on God for its existence. (*Shelley wants to say something.*) I have read your pamphlet. I know what you mean. You don't deny the existence of God, only a personal God. I know. It doesn't help. You must take responsibility for your publication, cancel it and renounce its ideas. Or else we have to expel both of you.

*Shelley (after a moment's silence)* Dum scripsisti scripsisti.

*Headmaster* And you, Hogg?

*Hogg* The pamphlet is printed anonymously, no one has any right to pinpoint anyone as its author, the edition is irrevocable, and (*looking at Shelley*) we both agree with the ideas of the anonymous author and can't honestly denounce them.

*Headmaster* Then you are both hopelessly lost. Don't you see that the university can't have students who refuse to take responsibility for publicly printed and distributed writings and who can't answer honestly to simple questions? (*silence*)

You will be formally and publicly expelled. Never expect to be admitted by any Christian university again. That's all.

*Shelley* I have been a deist, but I can never be a Christian.

*Headmaster* Enough! Get out!

(*The boys leave. The secretary opens the door for them. After they are gone:*)

What a pity! There two of the brightest minds in England are getting lost in misguided idealistic folly.

*Secretary* You have done your best, Headmaster.

*Headmaster* And yet have I failed. Such lamentable episodes make me worryingly wonder: how perfect is really our educational system, when it has to exclude the two brightest brains of our university?

## Scene 2. Edinburgh, August 28th 1811.

*Harriet Westbrook* We have to get legally married, Percy.

*Shelley* You know what I think about that.

*Harriet* Yes, but now we have reached so far as to no longer be able to swim back to the shore! You have run away with me, you know.

*Shelley* At your own urgent request.

*Harriet* I had no choice. Only you could save me. You can't guess how they harassed me at home! My only choice was between suicide without you or suicide with you.

*Shelley* You sacrifice your education for me.

*Harriet* Education! That horrible old school! To return to school would have been worse than suicide. After I first met you I could never become normal again. I fell for you the moment I saw you. No one is wiser than you.

*Shelley* My baby, you make me feel like a seducer of a child. You are only sixteen. Wouldn't it have been wiser to be patient for a few years?

*Harriet* You speak like an old father although you are just nineteen.

*Shelley* I was born old. I am so old that I was born already in the future.

*Harriet* That's a timeless poet speaking. You give me no choice. I have to be yours.

*Shelley* You force me to marry you.

*Harriet* I am sorry I have to force you, but love forces me.

*Shelley* I can only agree on a legal ceremony on one condition. I can not regard our marriage as binding if it would ever lead to more pains to us both than joy. Rather than ever making ourselves unhappy we should depart.

*Harriet* Is that your only condition?

*Shelley* Absolutely.

*Harriet* Love can but be unconditional.

*Shelley* I don't indulge in love. I indulge in self-sacrifice.

*Harriet* Then you don't love me.

*Shelley* I never said I did. But I sacrificed everything for you.

*Harriet* Take me then to the altar! I make no conditions, since I love you, and therefore I accept all conditions.

*Shelley* Then I can accept the burden of the unendurable fetters of legal formalism in the awareness that I can relieve myself of them at any time.

*Harriet* Just be mine!

*Shelley* I was yours the moment you decided to love me.

*Harriet* It wasn't me. It was destiny.

*Shelley* Let's then accept the challenge of destiny together.

*(They go to their destiny.)*

Scene 3. September 1811. The villa of Rogers the banker above Green Park.

*Rogers* We are expecting a third guest.

*Campbell* Who might that be, if I may ask?

*Rogers* I am not very well acquainted with him, but our Irish friend knows him well.

*Thomas Moore* I should indeed. I challenged him to a duel two and a half years ago.

*Rogers* Allow me to ask – have you duelled since?

*Moore* No, something came between. That rogue went abroad, and my letter of challenge was left unopened on his desk until he came home now in July. I happened to meet him then and asked him why he never answered my challenge. He answered that he hadn't had time to open his post yet. Two days later my letter was returned to me unbroken.

*Campbell* So he never read it?

*Moore* No, and I'll be damned if I have any interest in meeting him on the battlefield any more. He is after all a brave and smart sport who swam the



Hellespont, and I have now a lovely young wife to live for, which I didn't at the time.

*Rogers* That's why our Irish friend asked me to host a regular lunch of reconciliation. I had nothing against it, of course, but you have to be careful with a sensitive mind like our friend Byron's. That's why we are so few guests.

*Campbell* Do you have anything to fear from his bad temper?

*Rogers* No, but I am afraid he will not venture in. He has become so exceedingly shy since his mother's death last month. He has a constant thunder cloud in his face which gives plenty of rain.

*Moore* Our purpose, Campbell, is to get him out of that grave. It's perhaps our literary task in this world.

*Campbell* You never get a genius out of his grave, since he is only a genius as long as he sticks to his grave.

*Rogers* Gentlemen, I hear his carriage outside. May I ask of you the discretion of absence until he is safely in? He suffers from a limp and never wants anyone to notice it.

*Campbell* How long shall we stay away?

*Rogers* Until he is securely settled. Then we have him, and my good food will make him forget his grave.

*Campbell* Let's go, Tom Moore.

*Moore (to Rogers)* We will be back as soon as Hamlet is seated.

*Rogers* Thanks, good friends. *(They leave, and only Rogers is left. Lord Byron enters from the other side all in black and black bands but a white collar.)*

I am very pleased you could come, my friend.

*Byron* Thank you. I am not.

*Rogers* I hope you will be more pleased presently.

*Byron* I really shouldn't have come at all. I only made it by a superhuman effort to overcome my own will. – May I sit down? I am very tired nowadays. *(Byron sits. Enter immediately Moore and Campbell.)*

*Moore* How nice to see you, Byron! *(Byron wants to rise immediately.)*

*Campbell* No, please be seated, by all means!

*Byron* Where did you come from?

*Campbell* We were both caught by our friend Roger's splendid library. Everything he has to offer is exquisite: culture, food, parties, splendour and taste. Am I right, Thomas Moore?

*Moore* That's why we are so delighted to see you here, Byron.

*Campbell* You are still in mourning after your mother, I see.

*Byron* Yes, the pain is unbearable.

*Moore* You look rather as if you came directly from the grave yourself.

*Byron* Yes, I have actually been there, Tom, and that even without our famous duel.

*Moore (laughing)* It will come, Byron, it will come!

*Byron* In that case it would rather be a pleasure. That's maybe just what I need.

*Rogers* By the way, my friends, may I invite you to the table. You are well seated as you are, Byron. May I ask you two over here. *(shows them to their seats)*

*Moore* How was it really in Greece, Byron? Did you see many fights?

*Byron* No, only many massacres. Nowadays you fight decently and properly with your fists almost only in Ireland.

*Campbell* What about us?

*Byron* You, Thomas Campbell, fight more as the Greeks since you Scotsmen share the habit of the warriors of Greece and Albania to challenge your oppressors by showing your legs. (*Campbell and Moore laughing.*)

*Campbell* The fact is that we move around much more easily in our kilts than how both gentlemen and ladies of Europe stumble on in unnatural corset costumes and preposterous dresses to even hide their feet.

*Moore* You mean that all people should move around in kilts, so that even ladies' legs would be visibly available? (*Moore and Campbell laughing.*)

*Campbell* Why not? It's not a bad idea.

*Rogers* My friends, may I serve you with some soup?

*Moore* I'll be delighted.

*Campbell* Me too.

*Byron* No thanks.

*Moore* Why not, Byron? Our banker here provides the most delicious soups in London!

*Byron* Thank you, but I never eat soup.

*Rogers* What then may I offer? Some fish?

*Campbell* I would be delighted.

*Moore* Me too.

*Byron* Thanks, not for me.

*Campbell* You sullen puritan, don't you know that master Rogers here can make the most delicious fish courses in London?

*Byron* Thank you, but I never eat fish.

*Rogers* Then I'll have to provide my guest of honour with some meat. Bring in the lamb steak, butler!

*butler* Yes, Sir.

*Moore* Wonderful!

*Campbell* I am starved.

*Byron* Thank you, but I must decline.

*Moore* But lamb steak, Byron! Surely you can't resist that?

*Campbell* Prepared in the top class kitchen of banker Rogers, the finest in London!

*Byron* Thank you, but I never eat meat.

*Moore* I know what our friend Byron needs. A glass of wine!

*Rogers* May I offer you some wine, Byron?

*Byron* No thank you.

*Moore* But Byron! You may choose yourself! Our banker has all the best wines in the world in his cellar! It's all for you and your choice!

*Campbell* You can't refuse a glass of wine, Byron!

*Byron* Thank you, but I never drink wine.

*Rogers* My friend, you make me unhappy. Whatever can you live on if you neither eat food nor drink wine?

*Byron (simply)* Crusts and mineral water.

*Rogers (puzzled)* Butler, see if you can find some crusts and mineral water for our guest of honour.

*butler* I regret to say, Sir, that neither is to be found in this house.

*Rogers* That means a disaster. For the first time ever we have a guest whom we can't serve according to his wishes. I am really sorry about this, my friend Lord Byron. Is there nothing else you could deign to accept?

*Byron (says nothing)*

*Butler* I beg your pardon, Sir, but when the kitchen maid is sick she usually mashes a potato in some vinegar.

Rogers           What say you to that, Byron?  
 Byron            It sounds like something new that could be tested.  
 Rogers           Butler, serve Lord Byron a mashed potato with vinegar.  
 Butler            Yes, Sir. *(leaves)*  
 Moore            Your habits, Byron, defy all description. I thought the most inveterate calvinists of Scotland at least still drank whisky.  
 Byron *(seriously)* My mother is dead, Thomas.  
 Campbell        Yes, if she was a calvinist and used your habits, Byron, that is surely what she died of or got deranged of.  
 Rogers *(alarmed)* Thomas Campbell!  
 Byron            That's not what drove her mad, Thomas Campbell. What drove her mad was me, her son.  
 Campbell        However did you succeed in that, the soundest of all?  
 Byron            I am afraid, Thomas Campbell, that my soundness can drive any woman mad.  
 Moore            That's something we have to test.  
*(The potato and vinegar is brought to Byron. The others watch him in amazement as he mashes the potato and drowns it in vinegar, which he actually starts to eat.)*  
                   Is life really that bitter for you, Byron?  
 Byron            I wish it were even more so.  
 Moore            Not in our company, George! You'll see after two weeks here in London! Then not one gambling house, not one whore and not one pub any more be safe against you.  
 Byron            Shall we bet?  
 Moore            A bet, then, instead of a duel. What about it?  
 Byron            We could try it. What do you suggest?  
 Moore            I bet that within half a year you will have tempted a lady of nobility out of her marriage.  
 Byron            I don't seduce ladies, Tom Moore. They seduce me.  
 Campbell        It's the same thing. Either the intention is with the man and the action with the woman or the other way around. If both are found in only one of the parties he fails, and it's an unhappy love affair.  
 Byron            Let's see, Tom Moore. I accept. Take me to any place you want and introduce me to any ladies, but if in March next year I don't have a love letter in my hand from a married lady of nobility, you have lost, while my reputation has won.  
 Moore *(delighted)* Done!  
*(He raises his glass. The four friends all join, Rogers, Moore and Campbell in wine, Byron, still dead serious as throughout the scene, in water.)*

#### Scene 4. The ball at Lady Heathcote, July 6th 1813.

Lady Melbourne    What's the latest news from the war between Lord Byron and Lady Caroline Lamb?  
 Lady Heathcote    All are trying to get them together just for enjoyment of the explosion.  
 Melbourne        Is peace then unthinkable?  
 Heathcote        Lord Byron never forgives, and Lady Caroline never leaves him in peace.

*Melbourne* Alas, these youngsters! Are then all efforts on the poor husband's side, our poor darling William Lamb, to achieve a reconciliation completely worthless?

*Heathcote* Lord Byron considers himself insulted by both, by him for asking him to talk to his wife and by her for persecuting him by her astonishing letters.

*Melbourne* But here is Lady Caroline Lamb now! What an extraordinary lovely girl she is! How could Lord Byron possibly resist her?

*Heathcote* He couldn't. She was his mistress for three months. The problem is he found another while she couldn't let him go.

*Melbourne* Lady Caroline! You are more beautiful than ever!

*Caroline* Thank you! But that certainly isn't due to that Lord Byron!

*Melbourne* But shouldn't you just leave him alone?

*Caroline* Never, as long as I can't find peace for him!

*Melbourne* But your remarkable letters to him are being discussed in all society!

*Caroline* Good! Then everyone can remind him of his rudeness!

*Melbourne* But my dear Lady Caroline!

*Caroline* Don't blame me if he one day commits suicide! That's what he deserves! He can't behave! He seduces just anyone and even his own sister!

*(All fall silent, Lord Byron has entered and stands in the middle of all.)*

*Heathcote (worried, to a butler)* Quick! A waltz! *(He runs to the conductor. A waltz is introduced.)* Dear Lady Caroline, you must open the ball!

*Caroline* But with whom should I dance? I only see club-foots around here.

*Byron* You can dance with any one of the present gentlemen, Lady Caroline. You dance better than all the others, and I shall enjoy watching you all evening constantly changing partners.

*Caroline* Thank you for not having to dance with you.

*Byron* Lady Caroline, you have trampled on me enough for the rest of my life.

*Lord Grey (to Sheridan)* Only a year ago they were the most handsome and loving couple in society. Even her husband encouraged their association.

*Sheridan* Why did it fail?

*Lord Grey* Lord Byron found another, and she committed the mistake of refusing to accept it. Since then the war has constantly been worked up on her side. She has even burnt his poems under formal pagan rituals with his picture.

*Sheridan* And how does he react?

*Grey (with a sigh)* He just tries to forget her in the arms of constantly new mistresses.

*Sheridan* That's no cure for him.

*Grey* No.

*Caroline (interrupts her dancing)* Excuse me, I don't feel very well. *(goes to the buffet)*

*Byron (happens to come to the same spot with another lady at his arm)* What a pity you left the dancing floor.

*Caroline* Why?

*Byron* No one danced like you.

*Caroline (grabs a knife)* Why then do you have another lady by your arm?

Byron Just carry on, dear lady, but if you desire to stage a Roman tragedy, turn your knife to your own heart and not to mine. You already succeeded in cutting mine to pieces.

Caroline Byron! Your word is my law! (*cuts herself recklessly and bleeds a lot but with no deeper wounds*)

Heathcote Scandal! Scandal!

Sheridan Stop her!

Lord Grey Take her knife!

Byron (*cynically*) It's just another of her tricks. (*turns away and leaves the scene seemingly indifferent*)

Melbourne Have some water, dear Lady Caroline!

Caroline (*furious and all bloody*) Why can't I just die! (*is given a glass of water which she throws at the floor, the glass breaking. Great commotion. All gather around Lady Caroline.*)

Lord Grey (*to Sheridan*) I can see her husband now as he learns about her new public suicidal effort. He will say: "What a pity she failed!"

Sheridan And Lord Byron?

Grey He will also regret that she failed. This scandal will unite the lover and the husband in a united front against the all too loving and seduced woman.

Sheridan But Byron claims he never seduced a woman.

Grey He doesn't have to. He gets them anyway.

Scene 5. Windsor, March 24th 1814.

Harriet Remember, Percy, you wanted it yourself.

Percy We simply have to, Harriet. It's against my will, but we have to do it.

Harriet I can't understand why we have to marry a second time. And you, who are against all legal matrimonies!

Percy We have no choice, Harriet. We have to live. We have to be able to feed our children. My father could withdraw my maintenance at any time, as he has done before, and just leave us there. I owe you the only security I can give you, which is my own noble name according to English law with its privileges.

Harriet I don't care about your name. All I want is you, but ever since we started legalizing our engagement I have only lost you more and more, and this formal church wedding seems to crown it all.

Shelley It's not just my fault. You know how shamelessly Hogg tried to seduce you, the wife of his best friend, and you were only flattered by his efforts.

