

MARY SHELLEY: FRANKENSTEIN UNBOUND

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CHARACTERS

JOHN POLIDORI – ghost narrator, writer & personal assistant/physician to Lord Byron, 20's

MARY SHELLEY - prodigy writer of 'Frankenstein', daughter of feminist and radical reformer, 16-20's

PERCY SHELLEY - poet, disciple of Mary's father, 20's

CLAIRE CLAIRMONT - wannabe starlet, Mary's half-sister, 16-20's

LORD BYRON - celebrity writer, late 20's - early 30's

SETTING

The various homes of Byron and the Shelleys, located in London, Geneva, and Venice.

TIME

Early 1800's (1814-1822)

SCENE BREAKDOWN

SCENE I	Limbo (Prologue)
SCENE II	Graveyard in London England (Night)
SCENE III	Byron's Swiss Villa (Day)
SCENE IV	Byron's Swiss Villa (Night)
SCENE V	Mary's Guest Room in Byron's Villa (Night)
SCENE VI	Byron's Villa (Morning)
SCENE VII	Shelley's Home in England
SCENE VIII	Byron's Venetian Home
SCENE IX	Shelley's Venetian Home
SCENE X	Shelley's Venetian Home (Different day)
SCENE XI	Byron's Venetian Home
SCENE XII	Shelley's Venetian Home
SCENE XIII	Beach in Italy

SCENE I

(An upstage center FIREPLACE comprises a permanent set, representing all of the homes that are lived in by the Elect. Center Stage there is seating enough for 5 that matches the timeframe. Downstage/Stage Left, there is an audience-facing sofa.

White light FLASHES, thunder rolls - electrical buzzing, as if a bolt of lightning is being captured.

Orange spotlight representing glow from the fireplace slowly illuminates JOHN POLIDORI (20's, well-dressed and brooding) sitting on the sofa, with a COPY OF 'FRANKENSTEIN' in his hand.)

POLIDORI

Good evening. My name is John Polidori. During my lifetime, I created but a single work of lasting note: a vampire novel, the first in the English language. It was an inspiration for Bram Stoker, Anne Rice... and others. Yes, I am to be credited - or blamed - for the creation of the romantic vampire.

(The glow expands to 3 other seated people: LORD BYRON, late 20's, handsome; CLAIRE CLAIRMONT, voluptuous teenager, bouncy curls held back with a ribbon, leaning toward Byron; PERCY SHELLEY, early 20's, angelic-faced, messy-haired, wearing stained white labcoat over suit. They are posed impassively, like dolls)

POLIDORI (CONT'D)

The idea came to me during a fateful night, at the villa of Lord Byron...to whom it was mistakenly attributed. After all, who but the creator of 'Don Juan', and his close circle of the Elect, could write anything worthy of praise?

(sighs, shakes head)

But ignore my bitterness - in truth, I was a member of that Elect, if only for a fleeting moment. My position on the sidelines - and then, in the afterlife - provided me a unique perspective... for there was another story conceived that dark and stormy night at the villa... a tale of pride and ruin, which imbued its principle characters, and its creator, with immortality.

(indicates book in hand)

You have but to walk outside your door on All Hallow's Eve to see that patchwork of dead human flesh, brought to life in order to serve the vain ambitions of an insane genius. One word comes to mind: 'Frankenstein'. A name you might attribute to the monster, rather than to the doctor. Yet, as the Bard wrote, "What's in a name?"

(Polidori rises from the sofa, and inspects the nearest character, Percy)

POLIDORI (CONT'D)

Percy Shelley, 'The Doctor'. With a lofty aspiration to create life and beauty, he unleashed a force of darkness.

(studies Lord Byron)

Lord Byron, the dark side of Victor Frankenstein's psyche, which comes to control him as he spirals into madness. The indiscriminate genius, who created to exalt himself, only to abandon and curse that which he created.

(eyes Claire contemptuously)

Claire Clairmont, sweet Elizabeth, object of Frankenstein's desire, victim of the monster's vengeance. As a flower beautifies its surroundings with its simple and delicate design, the innocent is that which is easy to understand...but also, that which is easiest to destroy.