Harriet He was only kind to me.

Shelley He was only kind to you! He broke my heart! And then your sister on top of that, whom I can never get rid of! Can't you manage without her?

Harriet She helps me to not get bored.

Shelley She helps you to not get bored by boring me! Am I then so boring that her professional flimsiness bores you less?

Harriet You know your high philosophy and great learning are too advanced for me.

Shelley Too advanced for you, you simple goose! You are only too lazy to study and learn! That's all!

Harriet You know I lack that interest and talent. We women exist to amuse ourselves and entertain our children and husbands.

*Shelley* Yes, you exist only for simple entertainment!  
*Harriet* Take it easy, dearest! Are we to get married or not?  
*Shelley* We have to. If I ever get a son I have to be able to give him my title legally. That's why we have to humiliate ourselves down on our knees to the Church of England.  
*Harriet* We do have a daughter whom you love. Can't that be enough for you? Do you have to be as all other masculine tyrants who keep torturing their wives in forcing them to give birth to a son?  
*Shelley* Don't start it all over again, Harriet. Let's go in and have it done with. I promise you it's the last time you have to marry me. (*They enter the church.*)

Scene 6. London, July 1814.

*Harriet* Here I am, dear husband. You asked me to London. Has anything happened?  
*Shelley* Too much has happened, Harriet. We have to separate.  
*Harriet* Separate? I don't understand...  
*Shelley* I will continue supporting you, but we can't live any longer as husband and wife.  
*Harriet* Have you gone mad? I expect your second child!  
*Shelley* I know, but I never really loved you. I only married you to help you.  
*Harriet* My God! He *is* mad!  
*Shelley* Yes, Harriet, I am mad, for I am in love, I can't help it. I didn't want it myself. But I am truly in love, and my feelings are answered.  
*Harriet* Who is she?  
*Shelley* Mary Wollstonecraft, daughter of my master William Godwin.  
*Harriet* Goodness gracious! That adventuress! That libertine! Daughter to that impostor, the false prophet, the seducer of your good heart, that atheist, that humbug, that demon!  
*Shelley* Harriet, don't get upset.  
*Harriet* You drive me mad! Are you abandoning me with your two children?  
*Shelley* I said I will continue supporting you.  
*Harriet* You tricked me away from my family and interrupted my education, and then you just leave me – for a slut!  
*Shelley* Harriet, compose yourself. It had to go this way. We never loved each other enough to make it last. We were really only but friends. Let's remain friends but relieve ourselves from all false burdens of lies and hypocrisy.  
*Harriet* Lies and hypocrisy, you deceiver! What will become of my life without you? You took everything away from me!  
*Shelley* Not a penny shall be taken away from you. On the contrary, you shall continue being supported forever, and my children are yours.  
*Harriet* You bereave your children of their father and make a widow of their mother!  
*Shelley* Don't dramatize, Harriet dear. That will only make it worse. My decision is irrevocable.  
*Harriet* Are you then going to seduce and abduct – that slut?  
*Shelley* We are going to France tomorrow.  
*Harriet* May you then never come back alive! (*bursts into tears and rushes out*)  
*Shelley (alone)* Thus I lost a wife – to gain another. But it feels like releasing me from a prison to find happiness, paradise, myself and a future. The world may forgive me, but I will never forgive myself. On the other hand, many will

never be able to forgive me, while I can impossibly feel any regret. I feel sorry for Harriet but love Mary – that’s the simple case. And I know, that my love for Mary is the only divine thing I ever felt. So, farewell, England, and welcome, France!

Scene 7. Seaham, November 1814.

*Annabella* Lord Byron, it has been a long time. (*gives her hand*)  
*Byron* (*kisses it*) Was it? Are we not always together in our dreams?  
*Annabella* That’s not the same thing as seeing each other in reality.  
*Byron* Have I not written daily to you?  
*Annabella* That’s also not the same as seeing each other in reality.  
*Byron* We are engaged, though, and that you can’t explain away.  
*Annabella* Yes, we are engaged, but since two months. That’s why it’s so strange that you waited so long before visiting me.  
*Byron* Family problems, you know.  
*Annabella* Yes, Lord Byron, I know, your sister.  
*Byron* Don’t look at me like that. Do I not have obligations to my sister?  
*Annabella* I know all about your sister, Lord Byron. It was not your duty to make her pregnant.  
*Byron* (*with a casual gesture*) It just happened that way.  
*Annabella* Does it always ‘just happen that way’ when a man makes a woman pregnant?  
*Byron* I can assure you that she had nothing against it.  
*Annabella* Are you dishonest, or is she unnatural?  
*Byron* I assure you that I am honest and she natural. I let her read that letter for herself in which you answered yes to my proposal, and she honestly meant it was the best and most beautiful letter she had ever read.  
*Annabella* Did she so quickly forget her child with you?  
*Byron* Annabella, let’s not discuss her any more. She is my sister and has nothing to do with my marriage. I love you, at least that’s my intention, and Augusta knows she has nothing more to expect from me except as a brother.  
*Annabella* Lord Byron, I have to be cautious with you, for I am well acquainted with your reputation. I have no illusions that you will ever be faithful to me. That’s why it’s the more important for me always to know where I stand. I know that you don’t love me. I demand no love of you, but if I am to be your wife I have to demand complete honesty. Perhaps I know more of you than you yourself, and at least I know much more than what you have told me. I am well informed, for example, that your primary interest when you sent me your second proposal was whether Lady Frances Webster would decide to deceive her husband or not.  
*Byron* Miss Millbanke, if you knew that, how could you encourage me?  
*Annabella* Lord Byron, you need a consort, and I was the only one to ever turn you down. A man whom no woman can resist must needs a woman who will resist him occasionally. I am the only woman of that kind in your life, am I not?  
*Byron* I never could forget your turning down my first proposal.  
*Annabella* That appears to have been your life’s first defeat.  
*Byron* To be honest, I did not expect it.  
*Annabella* Did you expect something else to your second proposal?  
*Byron* I didn’t know what to expect. But I had nothing to lose.

*Annabella* Except all your temporary mistresses, like for instance your sister.  
*Byron* They were all lost from the beginning.  
*Annabella* But not I?  
*Byron* No, not you.  
*Annabella* Lord Byron, we will be an uneasy couple, but unfortunately I have a certain inclination to sacrifice myself for you. Only that weakness of mine makes our union possible. I see no reason or cause for that weakness. Perhaps it's motherly feelings, perhaps it's pity, perhaps it's just a whim or caprice, but it isn't love. If you can accept that, I will be yours in spite of all your vices.  
*Byron* Annabella, never before has a woman fallen for me in such sobriety. My love for you is equally non-existent. Perhaps that's why we match each other so well.  
*Annabella* It's an interesting theory, Lord Byron.  
*Byron* You will always be the same Princess of Parallelograms.  
*Annabella* Yes, Lord Byron, and being so geometrically clear-minded, you are the one to have fallen for me, not the contrary. Always remember that, Lord Byron.  
*Byron* Yes, my dear betrothed Princess of Parallelograms.  
*(kisses her front. They leave in confident intimacy, her arm in his.)*

Act II scene 1. January 1816.

*Godwin* But Percy, you were like a son to me. How could you do this to me?  
*Shelley* Try to understand us, dear father-in-law.  
*Godwin* I am not your father-in-law!  
*Shelley* I am irrevocably married to Mary.  
*Godwin* You are irrevocably married to Harriet Westbrook, with whom you have children and whom you legally married twice! Since then you have seduced my daughter and made her your mistress! If you are naturally married to two women you are not morally married to any of them!  
*Shelley* I left Harriet Westbrook long ago. I live only for Mary.  
*Godwin* Yes, you left your legal consort, and when it suits you you will also leave Mary! Let her have as many children as Harriet, and then she is through! You might as well emigrate to Turkey where people like you are allowed to establish their harems!  
*Shelley* I intend to remain married to Mary for the rest of my life.  
*Godwin* Ha! You are only twenty-three! What do you know about life and the future at twenty-three? You and Mary and Harriet live only for the present and don't care about any future as long as you can enjoy yourselves at present! With your easy life of carelessness you prepare a future of only hells and misfortunes!  
*Shelley* You don't make it easier for us, although we gave you a wonderful grandson.  
*Godwin* All England regard you with contempt and disgust, Percy. There is nothing but shame on you. And what's worse, by calling yourself my foremost disciple and preaching my ideas you also shame me. Your own name may be inviolable for its nobility, but nothing can purge my name from all your compromising scandals. By the inviolability of your name you have sullied my name for all time!  
*Shelley* I am sure you will see the contrary.



*Godwin* With such a bad start it's impossible.  
*Shelley* Is it? At least we can talk again. A year ago that was impossible.  
*Godwin* Both your and my circumstances are a bit different today from a year ago.  
*Shelley* Yes, I know. I have become rich. I inherited my grandfather. I received his title. And you have become poor. Is that why you deigned to see me again?  
*Godwin* Not only. I wanted to see my grandson.  
*Shelley* At least you are human and natural.  
*Godwin* As a contrary to you. How could you write to Harriet Westbrook from Switzerland and ask her to come and live with you?  
*Shelley* I wanted to be liberal and tolerant.  
*Godwin* Do you know so little about women that you can't see how mortally you insult them?  
*Shelley* I only know idealism. I can only live with a woman who is equally idealistic like me. I gave Harriet the chance. If she had been as idealistic as me and Mary she would have accepted and arrived, and both Mary and I would have received her with open arms for good.  
*Godwin* Your idealism is only egoism. You only love yourself. You excuse your egoism by calling it idealism, and the idealism you demand of your women is that they must love you more than themselves. Harriet can never do that, for she is only a woman. Mary is more than just a woman, so she could actually bear with you more than ordinary people can. But the only sensible thing for you to do is still to leave Mary and go on living with Harriet. That's the unanimous verdict of the whole English society. If you don't accept it, you will never be accepted in your own country ever again, and you might as well leave it for good. I give it to you in full honesty.  
*Shelley* I understand that you mean it, and I understand that England means it. But I can't leave Mary. Harriet may come to me if she wants to, but I'll never leave Mary.  
*Godwin (offers his hand)* Good-bye then, my son, and good luck.  
*Shelley (accepts it readily)* Thank you, father-in-law.  
*Godwin* Thanks for the money.  
*Shelley* You will get more whenever you want and as much as you want.  
*Godwin* I will miss you.  
*Shelley* Do you think it will be inexorable for us to leave England?  
*Godwin* The longer you stay, the more impossible your situation will become, and the more unavoidable will be your departure.  
*Shelley* We'll see. I intend to stay on as long as possible.  
*Godwin* At least you have courage. I only wish your health was as invincible as your courage.

Scene 2. April 8th 1816. The ball at Lady Jersey.

*A lady* They say Lord Byron is invited with his sister.  
*Another* How dares Lady Jersey challenge all society?  
*Lady 1* She wants to show tolerance.  
*Lady 2* An invitation to Lord Byron in these days is an invitation to hell. But who invites him with his sister casts herself into hell.  
*Lady 1* Poor lady Jersey!  
*Lady 2* It's obvious she doesn't know what she is doing.

*Lady Melbourne* You should rather pity Lord Byron. You can't imagine what she has been through!

*Lady 1* Is it true they are divorced?

*Melbourne* She never abandoned him no matter how brutally he treated her. When Lord Byron had his sister, that is his mistress, living with them too long, Lady Byron finally became ill and almost lost her mind. Fortunately Lord Byron lost his mind instead and deserted her, to her good fortune.

*Lady 2* And he is now living with his sister?

*Melbourne* Yes, but only when it suits him.

*Lady 1* And then Lady Jersey invites him here!

*Melbourne* She is the only one in London who dares to invite him. But that she dared to invite him together with his sister is beyond me.

*A servant (announcing)* Lord Byron and Lady Augusta Leigh.

*(enter Lord Byron with his sister Augusta)*

*lady 2* They are together!

*Melbourne (aside)* Enter supreme vice and supreme presumption, the total crime completely ignoring its own guilt and showing off naked in public in unnatural recklessness: incestuous nobility arm in arm with his ravished sister, who long since already bore him a child. If you don't know about it you could take them for any innocent and ordinary couple. When vice is total it carries the most outrageous mask of shamelessness: a look of innocence. *(leaves the room)*

*Augusta (noticing the guests are leaving the room)* The other guests are leaving for our sake.

*Byron* They are only pusillanimous. Let the cowards leave, and let the decent stay. We are here to amuse ourselves and not to pay any attention to the base insults of lower people. *(More and more leave the room.)*

*Lady 1 (to lady 2)* Come, my good countess, let us leave. *(They leave.)*

*Byron* Damned society! What kind of a lousy mob are you? Have you never seen a man before who dares to stand for what he is?

*Augusta* Don't make matters worse, dear brother.

*Byron* I am not making it worse. It's all these intolerant philistine snobs who create a scandal by impertinently demonstrate against a club-footed guest having accepted a formal invitation with his lady!

*Lady Elphinstone* How is your dear wife, my lord Byron?

*Byron* Lady Elphinstone, you are the only one here this evening who dares to speak with me.

*Augusta* Annabella Byron is in perfect good health, Lady Elphinstone. I look after her as if she was my dear sister.

*Elphinstone* She is getting better, then?

*Byron* I assure you, mylady, that she is in far better health than I.

*Lady Jersey (joining them; only she and Lady Elphinstone remain among the others.)*

Lord Byron, my deep apology for the attitude of my guests against you, which certainly was not intended. I had no idea that you could be exposed to such unpleasantness.

*Byron* Tell me the truth: if you had been aware of it you would never have invited me and least of all with my sister.

*Jersey* Don't be unfair. I thought better of society to be more tolerant. I gave them a chance to show you some respect, but they preferred to keep themselves buried in their prejudicial pettiness.

*Byron* Your attitude recommends you, mylady, no matter how much all England here has put itself to shame.

*Augusta* It's my fault. I should have declined.  
*Byron* I made you come with me. You didn't want to and felt ashamed in your timidity, but we did right in coming both. Now we have witnessed what all England is good for. They are all just vain philistines and conceited petty self-sufficient ignorants, the whole nation!  
*Elphinstone* Please don't say so, Lord Byron.  
*Byron* But it's true! What are we poets here for if not to state what no one else dares to stand for: the truth? I spit at your England, Lady Elphinstone, for this evening having spit in the face of me and my sister, who is dearest to me in the whole world and my only true friend. I can bear insults for my monstrous club-foot, but I can never tolerate insults against anyone I love even if she is my sister! (*leaves promptly with his sister*)  
*Jersey* Lord Byron!  
*Elphinstone* Don't call them back. They have left. It's best what happens. The scandal is enough as it is. You will never be able to avoid hearing about your ball this evening, Lady Jersey.  
*Jersey* Why?  
*Elphinstone* He would not be so terrible if he wasn't open and bragged about it. He is the only one in our new order of society of hypocrisy and false modesty who refuses to humble himself to the lie and take on any mask to obscure the truth. He is his own truth and is proud of it, even though his own truth is so terrible.  
*Jersey* I have heard it told that his mother was insane.  
*Elphinstone* Most members of his family are more than insane.  
*Jersey* I think it would be best for him to leave England.  
*Elphinstone* And for England to manage without him.

Act III scene 1. An evening in Geneva, summer 1816.

*Byron* We never discussed England, Percy.  
*Shelley* We both had reasons enough to avoid that subject.  
*Byron* Don't you miss her at all?  
*Shelley* In our position, Byron, with our intellectual capacity, any subject would be more interesting than England.  
*Byron* Do you speak of hate or scorn?  
*Shelley* My feelings for England are non-existent. So it's only disdain.  
*Byron* For me it is mingled with hate, fear, wrath and veneration.  
*Shelley* Still you have even less reason to miss her than I. You were cast out. I renounced it freely.  
*Byron* How I admire your arrogant impertinence, Percy. I have no talent myself for such a superiority.  
*Shelley* You are more romantic and warm while my detachment needs to keep cool.  
*Byron* Your idealism is so highly developed. That's why you have to be so critical. I can only feel warmth, never coolness. When my warmth is consumed I perish, but your cold sobriety could take you anywhere. It wouldn't surprise me if you became a new Shakespeare. I can myself never become more than a Christopher Marlowe.  
*Shelley* Marlowe was the more talented of the two.  
*Byron* But he consumed himself faster.  
*Shelley* I'll bet that I die before you, Byron.

*Mary* Percy! You mustn't speak like that!

*Shelley* But if it's true? Shall we make a bet, George?

*Byron* What's the winner's prize?

*Shelley* The title of the greatest English poet after Shakespeare.

*Byron* I can never live up to it.

*Shelley* Then you must die before me.

*Mary* Your cynicisms are outrageous.

*Shelley* It's not cynicism, Mary. It's cold calculation.

*Mary* You speculate in your own deaths as if you could control it.

*Shelley* But isn't that what the whole world is doing today? Man has even lately begun to claim supremacy over nature. Look at that Doctor Darwin, for example. He thinks he could produce children in test-tubes and create life out of nothing just like God.

*Byron* It's true. Such experiments have been ventured. Humanity has embarked on a dangerous path which is nothing but the establishment of hubris. Just look at that hideous new fashion of business, which everyone is staking their fortunes on since it gives such atrocious profits, called industrialism. By factories and machines man has created a hell on earth more terrible and inhuman than what even Dante could imagine. It's a capitalistic intoxication which all limited and tasteless people are obsessed with while all moderate and aesthetic idealists with time will risk becoming its victims.

*Shelley* Yes, it's a trust in over-optimism concerning the future completely without substance rushing blindly off the ground straight into an abyss which might devour the greater part of humanity, like some monstrous world war.

*Mary* But we must have a future for our children. How can you live for a future without being an optimist?

*Shelley* Optimism by all means, but idealism is more important. Without fundamental idealism and moral critical distinction all humanity would be lost.

*Byron* You dare speak of morals, Shelley, with your two wives!

*Shelley* I ventured on my marriage with Harriet for idealistic reasons. I didn't believe in love for my own sake at that time yet. But then I met Mary and fell in love with her. That was my destiny. But I will never abandon Harriet with my support.

*Byron* And how do you morally defend your consistent atheism?

*Shelley* With such intensity have we associated bringing you so close to me, and yet you don't know me at all? Mary, I seem to be obliged to yet again defend my moral atheism to this ignorant Englishman Lord Byron.

*Byron* I only posed a simple question, Percy. Can't you give a simple answer? The only thing I can't understand is how you can call yourself moral and at the same time deny the very basis for all morals.

*Shelley* I don't deny the original basis for all morals. I only accuse the administrators of this original moral power of abuse and corruption. God is an idea of eternity that never can be put out and which no life can continue without, but mark me well: this ultimate original power of life is just an idea. He is not a personal being who gets angry punishing villains and creating hells, casting down angels into it and chaining a Prometheus. God is eternally practically inactive but always living while only as an inextinguishable power of an idea. He is the idealism of eternity that nothing can impede.

*Byron* But don't you think it could be rather useful with an all-powerful God who could intervene in history when needed and for example

run tyrants down the ditch, like through our beloved French revolution? Don't you think we could need a personal and all-powerful God in the future, when your hated industrialism and capitalism runs amuck destroying all earth like in the days of Noah, and perhaps we could do with some civilisation annihilations? I consider the need of an angry God who can react as vital, and that humanity will not be able to manage without such a power.

*Shelley* But then you already give God a part to play, and then you already bereave him of his original identity, and thus you cause the whole concept of God to derail from the start. He is only God as long as he is indefinable and absolutely spiritual. You only recognize God in the Bible as long as he leads the people of Israel forward into history, as long as he has a constructive and idealistic effect. After the fall of Solomon it's impossible to recognize God any more when all Israel goes to perdition. Likewise we only recognize anything divine in the Greek gods according to Homer, since with Homer they are always constructive, idealistic and human, especially Apollo. In the later Greek poets the gods turn destructive and self-destructive. Constructive idealism is the only thing in which we can always recognize something divine. All destruction and selfish dictatorialness must be denounced as absolutely incompatible with God forever.

*Byron* So you want to reform all world religions and the whole world.

*Shelley* Gladly, if possible.

*Byron* Then you are indeed a new Prometheus. What do you think of me then? Is there any hope for the fallen Lucifer?

*Shelley* You certainly are an angel, but are you fallen, and are you a Lucifer?

*Byron* I took over the throne from Walter Scott just to be thrown over from its height down into a bitter exile without end. Am I then not a fallen Lucifer? Especially considering how I fell – my obvious incest, my own sister, whom I made pregnant and refused to give up although I later married legally?

*Shelley* Your marriage was nothing but a bad joke on your side, and your sister was only your half-sister. Well, you should have left her in peace and only retained her as a good friend, and you should not have married someone you did not love, but what's done is done, and the worst thing you can do about it is to regret it.

*Byron* I feel shame and guilt from which I can never be free.

*Shelley* Then you are digging your own grave.

*Byron* There we are again, at the brink of the grave. My best friend told me, that he felt my wedding was like following me to my grave. He was right. It became my grave.

*Shelley* You only wallow in your own misery and misfortune in a kind of masochistic sadism.

*Byron* Is there any cure for that?

*Shelley* Relieve yourself. Write horrible tragedies. Use your misery constructively. Let out the tempests of your soul into qualified poetry. In art everything can be used constructively.

*Byron* I have a diabolical suggestion. We both have our dark sides. Let's see who can produce the worst romance of horrors.

*Shelley* The worst one is already written.

*Byron* Which one?

*Shelley* Matthew Lewis and his masterpiece "The Monk".

*Byron* Let's take him into our contest and try to surpass him.

*Shelley* Reality can not be surpassed, and the events and scandals of "the Monk" have been documented in reality.

*Byron* Are you afraid to compete?  
*Shelley* I could never compete with you, George. The whole world is your audience, while I have none except for Mary here. The worst horror tales that I could produce would be memories from my childhood. And you know that I only appreciate rhyme and verse. Who can manufacture horror tales with beauty as a means?  
*Mary* May I join your competition?  
*Shelley* Of course! Do you have any good ideas, Mary?  
*Mary* All your topics of discussion, the derailment of humanity and its stillborn scientific hubris, Doctor Darwin's abominable experiment, and the unsurpassable realism of the human reality.  
*Shelley* That sounds promising, Mary. You are better at prose than anyone of us. George and I are only good for idle beautifying poems.  
*Mary* I can never vie with your beauty.  
*Shelley* Then you can surpass us in the contrary.  
*Mary* Maybe. Your actual discussions are sometimes mildly speaking just revolting.

Scene 2. Swansea, October 1816.

*Shelley* But how could she do such a thing? I can't understand it.  
*Leigh Hunt* Compose yourself, my friend. She was just not well.  
*Shelley* She was well indeed! There was nothing wrong with her! She was only a bit downcast. Anyone can get depressed. But what desperation would drive you to take your own life! I had a letter from her, which alarmed me, why I came here with speed, but her cry for help was just a hint at her utter despair. I understand that now. Suicidal despair is an abyss so deep that it never can be fathomed by words, and the sorrow it leaves behind with the survivors is a wound so deep that it never can be healed and its pain never be expressed. Poor Mary! How could I possibly tell her about this? She was so certain that I could help and comfort her sister.  
*Leigh* There is nothing you can do, Percy. No one is to blame for anyone's suicide except the suicide himself, and he if anyone knows what he is doing. He takes with him a secret into his grave which no survivor can unlock, why they do best in not even trying to understand it or even ponder it. Forget your poor Fanny and let her rest in peace. That's all you can do for her now.  
*Shelley* But how can we live on when one of our closest kin has killed herself? How can we manage, Leigh, who are such an expert comforter. Tell me, if you can! But you can't. You know as well as I that suicide is inherited from the dead to the living, that he who commits suicide thereby plants the irrevocable suicidal thought with the survivors, and sooner or later, when the others least of all expect it, someone of the survivors, and ususally the one you least expected it from, commits suicide again, and thus this supreme illness of the soul constantly marches on without ever dying out. No illness is more slow and certain, and no one can imagine its outbreak until the victim is already dead. If there is a God who is the supreme power itself and consequently also the supreme evil, then his most efficient and diabolical weapon against humanity is the gnawing thought of suicide, the spiritual self-destruction, the unexpected and irretrievable suicide, which more people are

dying of every year. No illness is so terrible, since no pain is so unendurable as the supreme pain of the soul which is the prelude to every suicide.

*Leigh* Stop thinking of that now, Percy. Life goes on, and you have many to live for. Your wife is still there, you still have your children, and even your legal wife is still there.

*Shelley* Not for me, Leigh. She has gone down too deep. She tried to find comfort with another lover, a colonel who deserted her, and after that she went as well as into prostitution. Everything is running out of my hands like water and beyond my control. I can't give Harriet any comfort any more or anything. I can't feel for her or understand her any more.

*Leigh* The more important for you to care for her and your children. If she falls they must not fall with her.

*Shelley* You are right, Leigh. It's my duty to live for my children, but it's also my only joy. For I know now that Fanny's suicide has taken root into my soul for good, so that I shall never myself get rid of recurring thoughts of suicide.

*Leigh* Let then your children cure them.

*Shelley* I will try, Leigh, I will try.

### Scene 3. London, December 1816.

*Shelley* I have been searching for her now for three weeks. Haven't you neither found any trace of her?

*Leigh* We have done all that we could, and you have done most of all. Perhaps she has vanished abroad. That might have been her happiest option.

*Shelley* Was she disowned by her father, or did she desert him herself?

*Leigh* It was mutual.

*Shelley* Poor Harriet!

*Leigh* Forget about her, Percy. You have Mary and your future children with her to live for. She is a better vessel than poor Harriet, who never really knew what she was doing.

*Shelley* You speak of her as if she was dead.

*Leigh* It would be better for you, Percy, if she was, for she was never worth your responsibility for her. She clung to you and refused to let you go just to have you for an excuse for her own disharmonic and flippant nature.

*Shelley* Your argument is cynical.

*Leigh* Forgive me, but I can't stand silent and witness your health deteriorate by your worries about disorderly women with nothing but nonsense in their heads.

*Shelley* Thanks for your concern, Leigh, but I will never get over my sorrow for Fanny, and my responsibility for Harriet remains total forever.

*Leigh* You are too good for this world, Percy.

*Shelley* Lord Byron claimed the opposite. He called me a seducer of humanity.

*Leigh* He only talked unconsciously about himself. You gave him much, but he took much away from you.

*Shelley* He never succeeded in contaminating me with his morbid pessimism.

*Leigh* And he took advantage and misused your optimism. He inspired you to nothing, but your influence he abused in the creation of such a human monster as Manfred.

*Shelley* It's his greatest poem.

*Leigh* Maybe, but it is not sound. He doesn't care about his wife, his sister and the now pregnant Claire Clairmont, whom he treats as lightly as you take on your responsibility for light wenches like Fanny and Harriet more than seriously. They say he has many new mistresses in Venice now, whom he constantly changes for more.

*Shelley* But he never wrote better poems.

*Leigh* Do you suggest, Percy Bysshe Shelley, that creative art is dependent on sexual release?

*Shelley* No, but it is dependent on love.

*Leigh* Then it's not dependent on your feeling of guilt for Fanny and Harriet.

*Shelley* My love includes all, Leigh, and especially those most unhappy.

*Leigh* That's how you differ from Lord Byron, who only loves willing sacrificial meat.

*Shelley* His women never complained of him.

*Leigh* They never loved him either. They only desired him. You are loved, Percy, and not by Harriet or Fanny but only by Mary. She is your only responsibility.

*Shelley (smiling sadly)* Unfortunately she has no monopoly on my responsibility.

*Godwin (entering dead serious)* Good evening, gentlemen.

*Shelley (rises)* You have bad news, father. I can see it.

*Godwin* The worst possible.

*Leigh* Let's hear it.

*Godwin* Prepare yourselves, my friends, for a deep shock, and especially you, my son. Harriet has been found.

*Shelley* Well, at last!

*Godwin* Dead, drowned in the Serpentine in Hyde Park.

*(silence)*

It was obviously suicide. She was seven months pregnant.

*(silence)*

*Leigh (to Shelley)* Take care, my friend.

*Shelley (sits, paralysed)* It – can't be true.

*Godwin* She dug her own grave, Shelley. She rebelled against her home, parents and safety. She used you for her own purposes. You never saw her through. She was nothing.

*Shelley (rising)* Say nothing against her!

*Godwin* I tell you the truth. When you found Mary, Harriet could have returned to her father. Her home was open to her, she had not been compromised, since you still supported her she was still respectable as your only legal wife, no one accused you or her, but she chose herself to elope again with a common colonel, who deserted her after having made her pregnant. She preferred death by her own hand to dishonour, and that was maybe her life's only wise decision.

*Shelley* It was I who seduced her!

*Godwin* Don't accuse yourself. Now you can marry Mary.

*Leigh* You have more than well deserved each other by now and far better than you ever deserved Harriet or she you.

*Godwin* Well said, Leigh Hunt.

*Shelley* But what will now become of Harriet's and my children?

*Godwin* They are yours. No one can take them away from you. You have only to go to Warwick and collect them with the priest they lived with for the last year.



*Shelley* I will do so, and I will marry Mary at once.  
*Leigh* At last you are talking sense.  
*Godwin* I am with you, Shelley, more than ever. I had difficulty in getting over your abducting Mary, but in your trials I will always stand by you, especially now, when all England probably will accuse you of the after all very natural death of Harriet.

Scene 4. The Chancery case, London, February 1817.

*Lord Eldon* We have heard the argument of the prosecutor and his witnesses, the intensive pleadings of the Westbrook family to deny Percy B. Shelley his right to his children, and we have also heard the defense, which more has been of feelings expressed than of sensible arguments. We cannot be inhuman, though. No human being can be so inhuman as to forcibly separate a father from his two children if this father is proved to love them, which Percy B. Shelley indeed has convinced us that he does. At the same time there is undeniable evidence of the father's immoral behaviour. He has failed the mother of his children to abscond abroad with another woman, which has been the cause of the mother declining into misery to finally end up in suicide in the heart of London to the gaping amazement of all England. These facts we cannot overlook, and Harriet Westbrook's family's strong argument as to the impropriety of Percy B. Shelley as a father must by these undeniable circumstances be underlined by these naked facts.

The court has decided on a compromise. The care of the children is on the recommendation of the father himself entrusted with Doctor and Mrs. Hume. Thus both the father and the Westbrook family are relieved of the care of the children while both parties are allowed to visit them by agreement with Doctor and Mrs. Hume.

*Old Westbrook* The most important thing is that the atheist and murderer of his wife may not have a hand in their education.

*Shelley (in despair)* It is not fair! You don't know what you are doing! You are tearing the heart out of my body! You turn my children fatherless!

*Lord Eldon* Order! The case is closed, and the sentence is mild, we have met the demands of both parties half way, and both parties ought to be grateful. The court adjourns. (*ends the proceedings and rises to dissolve the court.*)

*Shelley* To bereave a father of his children is far more cruel than to bereave a husband of his wife.

*Old Westbrook* You Antichrist! If only my grandchildren never had to see their mother's murderer again!

*Shelley* I am not guilty of what you accuse me of, Sir.

*Westbrook* What insolence! The atheist seduces my daughter and causes her death and then dares to play an act of innocence to humanity! I would like to wring your neck and have you hanged, Sir!

*Shelley (to Leigh Hunt)* My friend, they have torn my liver and kidneys and heart out of my body and tell me I got away cheaply. How can I go on living in a world of such human cruelty and injustice?

*Leigh* You just have to, Shelley. It's people like you that this inhuman and cruel humanity needs.