(The spotlight dims on the seated group. Another pale spotlight representing moonlight comes up on teenager MARY SHELLEY, Stage Right, standing next to a huge GRAVESTONE reading 'Mary Wollstonecraft')

POLIDORI (CONT'D)

(indicates Mary)

'The Monster'. Intelligent, lonely, confused - yearning desperately for companionship, purpose, and acceptance.

(stops)

Tonight, you will see these characters presented not as they were in the novel, but as they were first known to the young authoress. Her name was Mary Shelley, and this is her tale... not the one she wrote, but the one she lived.

SCENE II

(Spotlight dims on Polidori, leaving only the spotlight on Mary and the gravestone. Claire moves to the other side of the gravestone and crouches to eavesdrop. Percy enters her spotlight. He stops, runs fingers through his hair)

MARY

There's a ghost in the graveyard tonight.

(Percy startles, looks mystified, until Mary turns around, and smiles at his coat - he takes it off, chuckling)

PERCY

No ghost, I'm afraid... but nonetheless, I will possess you!

(Percy flings coat aside and throws his arms around Mary, who returns the embrace with happy laughter)

MARY

You will not! I will not be ruined by someone who smells of gunpowder and...
(sniffs)

Other odors I do not recognize. Have you been in a war?

PERCY

(shudders)

What an awful thought!

MARY

I would think so - I would feel compelled to speak to my father about you, if I thought your professed beliefs toward violence were so fickle.

PERCY

Never - I've experienced enough of it already. However, I confess: I was lavishing my attentions on another mentor, Professor Lind. Part of our study required the use of combustion - hence, the smell.

MARY

(teasing)

Oh but Percy, only gods can make fire - everyone knows that.

PERCY

And only by their will do our limbs move - name us, then, Prometheus reborn - for Lind and I have stolen fire!

MARY

(eyes widen)

Percy, did you...?

PERCY

Cause dead frogs to move, through the power of galvanism? Yes.

MARY

Did they hop all about the study, in wild abandon?

PERCY

That would be a sight, wouldn't it? I dearly wish they had. There was a reaction, nothing more than a twitch. But Mary, it was wonderful. Do you think me wicked for saying so?

(Mary glances at the gravestone of her mother, serious)

MARY

Creating life is not wicked. For certain, it is a better goal than destroying it.

(Percy takes her hands, turning her away from the gravestone)

PERCY

You are capable of creating a whole, perfect being within yourself - a process which we men are unable to recreate. As a woman, you are the natural alchemist.

MARY

You dismiss the contribution of your own sex to the equation? It requires the sum of two parts to equal the whole.

PERCY

(draws her in closer)

Yes, true.... I would not mind if you added me to the sum, and see what our two parts create.

MARY

(pulls away)

You are a married man.

PERCY

And you do not believe in marriage - you think it a form of bondage, remember?

(indicates gravestone)

Just as she did.

MARY

And my father, and yourself. Yet each of you, of your own free will, have entered into the very union you despise. There has to be a reason.

PERCY

Many reasons. My father and I held each other in mutual contempt, and I was eager to escape... she was in trouble, and I was convinced that marrying her would save her from it.

MARY

And am I not yet another girl in trouble, with whom you fancy yourself in love?

PERCY

I was young, then - in my inexperience, I mistook sympathy for love. The night I met you, however... I loved your mind as much as your form, and I knew I could not live without both.

MARY

So you told me. I did not believe you, at first - I thought you simply wanted to bed me, and were playing upon my sympathies in order to accomplish the task.

PERCY

You must have thought me a monster!

MARY

Not a monster. An opportunist, and a foolish one at that - one who believed that I possessed a kind heart, and could be moved to sacrifice my virtue on account of pity.

PERCY

You sell yourself short, as usual.

MARY

I don't, but it's kind of you to refute me. In order for me to believe the virtue of something, it must be proven.

PERCY

You have the mind of a scientist, then.

MARY

Yes, but I apply empirical technique to matters of the heart. I start with the bleakest of assumptions, because that seems the safest to me, and work upwards from there. When I returned to England, your ardor had not waned - indeed, you seemed all the more wretched with desire. It was then that I began to believe it was sincere.