*Shelley* I have nothing more to give to such a humanity, Leigh, since by taking away my children from me they have taken all.

*Leigh* Still you have love left to give. You are nowadays married to Mary Shelley, as a reminder.  
*Shelley* All England condemns my marriage twenty days after the death of my first wife.  
*Leigh* Let the world condemn you as much as they want, Percy, as long as you continue to love them.  
*Shelley* I know now what love really is, Leigh.  
*Leigh* Well, what is it?  
*Shelley* It's naught but suffering.

Scene 5. London, April 1817.

*Leigh* I have a guest with me tonight whom I long wanted to present to you, the brilliant young poet, that I so often spoke to you about.  
*Shelley* You mean that apothecary?  
*Leigh* He achieved more than both you and Byron: he has a profession. But he also sacrificed it for poetry. John Keats, meet my good friend Percy B. Shelley.  
*(Shelley and Keats meet and shake hands.)*  
*Keats* So this is the world reformer of our new age.  
*Shelley* I read your poems in Leigh Hunt's literary magazine. I admire you.  
*Keats* I am afraid I can't say the same about you.  
*Shelley (smiles)* Am I that bad?  
*Keats* No, you are too good. You transcend the borders of literature. You use poetry as an instrument for your sermons. Then I prefer Lord Byron, who only writes romantic poetry.  
*Shelley* I prefer a small poem by you to everything Byron has written.  
*Leigh* Don't spoil him, Shelley. He is already drunk by all his evening suppers in high literary society. Since he abandoned medicine he has almost become unbearable.  
*Keats* Is it that bad, Mr. Hunt?  
*Leigh (smiles)* It could be, if you don't watch out, Mr. Keats. Learn from young Percy here. He writes like a god but never had any literary success, while he suffered all possible human adversities.  
*Keats* I heard about the tragic departure of your wife, Mr. Shelley, and I share your sorrow.  
*Shelley* I didn't love her while I do love my present wife Mary.  
*Keats* But surely you loved your children?  
*Shelley* All too much, Mr. Keats, all too much. That's why they were taken away from me.  
*Keats* I am sorry.  
*Shelley* But why did you abandon your profession? At least it would have saved you all your problems of support.  
*Keats* Why did Solomon turn a preacher? Why did Dante leave politics? Why did Shakespeare leave the stage? Why did not Napoleon succeed? Because the world and humanity is all vanity. I stopped operating in the middle of an operation, as I realized I was as worthless a doctor to humanity as Augustus organized his Roman Empire in vain. It went under anyway, and my patients had to die anyway.  
*Shelley* Well spoken, poet, but you can't live on your writing alone.

Keats I admit my position is much more precarious than yours, my baronet, who inherited an inexhaustible fortune. But I can't do anything but write. That's how simple it is.

Shelley I envy you, dear colleague.

Keats Do you, who are rich, envy my poverty?

Shelley I envy you your natural capacity to see through all the universe and express yourself and your superior wisdom with clarity in perfect poetry. In view of such a talent wealth and poverty are insignificant details.

Keats Well, well, you are not that bad yourself.

Shelley Lord Byron and I made a bargain last summer which one of us would become a new Shakespeare. None of us is worthy to succeed him, for we are both too rich and self-satisfied, but you will surpass us both.

Keats We'll see.

Shelley How old are you, Mr. Keats?

Keats Twenty-one.

Shelley Shakespeare and Marlowe were already in full action at that age. You had better get going while you are still young.

Keats You talk as if you yourself were too old.

Shelley I am too old in my soul, Mr. Keats, to ever more be able to write such youthful poetry as you and Lord Byron.

Keats You are not much older than me.

Shelley Three years.

Keats Then I think we both still will have time to write plenty.

Shelley I think we could learn from each other a great deal. What about a competition?

Keats What do you suggest?

Shelley I suggest we both set down to write a poem of, let's say about 4000 lines within six months. When we are ready we can compare with each other.

Keats I call that a challenge. I accept it gladly. I need something to spur me to some discipline. It's all too easy to live at large in London.

Shelley Agreed then?

Keats Yes. (*They shake hands.*) But there is one thing I can't agree with you on.

Shelley What?

Keats You talk about successors to Marlowe and Shakespeare. I don't care about them but am satisfied if I somehow can live up to the level of Edmund Spenser, the purest poet England has seen.

Shelley I call that pretentious.

Keats You should rather call it idealism, and it surprises me that you don't recognize it as idealism, being an idealist yourself. (*leaves*)

Leigh Well, what do you think about him?

Shelley I like him very much. I never want to lose him out of sight. I think he is the very soul of English poetry today. And he is completely right about Edmund Spenser. It's Spenser who creates English poetry. Then follows Marlowe and Shakespeare debasing it by dramatic exaggerations. There has never been a purity in English poetry of the like I now see in Keats. We have to support him, Leigh. No vampires or parasites must ruin him by their ignorance.

Leigh It's not easy to follow him up as he takes a road entirely of his own.

Shelley That's his privilege and right, but we have the right to help him with what we can.

Leigh You are noble, Percy.

*Shelley* No, I only try to act naturally according to obvious needs.  
*Leigh* Few people do in these days.  
*Shelley* The more important then for us, who see through the present unnaturalness of man, to at least try to act naturally ourselves. This John Keats is already more than like a brother to me, and I intend to take care of him.  
*Leigh* That's your funeral. (*leaves*)  
*Shelley* Whatever does he mean?

Scene 6. London, spring 1818.

*Leigh* Well, Percy, our friend Keats seems to have won your competition.  
*Shelley* I admit it gladly.  
*Leigh* You are almost the only one in England to recognize his talent.  
*Shelley* Lockhart's attack on Keats is not only outrageous but even inhuman.  
*Leigh* Unfortunately he is not alone. Have you read the "Quarterly" review?  
*Shelley* No. Could it be worse than Lockhart's blows under the belt?  
*Leigh* It's much worse. According to our most respected literary magazine, John Keats' long poem is pure balderdash written in cockney. But it's evident from the article that the most irritating thing about Keats is that he is not of noble birth.  
*Shelley* Do you suggest that they attack him for his lack of noble blood?  
*Leigh* Precisely.  
*Shelley* That reveals something about England and its damned society. It's the old story over again. At school I was constantly harassed for being the smallest and most vulnerable. In the world of literature Keats is now being executed only because he has no relatives in such a position that they could help and protect him. We live in a society of established bullies, who sacrifice all nobler talents to confirm their complacent vulgarity and tastelessness, which sooner or later must confess its own barbarity.  
*Leigh* You were not entirely uncritical against Keats' long poem yourself.  
*Shelley* That's to be admitted. I found it too long and tedious. But it has sporadic qualities belonging to the finest writ in our English language since Edmund Spenser's time. In a way Keats is a revolutionary. In his poetic art he crosses over all classicism and puritanism, he completely ignores Wordsworth, Pope and Milton to instead connect immediately to Spenser and Shakespeare to continue where they left off. He if anyone can lead a true renaissance of our literature.  
*Leigh* That's not what the leading literary critics think.  
*Shelley* Those parasites don't understand anything. They can't comprehend Keats' genius, they resist its originality just because it's too alien for them and can't tolerate what they fail to understand, the short-minded blinded dilettantes who can't even see that they are blind, and that's why they run him down out of pure ignorance and stupidity. He is a virgin who dares to demonstrate his complete innocence. The ravishers of literature can't accept that. I just hope Keats will not mind too much.

Scene 7. Venice, spring 1818.

*Servant* A lady wants you, Madame.  
*Margherita Cogni* Who is she?  
*Servant* I am afraid she is a lady of rank.  
*Cogni* Then it must be Marianna Segati. Well, I will receive her. Let her in.  
(*The servant admits Marianna Segati.*)  
I know you. You are Marianna Segati.  
*Segati* And who are you? A simple street hussy who stole my English lord!  
*Cogni* It's not my fault that he preferred me to you.  
*Segati* Just you wait, you lousy streetwalker!  
*Cogni* Mylady, you are mistaken if you believe that you own him. You are not his wife, and I am not his wife. You are his mistress, and I am his mistress. Your husband is deceived, and so is mine. Try to see things as they are.  
*Segati* He will betray you with others, like he betrayed me with you!  
*Cogni* That's his own affair in that case. When he leaves me I have only to retire. I think we both are lucky to have husbands who are not overly jealous.  
*Segati* Accursed perfidious harlot! (*leaves in fury and tears*)  
*Cogni* She has lost and is aware of it. She will not trouble me any more.  
(*enter Byron*)  
*Byron* Who was it, my dove?  
*Cogni* A friend.  
*Byron* It sounded more like a quarrel.  
*Cogni* We only concluded a difference of mind.  
*Byron* Good. I just received a letter from England. It's that haughty dandy Shelley who has written. He says that my earlier associate Claire Clairmont has given birth to a daughter of mine, whom he wants me to come to England to take care of, as if I hadn't bastards enough already!  
*Cogni* What is there for you in England?  
*Byron* Nothing.  
*Cogni* If Shelley wants you to take care of your daughter, signor Shelley had better come here to deliver her first.  
*Byron* *Appunto!* That's exactly my own thought. I have no intention to do anything to get the girl down here. – He also writes about a new English poet, whose latest poem he includes. It's a tiresome over-strained poem called "Endymion" by a certain poor physician called John Keats. I never read anything more pretentious, high-brow and meaningless. I feel like returning the boisterous gastonnade.  
*Cogni* Do so, *caro*, and let signor Keats know there is no poet in the world except you.  
*Byron* No, I can't do that. Shelley shall know of my depreciation of the nosy Mr. Keats' presumptuous nonentity, but I will never willingly get into contact with a poet who isn't even of noble blood. I am the number one poet in the world, but I don't get better any more.  
*Cogni* I prefer you as a human being and lover to a poet.  
*Byron* Thank you. So do I. (*They accomodate themselves in the divan.*)

Scene 8. London, spring 1818.

*George Keats* Brother, I have decided to discontinue my business and emigrate to America.

*John Keats* Is that wise?

*George* I hope so.

*John* But you are just married, and your tea enterprise has never been more profitable, and then you decide to uproot yourself completely. How could that be wise? You are established! You are well off! What's this folly that has flown into you?

*George* It's the climate, John.

*John* What do you mean?

*George* I hope the climate is better in America. It's not good for me here.

*John* I still don't understand what you mean.

*George* Think of our small brother Tom.

*John* You mean...

*George* Yes.

*John* George! It mustn't be true! Not you also!

*George* I hope to get away. But in London with this rough dampness of a hostile climate I would never make it.

*John* Have the doctors diagnosed tubercles?

*George* I have the first symptoms. Tom didn't think he had it either until he got really ill. I intend to escape the illness before it breaks out.

*John* You let me down. First father, then mother, then Tom falls ill, and then you desert me. How can you?

*George* I must think of my wife and our eventual children. At least I want to give her a good start in America. But you will manage. You are the only one of us to be completely healthy.

*John* So far.

*George* You have a will out of this world. I believe you will make it as long as your will is strong enough.

*John* Maybe.

*George* Something depresses you.

*John* Only a broken heart.

*George* Have you fallen in love?

*John* No, it's worse than that.

*George* Tell me.

*John* My great poem "Endymion" has been publicly slaughtered in the papers. No one can take it. Even Lord Byron in Italy has expressed himself derogatingly about me.

*George* You and your poet dreams. You should have carried on as a doctor. What's that to you? It's only paper!

*John* I laid down my entire life and soul in that poem.

*George* Fiddlesticks. You'll get over it. You can easily write new poems and forget a failure. Greater poets than you have failed in their firstlings.

*John* You don't understand. "Endymion" is good. I know it. But my contemporaries have executed me without right only for having produced something beautiful.

*George* Don't let your poetic vanity carry you away.

*John* It's not vanity. It's my human value, my honesty and my striving for beauty that has been trampled down.

*George (takes his arm)* You are just over-sensitive. You always were. Forget "Endymion" and write something better.

*John* That's easy to say. It's like telling the widow: "Forget your husband and marry a better one." But if the widow is honest she will never forget her husband and will not remarry. Unfortunately I am honest.

*George* The risk is you are too honest for your own good. You must get over it.

*John* If I do you will not see it, for you are going away, and neither will Tom, for he is about to die. Father was 30 when he died, mother was 36 and Tom will perhaps not even be twenty. I am already executed at twenty-two, nipped in the bud by the winter of man's spiritual blindness. How do you think I could get over such fatal dark shadows in my loneliness?

*George* You will find yourself a good wife, and then you will have better thoughts.

*John* You are encouraging but not convincing.

*George* We have to live, John, even if God is out to get our lives.

*John* That's more convincing. In my poetry I will survive God.

*George* Here's your vanity again.

*John* If I am to survive, I have to be vain.

*George* Survive, but without hubris.

*John* It's easy to be humble when things are working out but impossible to be humble in adversity.

*George* You have many good friends.

*John* Have I? Not Lord Byron. The old fogey Wordsworth, who never can stand any other poet than himself any more? The domineering allpowerful Shelley, whom nobody can stand? The demanding protectionist Leigh Hunt? I have no friends, George. I have only myself.

*George (pats his arm)* Then you have the whole world.

*John* I don't know that until I am dead.

*George* What do you mean?

*John* It doesn't matter. So long, brother.

*George* We'll see each other yet before I leave. Farewell. (*leaves*)

*John* My untalented brother doesn't understand what it means to expose heart and soul to humanity only to experience the violation by humanity of one's inmost sincerity. I can endure losing my parents and both my brothers, but I can't survive the public massacre of my soul. Break, o my heart, and bleed until the human herd of swine have devoured all my heart's blood! Then they can vomit over my memory if they want, but I will never be able to please them by suiting myself to the shallow taste of the establishment; but I will sing as no one has sung before me, but only in order not to give myself the lie.

#### Act IV scene 1. Marlow, February 1818.

*Leigh* Percy, you are overstrained!

*Shelley* You don't have to tell me.

*Leigh* You have taken on too much.

*Shelley* You don't have to tell me that either.

*Leigh* You are sick.

*Shelley* Thank you, I know.

*Leigh* You can get worse.

*Shelley* They already found the first stages of tuberculosis in me. What can I do? Continue working, writing and suffering.  
*Leigh* You should leave England.  
*Shelley* Thank you, I know.  
*Leigh* You wear yourself out for nothing here. No one thanks you for your philanthropic work among the poor, and the English establishment only gives you great pains in reminding you that they have taken away your children.  
*Shelley* Don't remind me thereof.  
*Leigh* It's wrong to Mary to torture yourself by staying on in England.  
*Shelley* It may be, but what can I do?  
*Leigh* Go to Italy with Mary and Claire and leave Byron's girl to her right father, so you will at least have one grievance less.  
*Mary* Your family duties are towards me and our children, Percy. Lord Byron is shameless burdening you with Claire and her daughter. You must shake them off.  
*Shelley* I don't think Claire wants to see Byron again.  
*Mary* That's her problem, and she doesn't have to either. But she must make her child's father take care of it.  
*Shelley* Do you think he cares?  
*Mary* It doesn't matter! He must!  
*Shelley* What has Claire to say about it?  
*Leigh* I'll fetch her. (*leaves*)  
*Mary* We've had enough of Claire and her brat. We've had enough of all lazy beggars coming here to extort you. We have to think of our own survival! I don't want to lose you just because others used you to death.  
*Shelley* Whom the gods love dies young.  
*Mary* In that case I prefer the one whom they hate.  
*Shelley* Here is Leigh with Claire. Well, Claire, do you have anything against our moving to Italy?  
*Claire* Do we have to? Why?  
*Shelley* To get rid of our English troubles, to get me well, and to let your daughter have her father bringing her up.  
*Claire* I never want to see Lord Byron again.  
*Mary* You say so only until you see him again.  
*Claire* I don't think he cares about his daughter.  
*Mary* Of course he doesn't as long as he isn't even reminded of her! But it's his job to take care of her and not ours! She is not my and Percy's child! She is yours and Lord Byron's!  
*Claire* You are right.  
*Shelley* It seems we'll have to go to Italy, then. Mary always gets what she wants.  
*Mary* And good luck is that for my family!

Scene 2. At the sick-bed of Tom Keats.

*John Keats* Brother, don't worry. I will take of you and tender you well like my mother until the end.  
*Tom Keats* No, brother, you must live. You must write. Forget the dead and the dying and live for life in yourself and your future. The only fruits of your pains with me will be your coffin.



*John* Nothing is more important than you as long as you live. All life is found in death, brother, and it grows most precious and alive in its closest vicinity to death. Therefore nothing is more important to me now than you.

*Tom* I always said you had to marry. All women always liked you. You will easily find a good wife who takes better care of you than you could ever take care of me.

*John* As long as you live, Tom, there is no woman for me. Just because I will lose you soon you are all the poetry in the world for me just now. There can be no higher love and poetry in the world than a beloved brother who is about to die.

*Tom* You should have let me remain in Scotland there to die alone, and you would have been spared the torture of seeing me die.

*John* I should never have gone to Scotland. Instead of vainly hiking there at large for months I should have been sitting here by your side, and then perhaps you would have been saved.

*Tom* You are the only doctor I know who believes in miracles when everything is lost.

*John* That's the most important thing for every doctor to insist on, or else he could not endure reality.

*Tom* Even if I die you bring health to my soul.

*John* That's all I ask for. I can't cure tuberculosis, but if instead I could make your soul healthy forever by my plain company it would mean more to me as a doctor than if I discovered the cure for tuberculosis.

*Tom* You are too good and poetical to ever have been able to manage as a doctor.

*John* That's why I stopped in time before I could not manage any more as a doctor. At least I haven't failed neither as doctor nor as a poet.

*Tom* Still the press cut your head off.

*John* No, Tom. They only cut my veins. But that can be cured.

*Tom* I am glad you are an optimist.

*John* If I weren't, Tom, I would be neither doctor nor poet. For all the beauty in the world is realistically just transient vanity and childish play that must pass by. In order to live for such fickle dreams you have to be a hopeless optimist excluding all pessimistic realism from your life.

*Tom* Do you think you could make that a permanence?

*John* No, I don't, but at least for as long as possible. But that's how humanity has reasoned for many thousand years, and they are still carrying on.

*Tom* May your beauty and optimism live for five thousand years in the hearts of man, brother.

*John* Not only mine but also yours, and Shakespeare's, Milton's, Spenser's, Shelley's and Byron's.

*Tom* You always could select a good company.

*John* It was not I who chose them. They chose me.

*Tom* That's fine. Farewell, my brother. (*closes his eyes*)

*John* (*sits quietly for a while, then becomes uneasy, examines the brother, takes his pulse, listens to his heart, and breaks out into tears when he realizes Tom has passed away.*)

Scene 3. Venice, August 1818.

*Byron* How nice of you to come! May I present La Fornarina, my latest, actually Margherita Cogni.

*Shelley (greeting her politely)* Delighted to meet you, Margherita Cogni.

*Byron* She doesn't speak English.

*Mary (greeting her condescendingly)* Does she already have children with you, Lord Byron?

*Byron* No, I have not succeeded yet in filling her up.

*Mary* Is she then just made for your satisfaction?

*Byron* What else? Do you think I move around with wives? I have long since outgrown such twaddle and puerilities. I have torn the souls of far too many ladies to shreds to be able to any more associate with any of them spiritually. It's safer to just use their flesh.

*Shelley* Maybe that's why you ended up in the questionable Don Juan complex?

*Byron* Maybe, my dear Shelley, maybe.

*Mary (to Shelley)* Percy, I can't stand it here any more. I can't believe that fat flabby yellow creature to be an English lord.

*Shelley (to Mary)* He has really changed for the worse.

*(openly)* I am sorry, George, but we have to go. Mary isn't feeling very well.

*Byron* I quite understand that I disgust her. She is an honourable woman, who cannot tolerate a decayed Don Juan. Come, Margherita. Let's leave our English guests in peace. We have more important things to do than to make them feel uncomfortable.

*Shelley* I will come to see you later alone, George, when you are free.

*Byron* Looking forward to it. We have much to talk about. We haven't seen each other since Geneva two years ago.

*Mary* Then at least you were fit, Lord Byron.

*Byron* And what am I now?

*Mary* If you are not aware of it yourself, Lord Byron, I can at least inform you that you are not very fit.

*Byron* When I come to think of it, something has actually been gnawing at my glans the last month. Maybe I should seek some doctor's counselling.

*Mary (rising, determined)* Do that, Lord Byron, before it is too late.

*Come, Percy. (They leave.)*

*Shelley* Methinks the ladies here in Venice have been a little too easy to catch and perhaps also too many for you, George.

*Byron* I am not complaining.

*Shelley* See you later, George. *(leaves)*

*Byron* They should not complain. They have brought my daughter to her father although he didn't ask for her and her mother refused to see him. Now I will never get rid of that daughter, and that should make them happy. Come, Margherita. Lucky for us that we don't have children. If you get one I will throw you out.

*Cogni* You will do that anyway sooner or later. *(They go out.)*

Scene 4. London, winter 1818.

*Keats* Fanny, you can't guess how much I love you.  
*Fanny Brawne* You only flatter me.  
*Keats* No, I am dead serious. I adore you like no one ever adored a lady before.  
*Fanny* You exaggerate and let your imagination run away with you just to please me.  
*Keats* How can you doubt the extreme intensity of my passion?  
*Fanny* I can't doubt that you hold me dear, but you blow up your feelings out of proportion.  
*Keats* Is that not love? What is love if not to aggrandize your loved one to infinitely larger dimensions than yourself?  
*Fanny* Yes, but you overstrain yourself by so going to emotional extremes. I only ask you to spare yourself.  
*Keats* I shall never spare myself for you.  
*Fanny* But if you don't spare yourself, how will you be able to keep up such an exaggerated passion? I am afraid that you will burn your candle at both ends, and that's not good for your health.  
*Keats* The healthiest thing of all is love. If I can but continue nourish and keep its hot flame burning high and bright I will not mind getting mortally ill.  
*Fanny* Don't say that.  
*Keats* I mean it.  
*Fanny* Even if you mean it you mustn't say it. I want to keep you.  
*Keats* Is that an answer to my love? Will you then be mine?  
*Fanny* How could I possibly be anyone else's, the way you keep plying me?  
*Keats* Then you are my life's only worship forever.  
*Fanny* Now you exaggerate again.  
*Keats* No, I am just expressing my love.  
*Fanny* Get down to earth. Bow down, for example, and do your shoestrings.  
*Keats* What does it matter if my shoestrings are loose? What does it matter if the whole world is dissolved? If I only may love you, the whole world and history may go to blazes with or without their shoes on or off!  
*Fanny* I really think you love me, when you are so funny.  
*Keats* That's what I mean.  
*Fanny* I must take you seriously, then.  
*Keats* So we are engaged?  
*Fanny* It would seem so. (*They kiss.*) But your poetry is more important to me than I can ever be to you.  
*Keats* My poetry is my love, and all my love is you. So my poetry is you. So let me love you.  
*Fanny* Yes, but stick to the rules of the verse! Without rhyme and reason there can be no love!  
*Keats* As my mistress commands. Your poet is slave to poetry and therefore your humblest thrall.  
*Fanny* Don't say so. Just be human.  
*Keats* What is more human than love? And what am I if not only love? And what is all my love if not only you?  
*Fanny* Now you are back again in your delirium. Do your shoestrings.  
*Keats* Never as long as I love you.

*Fanny* Then you prefer nonsense to the basics of life.  
*Keats* The basics of life is only nonsense. But all nonsense in the world is divine if it only is poetical.  
*Fanny* I just have to accept you for what you are.  
*Keats* I am afraid I can't be anything else.  
*Fanny* Then I will have to do your shoestrings.  
*Keats* Only if you insist.  
*Fanny* I will enjoy insisting to serve you.  
*Keats* Then I have no heart to turn you down.  
*Fanny* So, allow me. (*bows down and ties his shoestrings*)  
*Keats (embracing her)* Now we are united forever.  
*Fanny* At least for the time being. (*They kiss.*)

Scene 5. Rome, June 7th 1819.

*Mary* Come to bed, Percy. You have been up the last 60 hours.  
*Shelley* I know.  
*Mary* Your sitting up doesn't help.  
*Shelley* I know.  
*Mary* We have to go on living.  
*Shelley (turning towards her)* Do you believe in that?  
*Mary* What? I don't believe in anything any more.  
*Shelley* That we have to go on living?  
*Mary* Even if I don't believe in it we have to do it.  
*Shelley* How can we after this death blow?  
*Mary* Percy, the blow is harder on me than on you. I was the child's mother.  
*Shelley* But he was my only son!  
*Mary* I know.  
*Shelley* How can we then go on living? How can the world go on living?  
*Mary* It doesn't stop for our sake.  
*Shelley* It should for William's sake.  
*Mary* No sorrows can stop the world, not even ours.  
*Shelley* No. They can only stop our own hearts.  
*Mary* Not even that. They can only make us cry and that without cease. They can only consistently augment our pains by forcing us to live on and compel our hearts to go on working although our little boy is gone! (*breaks into heartrending tears*)  
*Shelley (rises, comforts her)* Mary, I thought you were stronger than me.  
*Mary* I am just a woman!  
*Shelley* But what a woman! Without you I would die now.  
*Mary (dries her tears)* The same to you, Percy.  
*Shelley* William is dead, but we still love each other. We can have another son. It's never too late.  
*Mary* Do you believe in that?  
*Shelley* I believe in nothing but that.  
*Mary* Then I believe in you, Percy.  
*Shelley* Let's love each other and let love vanquish the grief. For what is grief but a heart-rending cry for love? Grief exists to be drowned in the tears of love, from which life-giving sea another still more beautiful and nobler life will rise, like Venus from the foam of Cythera and the eternal surges of Homer.

*Mary* My Percy, now you start sounding like normal again. I think you have some inspiration.

*Shelley* I know now what to write. Thou comfortless capital of the ruins of eternal abuse, thou Rome eternal, where Saturn who devoured his own children is the eternal ruling tyrant and god of greed, I shall write a tragedy about your power condemned to damnation forever by the papal see and some of its most outrageously maltreated victims to injustice, and never again shall the power of Rome be able to rule by death as a means without the condemnation by Romans in an overwhelming majority. I shall write a true chronicle of destiny as a monument for my son which forever shall mark my eternal sorrow here in Rome.

*Mary* What will the subject be?

*Shelley* The lusty Count Francesco Cenci, who raped his daughter and for that was bereft of his life by her and his wife and son for a revenge, which only the pope gained anything by, for he had the entire family executed, so that their domains and considerable riches easily could be expropriated by the papal see.

*Mary* So it will be a grand Roman tragedy as a monument for our son.

*Shelley* No, a testimony to the demon here in Rome that took his life.

*Mary* So you write only for revenge?

*Shelley* No, only to communicate and express the truth.

#### Scene 6. London, autumn 1819.

*Keats* I am sorry, Fanny, but we have to separate.

*Fanny* You are too intolerable. Why don't you want me now when you have gained me?

*Keats* I have to be true to myself. I have to prioritize my art to everything else.

*Fanny* You are only egoistic like all men.

*Keats* You've said yourself a number of times that the most important thing about me is my poetry. Therein lies my soul. You have my body, but the soul has a greater power over me than the body. Therefore I must forsake you to be able to write.

*Fanny* Why can't you write in my presence? Am I such a bad company that you can only long to get away from me when we are together, that my company makes your freedom impossible, and that you can't accept a normal human life? You must be ill, John Keats, if that's how you feel. Just tell me the truth. You don't love me any more.

*Keats* You only depress me by your coarse lies. I will love no one but you all my life, and the evidence you shall have in my loveliest and most elevated poems.

*Fanny* Wipe your arse with them if that's the only love you can give.

*Keats* No, Fanny, you can't say that.

*Fanny* Commit yourself then to your poetry in your loneliness and illness, escapism and self-deceit, love only yourself then, for that is all what so called poetry is about: narcissism; turn into a perfectly conceited egoist like that Byron, whom you adore, who only sacrifices his women to himself, like Goethe. Carry on your dismal days in the cultivation of constantly increasing self-pity, for that is how all effeminate and self-centred men always end up: they seek loneliness only to wallow in their self-love, but in that self-

destructive passion they ultimately only find suffering, misery, depression and death. Just perish, poor poet, and be divine to yourself as much as you want, but never try to come back for comfort from a motherly substitute, who at length can't bear with such miserable monsters of selfishness and piteous sentimentalists. Go then to Italy and Venice to your adorable Lord Byron and his courtesans! He can comfort you. They say he is bisexual.

*Keats* That's not fair.

*Fanny* Yes, truth is always unfair in its ruthlessness, but it nevertheless remains the truth. Good-bye!

*Keats* My love...

*Fanny* Stick to your poems only from now on, find a more suitable mistress in your poetry, but never expect any mercy from any woman if you choose to be like that.

*Keats* You are cruel.

*Fanny* No, only honest. Go to blazes, you perfidious failure of a pathetic dilettante! If at least you would have graduated as a doctor! (*leaves, banging the door behind*)

*Keats* She doesn't know what she is saying. She has no understanding at all. But I shall love her anyway. She will regret and long for me when she sees what poems I shall write to her honour only. She is just a woman and can't understand how highly and faithfully forever only her man can love her. She has hurt me, but I have only loved her, and I will continue doing so blindly and forever. Thereby my poetry will triumph over the narrow restrictions of earthly love in an earnest and honest expression of the only true and lasting love.

*(sits down by candlelight and starts writing)*

#### Scene 7. Venice, November 1819.

*Teresa Guiccioli (17 years)* Who has come for me?

*Servant* The Count.

*Teresa* The Count? What does he want, that goat?

*Servant* He actually seems rather angry.

*Teresa* If he comes to quarrel after having let me associate with Byron for half a year, I will surely answer his quarrel! Let the miserable old man in!

*(The servant enters Count Guiccioli, 60 years.)*

*Count* My wife! I hold in my hand a letter from your father signor Gamba to you, in which he advises you how to commune with your lover, that notorious English playboy called Lord Byron.

*Teresa* Signor, if you have come over such a letter you have violated your consort by illegally obtaining it by force behind her back!

*Count* My wife, you should not mention what is going behind anyone's back! I am well aware of that that impostor now has been your lover for half a year!

*Teresa* Which means you have tolerated it so far. Why then start complaining now?

*Count* I am being made a fool of! I feel the horns growing on my head! I can't stand people talking about this all around me! No one shall have something to laugh at behind my back at my expense!

*Teresa* It costs you nothing, signor. You are richest in all Romagna.

*Count* It costs my reputation! You must immediately cease your association with that wicked dandy!

*Teresa* I then prefer that terrible dandy to that miserable old man who can't make love.

*Count* My wife! Are you suggesting a divorce? Think of the scandals! It would completely ruin your entire family!

*Teresa* If you force me to choose I will choose him. It is quite customary in Venice for everyone to have a lover. After six months with the most famous lover in the world I will not let my lord go easily.

*Count* Be sensible, my girl! Certainly everyone will have lovers who choose to, but you challenge the unwritten law by going too far in backbiting your husband and living quite openly with the world's most fatal defamer of women! You must choose! If you choose him I will bestow on you the eternal dishonour of a divorce! (*Byron happens to enter.*)

*Byron (hesitating)* I apologize. I did not know you were both here.

*Count* Just enter, dear friend. We were just standing here discussing you. Come in!

*Byron (can't retire)* I really hope I didn't disturb you in something important.