PERCY

You truly are a cynic! But now that we've established the sincerity of my love, how are you in trouble? With a father such as yours, are you not better off than most?

MARY

(sighs)

My father is a man of principle. He loved my mother very much... he denied her nothing. He has done the same for me. I have no complaints.

PERCY

I should think not. Though that vulgar shrew he married must be... trying, to deal with.

MARY

I will not refute it! But let us speak plainly: I know you promised to pay my father's debts...

PERCY

And I would have, had my family not intervened. Mary, if I've imposed upon you-

MARY

No, not at all! Father took it badly, but I know you didn't mean to disappoint. I meant only that you have a habit of trying to rescue people, to your own detriment.

PERCY

And to yours? Are you truly afraid I will 'ruin' you?

MARY

(takes deep breath)

I don't know. Father always taught me that there was no such thing as principle, only reactions to circumstance, and that I should abhor anything that tries to sway a person away from their own innate judgment. Yet he also taught me to reserve my passion for intellectual pursuits. I feel constrained, by a man who does not believe in constraints.

PERCY

That is perfectly natural. You have prepared your mind long enough - now is the time for stimulation, for which you must venture outside your home, into the wide, grand world.

MARY

(mock-scandalized)

Percy! I think you overestimate my father's esteem for you, if you think to spirit me away!

PERCY

I cannot abide Harriet any longer, not even for the children's sake. She is avaricious and simple-minded in the extreme. Besides, she now gives her affections to a young soldier-

MARY

Oh Percy... I am sorry....

PERCY

Do not be sorry. I would have thought it healthy for her to take a lover, or several if she wished. But her heart only has room for one.

MARY

Whereas your heart has plenty of room for all.

(Beat - Percy is confused whether that was a compliment or a criticism. Mary smiles)

MARY (CONT'D)

Your point is, she will not suffer in your absence.

PERCY

Yes, exactly right! And your Father, I'm sure, will understand - he cannot blame you for being your mother's daughter.

MARY

It sounds wonderful! Percy, if I am hesitant, it is only because I love you so fiercely. That is also why I must warn you - I am not a person for whom happiness comes easily...

PERCY

Nonsense. You are a child of love and light, Mary. Once you are acquainted with happiness, it shall never leave you.

(Mary embraces him again, thrilled)

MARY

Where will we go?

PERCY

How does France sound, to start? Then to Switzerland, and everywhere in between.

MARY
It sounds splendid! When do we leave?

PERCY
Now.

CLAIRE
Now?!

(They startle, seeing Claire stumble past the gravestone. She is the same age as Mary, but seems younger and more naive. She trips, and Percy catches her. She smiles, embarrassed, and tries to get her dress and hair back in order)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
Oh...thank you Percy...

MARY
Claire! What are you doing here?

CLAIRE
Oh do forgive me! I did not mean to interrupt so rudely, but you said something about leaving.

MARY
Yes, we are... but that is not what I asked you.

CLAIRE
Mary, um...I have accompanied you to each of these meetings. Not to be meddlesome, though! It was the only way I could think to excuse your absences with Father and Mother...

PERCY
That was very kind of you, Claire.

(Claire flushes. Mary eyes her, still skeptical)

CLAIRE
I know what you're thinking, Mary, but I'm not spying for Mother. She shouldn't play favorites the way she does... I wish I had been your mother's child, instead of hers! Then I would be more like you and Fanny.

MARY
(relaxes)
No, I'm sorry - I've become somewhat distrustful. I don't blame you for your mother, Claire. It doesn't matter who was born to whom - Fanny is our father's daughter despite her lack of blood connection, and we have never regarded you as anything but our beloved sister.

(Claire brightens, and hugs her)

CLAIRE

It will be so dreary without you!

(pulls back)

Take me with you? I would so love to go on a grand adventure with the two of you!

(Mary and Percy exchange looks)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

I promise not to be a bother - I'm very good at French.

MARY

(laughs)

It's true - she is better at it than I am.