*Count* On the contrary. You are needed in the debate. You see, I can't make my wife see reason. Your relationship has exploded into a public scandal. I have asked her to separate from me if she wishes to continue to live so openly with you. Imagine what a scandal it would be to her family! Dear Byron, consider! She is only seventeen!

*Byron* Teresa, are you not happy with me for a lover?

*Teresa* Yes, but that old man is jealous and don't want us to continue.

*Byron* Count Guiccioli, with all respect for your discretion and dignity, but your countess needs me. You can't force us to give up our friendship.

*Count* I have no desire to ruin your friendship. I only beg of you to behave decently in public and stick to reasonable discretion.

*Teresa (throws herself in Byron's arms)* Lord Byron! I Can't live without you! Without you I would be dead!

*Byron* Is it my fault, Count Guiccioli, that she is so spontaneous and direct also in public?

*Count* No, it's the fault of both of you! You go too far with each other when you shamelessly live so openly together without thinking of others!

*Byron* Well then. I will go back to England and leave the insurmountable Alps between us.

*Count* My good lord, that is noble of you.

*Teresa* If you leave me, Byron, I will die.

*Byron* That's a happier solution, though, than dishonour. It's only for your sake that I will go away to let you live in peace. Live with your honour and your rich husband. I will gladly sacrifice myself for you.

*Count* Good lord, you are magnanimous!

*Byron* No, I am just tenderly sentimental.

*Teresa* You see yourself, Count, what a supremely noble man you wish to drive in exile from our beautiful homeland. And this poet has in honour of our nation compiled immortal epic poems about our most beloved poets Torquato and Dante! How could we send such a man abroad? Italy shall never forgive you!

*Count* I never insulted Lord Byron the poet!

*Teresa* But that is what you are doing! For your sake he is forced abroad!

*Count* No, not for my sake. For your sake only.

*Teresa* For my sake! I saved his life! For my sake only he is alive! When I met him he was sick with venereal diseases who didn't have any strength

left to even lift a pen from the table! Thanks to your wife, signor, Lord Byron has remained alive so that he could write those eternal poems about our eternal poets. Am I not right, dear mylord?

*Count* Dearest wife, I must submit to your argument. Art conquers all, like always. I will not expel your debatable lover, since he unfortunately is such an immortal and world famous poet. Keep him as much as you want, but don't imagine that he will keep you forever. (*leaves*)

*Teresa* He gave us licence!

*Byron* So I will not see England again.

*Teresa* Do you long for home so strongly?

*Byron* Only for my dear sister Augusta.

*Teresa* Your incestuous sister?

*Byron* She is only my halvesister.

*Teresa* Is that not enough?

*Byron* But I am glad, Teresa, that at least I may keep you a while longer. You are actually the only one I have loved whom I have not committed acts of cruelty against.

*Teresa* Are you capable of cruelty?

*Byron* I ruined my marriage only by cruelty, I almost killed my poor lawful wedded wife, I tortured her and drove her mad, and I have been equally cruel to everyone I lived with for too long. Only you have not yet seen that side of me.

*Teresa* I don't believe it exists until I may see it.

*Byron* You will never see it as long as I love you.

*Teresa* Love me then forever.

*Byron* At least I could try. (*They kiss.*)

#### Scene 8. London, February 1820.

*Doctor* How do you feel?

*Keats* I am rather tired.

*Doctor* Yes, you seem rather exhausted.

*Keats* Stil I have only been writing.

*Doctor* But this poetical work of yours demands quite a lot of intellectual energy, does it not?

*Keats* I can keep working and improving a poem for weeks, and when it's finally finished it feels as if I had drilled all alone through a mountain ridge.

*Doctor* Yes, you exhaust yourself intellectually and nervously. I consider that the cause of your illness.

*Keats* So I am really ill?

*Doctor* Yes, regrettably, and I can't cure you. I can only give advice. Stop working at poetry, and get a wife who can take care of you.

*Keats* I had a wife, but she felt neglected by my poetry.

*Doctor* That's why you have fallen ill.

*Keats* But how can you get ill from poetry?

*Doctor* You don't get ill from poetry, the noblest and finest man can create. But since poetry is the highest art of man it's also the most difficult and demanding to create. You are exceedingly talented as a poet. To you therefore the poetical effort is more straining than to normal poets, like Lord Byron, for example, who is just improvising and then calling it poetry. He gets paid for his verses, so he doesn't have to mind their quality. But you wage a maximal



effort just to accomplish a pureness of supreme beauty, and such a spiritual effort is more demanding than the most strenuous sport, for it's the frail nerves who take the burden of the constantly hard working and dire heaviness of thoughts. That's my theory. Most people I met who had your illness have like you strained themselves mostly nervously and spiritually.

*Keats* You mean that I have to choose between poetry and death or life without poetry?

*Doctor* I sincerely mean that, yes.

*Keats* Is then life without poetry a worse death than death?

*Doctor* So you made your choice. Then I give you one year to live, if you leave England to settle in warmer countries.

*Keats* Is it really that bad?

*Doctor* Yes, and it can not get better, only worse. Not until you are dying you will feel well again.

*Keats* What is the nature of my illness?

*Doctor* I see it as the consequence of neurasthenia. You torture yourself by the pains of birth of your poems, and the only cure is to work even harder, for nothing is more harmful to your peace of mind than idleness.

*Keats* It's true.

*Doctor* So you lash yourself into constantly harder exertions and thus become chronically overstrained. The body cannot cope with too much nervous strain, the immunity defense collapses, and you are invaded by massive infections. You have hereditary symptoms of tuberculosis. That illness has first of all taken possession of your body.

*Keats* So it's just ordinary tuberculosis?

*Doctor* What else? Any fool can see that. I have only charted its probable origin, and I think you might get cured if you stop straining yourself with poetry.

*Keats* Mother died in tuberculosis, my youngest brother also, and my brother in America also carries sad symptoms. So let me die like all my unjustly stricken family, if only I may continue composing poetry until I die.

*Doctor* Then you die the more certain. That I can promise you.

*Keats* I thank you, dear doctor, for your honesty. You have told me and not hidden the worst, like a man should be straight with a man. We are really colleagues actually. One reason for my not becoming a doctor was the confounded hypocrisy that doctors practise to keep their patients: they can never tell the whole truth. You have told it though, and I thank you for this proven courage.

*Doctor* I tried to save your life by telling the truth, but you did not want to be saved.

*Keats* Tell me, what do I owe you?

*Doctor* Nothing.

*Keats* You can't mean that.

*Doctor* Yes. You are to die. I haven't succeeded in saving your life.

*Keats* A surgeon always charges enough even if the patient he is operating on dies.

*Doctor* I have not operated on you. I gave you instructions how you could successfully operate yourself and no one else, but you won't perform that operation. Therefore I can not charge anything.

*Keats* I thank you, my friend.

*Doctor* And I deplore you. (*leaves*)

*Keats* One year to live, if I go south to warmer countries. It will have to be Italy, then.

Act V Scene 1. Ravenna.

*Shelley* Well, George, you look well enough.  
*Byron* I really can't help it.  
*Shelley* Do you mean to say it's not your own fault?  
*Byron* I am afraid it isn't. It's all the fault of that Teresa Guiccioli girl.  
*Shelley* Do you mean you are still living with her?  
*Byron* Of course. Haven't you followed my whereabouts?  
*Shelley* I am sorry, but I have been all filled up with my own families lately and especially with your poor dismissed Claire Clairmont. That's why I am here. But if you still retain the Countess Guiccioli it would mean you have lived with that girl longer than with anyone else, including your wife and sister!  
*Byron* It's actually true.  
*Shelley* You beat all records.  
*Byron* One could almost call me settled. I was at the peril of perishing among all the boggy courtesans of Venice who devoured you body and soul...  
*Shelley* Yes, you were rather on your way down there.  
*Byron* Teresa has rescued me from there, sorted me into a more regular life, kept me busy by constant intrigues with her husband and even turned me on politically.  
*Shelley* You have only had successes lately. Castlereagh, Metternich, the pope, all are discussing you, spying on you and tremble at you. Congratulations by the way on your latest poem "Cain" where at last you dare to sing out loud.  
*Byron* Walter Scott defended God against me but accepted my dedication to him.  
*Shelley* What is really your relationship with the bard that you replaced?  
*Byron* He is like a father to me. It is remarkable that he always generously showed me his favours no matter how I always abused him.  
*Shelley* I suspect he is only grateful that you took over the responsibility for the art of English verse from him. I guess he wanted to abandon it for prose himself.  
*Byron* He hasn't written anything for years.  
*Shelley* Do you think so? What about the anonymous Waverley novels?  
*Byron* Do you think he is the one?  
*Shelley* Who else?  
*Byron* We shall know eventually.  
*Shelley* No one else is that good in English today except John Keats.  
*Byron* John Keats? That boasting blinded juvenile?  
*Shelley* Yes, I know you wrote him down in our literary magazines. But he is on his way to Italy now to get well. The critics were so hard on his magnificent "Endymion" that he attracted tuberculosis, they say.  
*Byron* Can you attract tuberculosis from critics?  
*Shelley* You get tuberculosis if you are as sensitive as the rest of humanity is insensitive. If you publicly are exposed to unfair treatment at

that, your vulnerability becomes critical. Keats has in addition to that lost a brother and his mother in tuberculosis.

*Byron* That's not reason enough for writing like taking for granted that the whole world must read it and admire it.

*Shelley* Like myself Keats does not write for the public but for the happy few.

*Byron* Well, Percy, there you struck home. You never could stand my immoderate popularity.

*Shelley* I never complained.

*Byron* Except on my manner of living.

*Shelley* You seem to live better off now.

*Byron* And still you want to tear my daughter away from me?

*Shelley* It's not me. It's her mother.

*Byron* ...who thinks the girl is damaged by her extravagant father. Would it then be better for her to be brought up by atheists?

*Shelley* The mother wants her daughter. You have already been too cruel to Claire to be able to refuse her own daughter.

*Byron* My cruelty to Claire was provoked in me by herself. She made herself despicable in my eyes.

*Shelley* Don't you find that in all women after you have used and left them? Wasn't that the case also with your wife and all your Venetian mistresses? Do you blame them for your having seduced them?

*Byron* Let's not discuss morals. You don't know anything about that, you little atheist.

*Shelley* I know what is right from a human point of view, and that's a higher moral than all calvinism and puritanism in the world, which you use to justify to keep your daughter imprisoned in a monastery so that not even her parents may see her.

*Byron* It was not safe for Allegra to be here. I was involved in a conspiracy against the papal state.

*Shelley* I know. And the Countess Guiccioli is in Switzerland. Was it also unsafe for her to be at home?

*Byron* Her family was exiled.

*Shelley* But doesn't her husband hold a high position in Romagna?

*Byron* Yes, but they are not married any more.

*Shelley* Do you mean to say the Count has divorced his wife?

*Byron* Yes. Her family demanded it for my sake.

*Shelley* So that's why they snatched her away from both her husband and lover. I see. I congratulate you, Lord Byron, to yet another victim.

*Byron* Don't scorn me like that, Percy. You only give me a bad conscience enough to end miserably one day.

*Shelley* Pardon me. But you will release your daughter? You can't honestly keep her in her monastery prison when her mother wants her?

*Byron* No, I can't in the long run.

*Shelley* You should visit us in Pisa. I also invited John Keats there.

*Byron* I would rather not meet with him.

*Shelley* No, because you made him too much damage by your mean critical reviews.

*Byron* You must get over your bitterness, Percy. My fame is not for everyone.

*Shelley* You have your fame thanks to the high protection of Walter Scott and Goethe. What I write is thanks to no one but myself.

*Byron* You are jealous.  
*Shelley* I have enough money without fame. You would not manage without your fame.  
*Byron* That is correct.  
*Shelley* Another who is soon coming to Pisa is Leigh Hunt, the liberal buccaneer. The English censorship tried to silence him.  
*Byron* I would gladly associate with him.  
*Shelley* That pleases me. Then I'll write to him immediately to come at once. So long. (*leaving*)  
*Byron* Wait a moment!  
*Shelley* See you later. (*leaves*)  
*Byron* He is always in such a hurry to stress and force all his friends to action! No sooner is he arrived, and he immediately wakes you up from your deepest beauty sleep and lash you to action, and when at last you feel up to date with his hurry he is already gone... Percy! Get back!  
*Shelley (returns)* Was there anything more?  
*Byron* While you are at it inviting everyone to come to Pisa, you might as well write to the Countess Guiccioli and invite her there as well. I don't want to see her in Switzerland. There are too many Englishmen. Let her come to Pisa.  
*Shelley* Very well, she will come to Pisa.  
*Byron* But why such a hurry, my friend? We haven't seen each other for years!  
*Shelley* I have to visit your daughter in the monastery.  
*Byron* You can do that later. I need you. Countess Guiccioli knows I shouldn't be alone.  
*Shelley (irritated)* It's only beneficial to be alone with the memories of all you should make amends for, like for instance the lost fortune of the Countess Guiccioli. (*leaves*)  
*Byron* He leaves me alone to my vices. Well, at least your vices make better company than your sins. (*drinks*)

Scene 2. Casa Magni, La Spezia.  
 The veranda by the sea.

*Shelley* I am sorry, Claire, but he forbade me to take the child from the monastery. You can beseech a father, but you can't give him orders. If he chooses to spite the child's mother and refuse her her own child it's on his own responsibility.  
*Claire* But she is only five years, and I know she must be unhappy in that monastery! I was warned that it had the worst premises in Italy!  
*Shelley* You must complain with Lord Byron.  
*Claire* I can't see him any more! He has treated me with such outrageous cruelty!  
*Shelley (aside)* How often have I not heard this before from Byron's discharged ladies!  
*Mary* What about the boat, Percy?  
*Shelley (happier)* It should be ready any time.  
*Mary* I don't like it.  
*Shelley* Williams and Trelawny are qualified sailors. Nothing can happen in their company.  
*Mary* But you can't even swim.

*Shelley* Still I never drowned, although I sailed with Lord Byron.  
*Mary* You were almost shipwrecked once on the Geneva lake.  
*Shelley (calm)* Yes, but we weren't.  
*Thomas Medwin* Mary, you can be quite calm concerning your husband. He is safety itself. Since he fears no god and has no god, no god can kill him.  
*Claire* If there is anything I can't bear with Lord Byron it's his religious hypocrisy.  
*Shelley* My classmate alludes to the old saying, that "whom the gods love dies young". Since I have no god I can't die young.  
*Mary* You can be loved by the gods all the same.  
*Medwin* Even John Keats lived without a god but died anyway.  
*Shelley (shocked)* Keats? Is he dead?  
*Medwin* Yes. Didn't you know? He died two months ago.  
*Shelley* But he was supposed to come here! To me!  
*Medwin* He had no time. He was ill. He wasn't up to it. He came to Rome only to die. He could live there for four months but could hardly even lift his pen to write any poetry the last month. But you were not particularly good friends, or were you?  
*Shelley* He preferred Byron, who was one of his most prejudiced critics. Me and Keats never came close to each other. I appreciated him as a poet, but he would never let me in on him. He was afraid of my domination and perhaps patronisation.  
*Mary* Poor Keats! How old was he?  
*Medwin* Twenty-five years and three months.  
*Shelley* He was a greater talent than me and Byron put together. Time's folly and ignorance took his life. When "Endymion" was released, which was the only great poem he had time to complete, the critics competed in executing it as brutally as possible. Leigh Hunt was upset for months, and after that Keats fell ill. He lost both his brothers at the same time, one in tuberculosis, the other to America.  
*Mary* Here is Lord Byron. He looks pale.  
*Shelley* Good morning, George! How was it at the Countess' today? Has she given you another thrashing?  
*Byron* It's worse than that.  
*Shelley* You would hardly be the one to mourn John Keats.  
*Byron* John Keats? Is he dead?  
*Shelley* He died of a broken heart two months ago without anyone knowing about it. He was a more unknown poet than me and poor at that. The critics murdered him.  
*Byron* My dear Percy, you are unfair. You accuse me of murder of the wrong person.  
*Claire (at once)* Whom have you murdered now?  
*Byron* Your daughter Allegra.  
*Claire (cries out)* No!  
*Byron* She died in the monastery without anyone letting me know about it.  
*Claire rising* I knew it! I knew she would freeze to death in those cells! I warned you all! But you didn't care!  
*Shelley* There, dearest Claire, no scenes now, please. Our friend Byron has suffered enough.  
*Claire* So has my daughter! She was allowed to freeze to death without her father even visiting her! He ignored her! He only bothered about

pestering me in refusing to return my daughter! He sacrificed his daughter only to torture me!

*Shelley (tries to calm her)* We did what we could. She was well when I visited her. I couldn't guess she would be so ill so soon. The Williams couple were just trying to find an accomodation here for her. We were only too late, *(aside)* as I was too late for John Keats' funeral. – Where did they put him, Thomas?

*Medwin* In the protestant cemetery by the Cestius pyramid.

*Shelley* The same place whe we buried our son, Mary. Our son has been given the finest company in the world.

*Byron* I am sorry.

*Shelley* We are sorry for *you*, George. Who told you?

*Byron* The Countess Guiccioli.

*Shelley* Isn't it strange that such news last of all shall reach those who it touches the most? All Italy probably knew about it before you, like certainly all England had knowledge of the departure of Keats before me...

*Medwin* I am not so sure about that, Percy. John Keats was only known to the circle around Leigh Hunt.

*Shelley* So unknown could only the universally important make his departure.

*Byron* What's that beauty of a yacht coming around the cape?

*Shelley* But it's Ariel! It's Williams and Trelawny at last arriving with Ariel!

*Mary (more serious)* It's the sailing-boat which the gentlemen will play with all summer just to have something to risk their lives with.

*Byron* It's not that dangerous, Mrs. Shelley. I have been in the same boat with Percy, it was filled with water in a storm, I wanted to swim ashore, but Percy refused to abandon the ship. That's how we both came ashore with the ship. Or else I would have come alone.

*Mary* Lord Byron, you are just horrible! Come, Claire!

*(The ladies leave in apparent horror of Byron.)*

*Byron* Have you anything left of that opium tincture, Percy? I would need it now.

*Shelley* I understand you. You can always trust me. You know that I am never without that comfort after the death of Harriet and my children were taken away from me.

*Byron* Shall we take it together?

*Shelley (jokingly)* Avaunt, temptation! I have more important things to think of now, as my sailing-boat Ariel is here, than old worries. Not all the troubles, worries and pains in the world can now keep me ashore on such a beautiful day! Come, Thomas! Let's meet with our merry shipmates on the shore! *(They leave.)*

*Byron* Only I am left alone with my grief and guilt and my countess Guiccioli, whom I will probably never be rid of any more. My last mistress became an anchor locking me to the bottom. Still I will not drown, for I am a good swimmer. It's my destiny to unjustly be forced to survive while all my victims die.

*(contemplates the grandiose natural panorama over the sea and the coast.)*

Scene 3. Montenero.

*One of Byron's servants* Who do you think you are?  
*One of Gamba's servants* Looking for trouble? Want it on the chin?  
*Byron's servant* Sticking up, huh?  
*Gamba's servant* Want some ironing?  
*Byron's servant* It's you who are picking quarrels!  
*Gamba's servant* Who started? Not I, you damned dumbbell!  
*Byron's servant* Just carry on going to blazes!  
*Gamba's servant* It's you must go to blazes, you parasiting pest!  
*Byron's servant* Are you suggesting my master is a parasite?  
*Gamba's servant* What else? What else does he do?  
*Byron's servant* I admit he should be beating you more around.  
*Gamba's servant* He is too drunk and besotted to beat anyone around! He is good for nothing!  
*Byron's servant* We never insult our hosts, but you insult your guests!  
*Gamba's servant* With good reason! Tourist parasites like you defoul all Italy!  
*Byron's servant* Don't you think we can defend ourselves when put to test?  
*Gamba's servant* Draw your knife, then, and be at least a man, unlike your decadent master!  
*Byron's servant* He is the best sportsman in Europe!  
*Gamba's servant* Was. Now he isn't even good for women.  
*Byron's servant* You may insult me but not my master!  
*Gamba's servant* He is the parasite and vulture, not you.  
*Byron's servant* But he is something, while your master is not!  
*Gamba's servant* Do you want to fight about it?  
*Byron's servant* I see no other choice!  
*(They fight. Oaths and screams. Many other servants appear trying to separate them.)*  
*servants* No fighting in the house of our lord! Stop them! Separate them! The lord might wake up! Help! They kill each other! They cut each other to pieces! *(and so on)*  
*Byron's servant* There you are, humbug! *(has wounded Gamba's servant)*  
*(Leigh Hunt enters with family, wife, six children, coffers and serving staff.)*  
*Leigh* Is this the house of Lord Byron?  
*Gamba's servant* No, it's the house of Count Gamba, infected by Lord Byron! Look! His servants have already started slaughtering Count Gamba's household!  
*(massive quarrel breaks out between the servants, on one side Count Gamba's, on the other Lord Byron's – another universal fight risks breaking out.)*  
*Marianne Hunt* Do you really think we arrived at the right place?  
*Leigh* I am afraid so. *(enter Lord Byron)*  
*Marianne* Who is that fat and flabby figure?  
*Leigh* Good golly! It must be Lord Byron himself! George! Is it really you?  
*Byron* What is going on here?  
*Leigh* Your servants were just about to cut each other's throats when we arrived.  
*Marianne* Leigh! I can't remain in a place like this! I can't stand the sight of blood! Uh! *(putting her handkerchief to her mouth)*  
*Byron* Has anyone been hurt?  
*Leigh* Only slightly, it seems.

*Gamba's servant* No bloody devil has been hurt except me, damned English bedevilled bully!

*Byron's servant* What do you mean by insulting my master?

*Gamba's servant* Just what I say, you badass of a nincompoop!

*(New quarrels on the point of breaking out with increasing turbulence galore. Only Byron keeps apart seemingly amused. Hunt's children start screaming and crying.)*

*Marianne* What kind of a place have you brought us to, Leigh? No one can remain here except madmen!

*Count Gamba (suddenly appearing)* *Sacramento del diavolo!* What spectacle is this? Stop fighting, you indolent baboons, not in front of the English! *(Throws himself into the fighting, gets knifed himself)*

*Teresa Guiccioli (enters in disarray)* Oh my! Heaven save us! Papa! What are you doing? What on earth is going on? Mamma mia! Help! *(screams and gets into hysterics)*

*Marianne* Leigh, consider that I am not well!

*Leigh* We are stuck here, dearest, and at the mercy of these caretakers.

*Count Gamba (all bloody)* Bloody sacramental idiots! Stop fighting immediately, or I will beat you all up into butchered wrecks! *(Enter twelve policemen)*

*Police inspector* In the name of the law! Order!

*(to an inferior)* Calm down the bewildered mob. *(The policemen manage quickly to calm down the lot.)*

Count Gamba, I have warned you! You have been exiled before! If there is any more quarrel with our English guests I must deport you not only from here but from all Tuscany!

*Gamba's servant* It's all the fault of that bullying coward Lord Byron!

*Police inspector* Arrest him! *(Gamba's servant is taken out.)*

We can't afford insulting our wealthy guests! On behalf of all Italy I apologize, cavaliere Lord Byron. *(makes a deep bow)*

*Byron* They haven't quarrelled with me. They only quarrelled with each other.

*Police inspector (shaking his finger against the sky)* But the insult, mylord! The insult!

*Byron* You don't have to threateningly give God your finger for that. It only amused me.

*Police inspector (clicking his heels, growling, and leaves)* Come! *(All the police depart resolutely)*

*Trelawny (Irishman with large mustachios, a picturesque character, enters)* Hmh!

*Byron* But there you are, Trelawny! Where have you been so long?

*Trelawny* Hmh!

*Byron* How is my yacht? Have you got it into the Geneva lake yet?

*Trelawny* Hmh!

*Teresa Guiccioli* But, *caro mio*, we were going to France, were we not?

*Count Gamba* Weren't you two off to America? Weren't mylord supposed to transplant a plantation there?

*Teresa* Don't tell me the yacht is already in the Geneva lake!

*Trelawny* Hmh!

*Byron* It's quite correct, Count Gamba, that I plan to plant a plantation in South America, but I don't think we will go there immediately. We will probably first go to France. But at the moment we are preparing for Geneva, are we not, Teresa? That's where you have taken the yacht, isn't it, Trelawny?

*Trelawny* Hmh!



Leigh Is everyone leaving, now that we have arrived? Weren't you supposed to take care of us?

Byron (*taps his shoulder*) There is always someone to take care of you, my dear Leigh. Just don't worry. But lo! Here is our dear Shelley!

Shelley (*enters with Williams and some other sailors, all dressed up smartly and in good spirits*) Welcome to Italy, dear friends! At last you are here! Now we can really call the whole family reunited!

Leigh Lord Byron intends to immediately go to Geneva.

Shelley Nonsense! George, you are staying here! I will talk with the police and see to it that no one of yours are being exiled again. But what is the matter, Lady Hunt?

Marianne (*crying*) I am only so desperately ill since I have fallen straight into an asylum! (*cries*)

Shelley There, Lady Hunt, Lord Byron is only joking. He is cruel sometimes but only means well. (*sincerely to Byron*) George, you are not going away. Is that clear?

Trelawny Hmh!

Shelley (*to Hunts*) Byron has no choice. He must remain, for he has promised to write a new poem for the papers here. (*severely to Byron*) If you don't send a complete poem to the first edition of that paper your house and family will be stormed by the mob! Is that clear, George?

Trelawny Hmh!

Shelley Quiet, Trelawny! Say, is it clear, George? Think of your hosts! You can't just leave them when they have done so much for you! They have opened their house to you and given you free hands with their divorced daughter!

Byron Quiet, Percy. Think of Mrs. Hunt. Well, I will have to stay on then.

Marianne (*crying*) We will certainly never stay here!

Shelley I know where you can stay. There is room in Palazzo Lanfranchi. Come with me, take your things, and we'll go there immediately. I will see to it that your children will have a good time. (*The Hunts forget their tears and get organized.*)

Marianne Anywhere is better to stay than under the same roof as Lord Byron! (*crying again*)

Shelley You hear, George, what a reputation you have with the women of England.

Leigh No, it's only my wife. England still loves you, George.

Byron And I still hate it.

Leigh You are incorrigible.

Byron So is England. Just look at your wife.

(*Marianne and the children vanish out almost in an escape.*)

Leigh So long, George.

Shelley See you later.

Byron Thanks for taking care of them, Percy.

Shelley Someone has to do it, but I am afraid their complaints have only started. They will be better off here than in England, but not materially. (*goes after the others.*)

Byron (*to Teresa, embracing her*) Well, Teresa, everything is settled down now. Are you happy that we are not going?

Teresa (*sobbing*) You would gladly go away just to get rid of me.

Byron No, my beloved Teresa, I would gladly go away just to get rid of my memories. But it's unfortunately impossible. They will pursue me until I

die, and England is the first and worst of them. Or what do you say, captain Trelawny?

*Trelawny* Hmph!

*Byron* Yes, you are the only wise guy here. (*leaves with Teresa.*)

(*All the others have departed long since. Only the picturesque previous pirate Trelawny remains twisting his mustachios with a very serious mind.*)

Scene 4. Palazzo Lanfranchi.

(Late at night. Knocks at the gate. Festive music out at left.)

*Servant maid (coming out, calling:)* Who is it?

*Mary Shelley* Mary Shelley and Jane Williams.

*Servant* Cavaliere Byron is already asleep, but the Countess is still up.

*Mary* Wake up Lord Byron.

*Servant* But signora Shelley...

*Teresa (coming down)* Mary and Jane! Welcome! But at this hour?

*Jane* Where are our men?

*Mary* Do you know anything about Shelley?

*Teresa* But why are you so pale? What has happened?

*Servant* They insist that Lord Byron comes down.

*Teresa (irritated)* Do as they say.

What can I do for you?

*Jane* Do you know nothing about our men?

*Teresa* Haven't they come home?

*Mary* They left Livorno sailing on Monday. The same day there was a storm. We never thought they would have sailed in that weather. But a letter from Leigh Hunt today says they left Livorno on Monday.

*Teresa (takes Mary's hands)* Calm down. They might have blown over to Elba or Corsica.

*Mary* So you know nothing?

*Teresa* Here is Lord Byron.

*Byron (enters in nightgown)* What is it now?

*Teresa* Shelley and Williams have not arrived.

*Byron* There is a party in the village. Maybe they stranded there.

*Mary (stamps her foot impatiently)* This is no joke, Lord Byron! Your scronful cynicisms are out of place when Shelley might have drowned!

*Byron* He can't drown. He has no god and can't swim either.

*Jane* You talk in your sleep, Lord Byron! Get my man instead!

*Byron* Get your man! You don't get your men readily if they voluntarily have gone away.

*Mary* Don't listen to him, Jane. He is only tasteless.

*Jane* Yes, I notice.

*Byron* Look for your men wherever you want, but don't expect any help from me. (*turns back and leaves*)

*Jane* We have to go on to Livorno, Mary.

*Mary* Yes, that is what we must do. Sorry about the disturbance, Countess Guiccioli.

*Teresa* You must excuse Lord Byron. He is like that.

*Mary* That's why we can't excuse him. Good night.

(*Enter Captain Roberts solemnly.*)

*Roberts* Do they have to party in the village on a night like this?

Mary           Your gloomy looks forbode indeed no cheer. What has happened?  
 Roberts       Mary Shelley! You here? Go home at once!  
 Mary           What do you know about my husband?  
 Jane           And mine?  
 Roberts (*removes his hat, lowers his eyes*) They are gone.  
 Mary           How? What has happened?  
 Roberts       I saw them sail from the harbour of Livorno. I would have sailed after them with Trelawny, but then the gale came. I couldn't hoist my sail and hurried to the harbour looking for Ariel in my binoculars. They were taking down their sail out at sea. Then came the rain. It was impossible to see anything more. The sea turned white of foam and united with the stormy sky. All ships in the harbour lowered double anchors. Fishing boats came fleeing in from the stormy sea. After two hours everything was clear again. Then there was not one sail left on the horizon.  
 Jane           They disappeared but might yet be back.  
 Roberts       The worst part remains.  
 Mary           Let's hear it!  
 Roberts       We looked for wreckage along the beaches. We found the small canoe from Ariel and a barrel, which was also from Ariel.  
 Mary           Is that all?  
 Roberts       That was all, until Trelawny was summoned to Viareggio. A corpse had been found on its shore.  
 Mary           Whose?  
 Roberts       No one knows. Fish and crabs had eaten all meat that was not covered by the clothes. But Trelawny knows, when he comes back. He should be here any moment.  
 Teresa       How many were on board of the Ariel?  
 Roberts       Shelley, captain Williams and the boy.  
 Jane           Here is Trelawny. I don't like his looks.  
 (*enter Trelawny slowly towards them*)  
 Mary           Captain Trelawny, is there any hope?  
 Trelawny (*silence*)  
 Roberts       Was it Shelley, captain Trelawny?  
 Trelawny (*silence*)  
 Jane           Was it any of ours?  
 Trelawny      Umph!  
 Mary           Oh no!  
 Jane           Woe is me!  
 Roberts       Who was it, captain Trelawny?  
 Trelawny      Umph! Three corpses, all eaten by fishes. Utterly unidentifiable. Shelley, Williams, a boy.  
 Roberts       How did you recognize them?  
 Trelawny      Two books in Shelley's pocket. Sophocles and John Keats.  
 Mary           John Keats!  
 Roberts       Be brave, my girls! Sorrow is for all of us.  
 (*takes care of Mary. Teresa takes care of Jane. Black-out.*)  
 (*Only the festive music from the village continues out at the left.*)

Scene 5.

A golden shore between a sea in violet and the white peaks of the Apennines far away. The sea surges calmly and regularly against the shore. A pyre has been erected on the sand, on which rests the remnants of a beautiful but disfigured corpse. The corpse is Shelley. Growing dusk and moonlight. Byron, Leigh Hunt, Trelawny and a group of Italian soldiers are present.

*Byron* Light the fire! (*The pyre is set aflame.*)

Oh iron will, more fleeting than butterfly wings! You spited Jupiter, vainglorious poor Prometheus, and what remains of your god-challenging heroism? Only a bottomless abyss of loss, a black hole of total emptiness in the hearts of all those who were granted the bliss of your acquaintance. Only those judged you who did not know you, the world condemned you in prejudicial stupidity for your faith in reason and that atheism which only was enlightened disdain and clear detachment from all superstition. I can testify against the world that you was the least selfish man that I ever knew to be alive. But our world consists of egoists. They are leading it, and they decide what is to be valued and devalued, and therefore only egoism has any value. We belong to a waning kind, we vain worshippers of beauty, who dare to abandon ourselves to the sensitive frailty of poetry, which normal banal world citizens soon no longer will be able to understand and bear with for its difficult supersensibility. And most transcendental of all was you, the most perfect gentleman that ever existed. You alone mastered me with your high morals, you defended the women against me and dared to judge me justly. The others only judged me unjustly or not at all. Now I am the last one to remain, the most absurd, last and vainest of poets. Nothing can justify my presence here any more, for you, my friend, noble Percy, was alone so brave that you could face the whole world in my defense, like you also alone defended our young friend the apothecary Keats, although I myself took part in the butchery by the critics of his wonderful elevated and high-flowing Icarus art. He was the innocence falling victim to the hereditary evil of man's inveterate incurable stupidity, you alone took up his defense against eternity and your last reading was a not yet closed volume by the young John Keats. No, I can't bear it any more. Leigh Hunt, I can't do and stand any more. It's not Shelley who has left us. Time and age and the world has lost its course by the loss of him.

*Leigh* Be strong, my friend Byron. If you have lost your backbone in Keats, I have myself lost my life by my broken heart which never can be restored. My life is a gulf of despair. I left England in chaos and brought my sick wife and six children here by my last effort. There was a possibility here to start a new literary life with Shelley. We two have nothing in common, Byron. With Shelley I had everything, the whole world and all my freedom. Now he is gone, and I am left alone with a hell of much deeper loss and loneliness than you. If you can't bear it any more, I have even less any life left to live.

*Byron* But my good Leigh, don't you have wife and children? You are even more settled than poor Shelley was, whose children all died or were taken away from him, except the last. You are established enough to have reason to live. What do I have? My life is strewn with corpses, and what's worse – a crowd of disowned and dishonoured mistresses like monkeys on my back.

*Leigh* Lord Byron, you are right. We don't belong. Shelley alone united us. My wife can't tolerate your so much younger mistress, whom you

have taken from her husband and whose other families you have forced into exile. You have no idealism, only presumptuousness, recklessness, ostentation and a bottomless pit of immorality.

*Byron* Let's have no division here at our friend's farewell pyre. I have a better idea. We are both excellent swimmers. Let's try the waves that killed the best of us! How long from the shore were they as the fury of billows overtook them? *(casts off his clothes, throws himself into the sea and continues swimming out to the yacht Bolivar anchored in the bay.)*

*Leigh* Yes, Byron, run away, escape to nothing, for that's all you ever did in life. You can only flee from yourself and without ever succeeding. Yes, swim out to sea against all the currents that life can turn against you, and never turn back, you dashing and incorrigible buccaneer! That's all you can do in life, to spite the noisy stupid mob and vulgar masses, that was your and Shelley's mission, but he could only do good while you could only cause damage. Here our ways are separated, here a brilliant set of spiritual and clairvoyant intelligent talents break up to never again unite, the splendid society of intellectual individualists that Shelley so successfully could bring together. Here end our lives, by the burning body of Shelley and Byron disappearing swimming out to sea in the obsession of his demonic moonlight lunacy. There was never a more beautiful soul than our Shelley, and never a more irresistible adventurer than Byron.

*(Trelawny sticks his hand into the pyre and saves Shelley's heart from burning.)*

*Trelawny* I saved his heart.

*Leigh* His heart is with us forever. He himself, though, has left us and forever.

*Trelawny* Whom the gods love die young.

*Leigh* He died already when Keats died. And that wonderful talent died even younger.

*Trelawny* Shelley found happiness in the end, though.

*Leigh* Yes, he found more happiness than he had ever felt before. But now they are both dead and happiness with them, while the unhappiness of Byron continues to live.

*Trelawny* How long?

*Leigh* Well, we shall see.

*(The cinders from the pyre slowly fade in their glow. Everything is put out with the fire.)*

#### Scene 6. London, many years later.

*Leigh Hunt* My life turned into a chaos after Shelley's death. Around Byron everything was chaos. For me things turned out better as I came away from him. But you followed him to Greece, Trelawny. What do you say? Was his Greek journey a strained bluff to save his face to his lost audience, or was he really serious?

*Trelawny (trimming his mustachios)* A difficult issue, Mr. Hunt. He was definitely finished as a poet after Genoa, and he knew it. No one thought worse of the last cantos of his "Don Juan" than himself. "Poetry is dead," he said, "and I have survived both it and myself, to my own double misfortune." But he truly hoped to achieve something in Greece. That was his last clinging to life. He hoped it would at least bring some meaning to his life in the end. The death blow to his poetry, do you know what it was?

Leigh No?

Trelawny The letter from Goethe.

Leigh But that was only appreciative?

Trelawny Yes, the world's leader of literature flattered Byron to death. After that Byron never wrote anything that he could like himself. Hypocrisy was his life's greatest terror, and when even Goethe himself feigned understanding, the last literary illusions of Byron were lost, and after that Byron could never more write any beautiful poetry without experiencing himself as a hypocrite. In Greece he could at least die for a good cause, he thought, and he hoped sincerely to do so. But he died of weakness in his bed after a minor cold.

Leigh How were his last moments?

Trelawny I can still hear him rave. He was always eloquent even in his delirium and always Byronic:

*(The scene is a sick-bed with a delirious Byron)*

Byron Do you really believe that I want to live, doctor? I have nothing left to live for, and I wasn't even allowed to die for the freedom of Greece! The Greeks only fight among themselves, while the Turks are setting and pulling their net around them and all the nations of Europe abandon them, including England. England is dependent on Turkish money, the Russians paralyze Austria, and the lovely France is laid in chains. Only I took up a defense for Greece, and here I die completely worthless and powerless in my bed! But it's better to die in any manner than not to be able to leave life when you have finished. I am so bitterly sick of life, and I bless the moment when I may leave it. Few people have lived more intensely than I. I have consumed sixty years in half that time, for I almost never slept. I am probably literarily a young but burnt out old man. I got the whole world far too early. I was spoilt by my destiny and consumed by my own reputation, and all the pleasures and enjoyable vices I was given far too much licence to wallow in all imaginable and unimaginable forms. The disadvantage with this all too intensive life is that I have lost all my illusions and human ideals in the bargain. That's probably why I have been already dead since I buried myself alive in the vices of Venice...

Trelawny He was afraid of two things only: to become mad, like all his ancestors, or to die slowly in his bed, which he did. To get him into shape the doctors undertook to bleed him several times, although he protested. As a result he became even more sleepless and nervous and even had some epileptic fits. But now and then he could be very bright again:

Byron *(the bed is brought to light again)* You can't imagine the strange thoughts that affect me as the fever drives me out of my mind. I suddenly believe myself to be a Jew, then a Mahometan, a Christian, all three at the same time and a member of every sect belonging to the three religions, and that I shall unite them all three. In front of me lies eternity and all the world, and faced with these dwindling spiritual escapes beyond fantasy and reality I can only feel the deepest satisfaction.

Trelawny They bled him again, they were three awkward amateurs including an assistant, and they scratched themselves confusedly behind their ears and could be no wiser. They could not understand Byron's illness which apparently was such a trifle but still evidently fatal. Byron's resistance was at an end, and he quite consciously gave up life himself.

Byron Your efforts to save my life are in vain. It just so happens that I am about to die. I don't complain of my ignominious loss of life, since I came

here to Greece only to die for something beautiful and get rid of my living worries. All that I still had I have sacrificed for the cause of Greece, and now it will also be my life.

*Trelawny* That was the last intelligible thing he said. Then he fell into chronic delirium until he quietly passed away after a few days.

*Leigh* Did he have any consequence at all for the Greek fight for freedom?

*Trelawny* At least not militarily. The beautiful Missolonghi was completely bombed and flattened out later, and the Turks were clearly in control of the situation. Then all Europe abandoned Greece, as it already did in 1453, the fall of Constantinople seemed to repeat itself, everyone saw the hopelessness of the situation and seemed to give up, except Byron's readers in England. They demanded by their public opinion that England would take up the freedom mantle of Byron and defend the Greeks against the Turkish oppression, England did and gradually got all Europe to follow suit. This is the Byronic miracle, which alone saved the freedom of Greece.

*Leigh* That's what I thought. But what did Byron really die of?

*Trelawny* There were strange phenomena at the autopsy. Byron's brain was that of a very old man. *Dura mater* had grown into the bone of the skull, and *pia mater* was thoroughly bloodshot. Byron's heart was in a very bad shape, and the liver was consumed. If Byron had survived his 37-year crisis he would not have survived very long.

*Leigh* Very strange, while Keats and Shelley died before they even had had time to begin to live. None of them reached even thirty.

*Trelawny* But Shelley's death was the most remarkable: with Keats' book left open in his pocket as the storm suddenly surprised them, completely disfigured into indefinability by the living sea, hidden in haste in a provisional grave on the beach, impossible to transport because of the sanitary laws of Tuscany, therefore cremated openly in view of the Mediterranean sea, with Lord Byron, me and you as witnesses, and not until then transported as dust in an urn to the side of his son and John Keats at the cemetery of strangers by the Cestius pyramid.

*Leigh* Shelley invited Keats to his place, but Keats was the one who got his brother of destiny to his side instead.

*Trelawny* Who was the greatest poet of the three?

*Leigh* They all had their credits and debits, Byron as a brilliant artist of words and human psychologist but almost morbidly without a character, the noble Shelley unique as a character and philanthropist but all too unearthly and unrealistic as a poet, like also Blake; and Keats, the clearest and purest of them as genius of form and artist of words but hardest hit from the beginning by a mortal illness.

*Trelawny* They say he would never have become ill and died if the critics hadn't attacked his "Endymion" so hard.

*Leigh* In that case they all three died only of the failure of their time to understand and appreciate them.

*Trelawny* Will they ever be fairly judged and understood?

*Leigh* Keats and Byron probably but hardly Shelley.

*Trelawny* Why not Shelley?

*Leigh* His clarity of mind was not of this world. He was too wise for our poor humanity to ever be able to catch up with him and become equally percipient.

*Epilogue.*

*The Man* You haven't told me anything.

*The Lady* Is that not enough?

*Man* You have only presented me with a shadow play without any clear contours. What became of Byron's children and Shelley's?

*Lady* Shelley's son with Harriet died. His second son with Mary is today the legitimate baronet Shelley. All Byron's children were marked by his hereditary condition. They died no older than their father, became mad like him, became known only for their eccentricism and never experienced any normal human happiness. The same fate befell all his mistresses. Both the wife and sister died in grief and poverty. His dismal destructiveness became not only the fate of Keats and Shelley, the wife and sister, the children and his mistresses. Everything he touched was stricken by his enigmatic curse, which he could not control himself.

*Man* But Byron's male comrades could also manage well enough, Hobhouse, for instance.

*Lady* Yes, they avoided getting ruined if they were idiots enough. Hobhouse was the most imbecile of them. The British Empire consists of his likes.

*Man* Yet you also loved Byron and are still alive.

*Lady* No, misguided man, I was never in love with Lord Byron. I was only fascinated by his reputation, and I enjoyed his poetry.

*Man* But he gave you a child.

*Lady* To which he was totally indifferent. Shelley cared for her much more. Only Byron's cruelty matched and challenged the good Shelley's noble constructivity and honest idealism.

*Man* So you were more in love with Shelley?

*Lady* Yes, he was the only man I loved, and that's my life's secret.

*Man* So you were practically his third wife?

*Lady* He never had any wife except Mary. Harriet was a poor wild hysteric who Shelley had the bad luck to get across. She was only his preparation for true love, which he only found in Mary.

*Man* And what became of Mary afterwards?

*Lady* She and the Williams widow lived together unseparable in Italy for many years, and both were frequently courted since they were still young and attractive. Captain Trelawny proposed to Mary, but she turned him down, as she kept her character and remained a Shelley. The wife to captain Williams, little Jane, was courted by Shelley's friend from school, the audacious Hogg, who proposed to her. She accepted him but confessed before their marriage that she never had been married to captain Williams but had some other legal husband in India or somewhere. So there was no marriage, but Hogg stuck to his intentions, and they lived happily ever after.

*Man* And you yourself?

*Lady* I am a good catholic today who lives only for charity.

*Man* So you didn't accept Shelley's atheism.

*Lady* My friend, you still haven't grasped an inch of the character of Shelley. He called his view of life atheistic only as an understatement of the fact that he knew God better than anyone else.

*Man* So he was somewhat divine, then?

*Lady* If anything, he was "Immanuel", "God with us".

*Man* Which one of his wives did he love the most?

*Lady* What do you mean?



*Man* Jane Williams boasted to Mary after their husbands' shipwreck that Shelley had loved her far more than Mary.

*Lady* So you are just here to fish out scabrous gossip for your readers. I saw that the moment you entered. Avaunt, you dirty Frenchman! (*drives him out*) You will never understand the nobility of Shelley! All you write about the best man who ever lived will be false and completely wrong! Your slant on the purest idealistic motives in a carnal direction is just abominable!

*Man* Still it must be true that Byron was openly and unscrupulously bisexual? His homosexual habits and tendencies were perhaps the very curse he carried around?

*Lady* Young man, I should not have told you anything. You know nothing about the soul and its qualities. All you can think of is indecency.

*Man* But that's the only kind of story you can sell in these days!

*Lady* That is why Lord Byron, Keats and Shelley died, who were the last real poets. Their followers, like Tennyson and Browning, are just drivelling prattlers on verse. But Byron could write! – if yet he could not love. Keats was the greatest literary promise after Shakespeare, and the splendid Shelley was the noblest, most unattainable and ideal personality and poet who ever lived. Only in Beethoven's music have I ever heard anything that sounded like Shelley. A book or biography will never be able to do him justice. That is why I would like to give you some advice for your departure.

*Man* Well?

*Lady* Write nothing about Shelley. Satisfy yourself with investigating Byron, whose weaknesses you are more qualified to understand than Shelley's virtues.

*Man* But still they did have some closer relationship?

*Lady* Are men not allowed to know men without being associated with homosexuality? I tell you, that sex is the curse of man, and that only art, music above all but also literature, stands above it. Mix art with sex, and the art will be ruined. That's why literature is completely ruined today by the so called naturalism. And what follows in the form of that decadence of which you yourself are an representative is even worse. Byron, Shelley and John Keats are dead! Then at least allow us, who knew them, to cherish and honour their memories in peace! Let those who care honour them as they deserve! People like you, the flirting leeches of literature and populist parasites of sensational journalism have no sense of human dignity and only seek to deprive humanity of the individual human dignity that still exists sporadically in constantly more scarce oases and hiding-places. Mr. Prosaist, I can but despise you, for you will never be able to write any poetry.

*(She falls silent. The man does not know what to say, can ultimately but rise and depart with some shame without himself understanding why. He hasn't touched the old lady but still feels like a ravisher.)*

*The End.*

*Translated 28.7 – 2.8.2017*