PERCY

(smirks)

I doubt that.

(clears throat)

Anyway, it might be prudent to have an interpreter with us. However, I will leave it up to you.

(Mary looks conflicted for a beat)

MARY

I would be glad to have you accompany us, Claire.

CLAIRE

Thank you Mary! What about Fanny?

MARY

Father would soon be destitute without Fanny to hold everything together. Besides, she's much too practical – even if she did wish to play the nomad, which I doubt, she'd never approve such a trip without meticulous preparation.

PERCY

And Fanny would not be able to do so without raising your father's suspicions. It's bad enough I'm stealing two of his daughters, let alone a third...

CLAIRE

Yes, that's true! I must collect my things at once!

(Claire skips off. Mary leans in to Percy)

MARY

Never Claire.

What? PERCY

Anyone else. But never Claire. MARY

Oh. Why yes, of course. PERCY

Why 'of course'? MARY

Because sisters are dangerous things to come between.
 (both smile, he sobers)
 You have my word, Mary. PERCY

(BLACKOUT. Headstone prop is removed. Claire, Mary and Percy wait in black Stage Right for the next scene)

SCENE III

(Spotlight on Polidori on the sofa)

POLIDORI

The charming threesome traveled Europe, exploring the Castle Frankenstein and the land of Geneva, where Mary's fictional doctor would reside. They did not cease their wanderings, until they had not two pennies to rub together. Mary arrived at her former home as a pregnant, unwed teenager in love with a married man, and was promptly turned away by her disappointed father. Claire was soon to indulge in a scandal of her own, when she... acquainted herself with the most famous writer and seducer of that age. Before there was such a thing as rock stars... there was Lord Byron.

(Byron rises from the chair. Lights up on the fireplace and seats Stage Left. Byron sweeps past Polidori, fussing with neck-tie.)

BYRON

Doctor, I am in a very ill humor. Fix it.

(Polidori startles, losing his narrator calm, rises to join the scene as a character)

POLIDORI

Yes, master. But how am I to do that?

BYRON

Pills? Smoke? Tinctures? Confound it, Polidori, you are the physician!

(Polidori fixes his necktie for him)

POLIDORI

I should think the easiest solution would have been to avoid the source of your anxiety.

BYRON

Rescind my invitation to Miss Clairemont? I considered it. But then I would be denied a chance to meet Shelley and the girl. They come packaged in a set, you see, and the world supply of interesting persons is severely lacking.

POLIDORI

Am I not a person of interest?

(Byron looks him up and down, throws back head and laughs)

POLIDORI (CONT'D)

Pray, what is there except writing poetry that I cannot do better than you?

BYRON

(points)

First, I can hit with a pistol the keyhole of that door.

(points)

Secondly, I can swim across that river to yonder point.

(puts an arm around his shoulders)

And thirdly, I can give you a damned good thrashing.

Byron smacks him on the back of his head before releasing him. Byron hears approaching footsteps, flashes a grin.

BYRON (CONT'D)

Here they are, at last!

POLIDORI

(aside, to audience)

For a master to degrade his student is a sign that he is threatened - he would not otherwise waste his time. This is true for Lord Byron especially, as a man given to fits of jealousy in place of love.

(Mary, Percy and Claire enter the light, from Stage Right. Claire runs ahead of the others, embraces an unwilling Byron.)

CLAIRE

It is lovely to see you again!

BYRON

(pries her off him)

Yes, I'm sure. Have you done any writing or acting, since you last sought out my advice in London?

CLAIRE

Oh, no... I'm afraid without your guidance, I am at a loss.

(seductive)

But...I still love the theatre with a passion... and I am eager to return, if it will have me-

(Byron spins her around, to face Polidori behind him)

BYRON

This is John Polidori, my physician and friend.

CLAIRE

Charmed!

POLIDORI

Likewise.

(Byron approaches Percy & Mary)

BYRON

The poet and his muse! Mr. Shelley, I presume?

(Percy nods, shake hands. Byron lifts Mary's hand)

And Miss-

MARY

Mrs. Shelley.

(Beat, as Byron regards her with surprise)

BYRON

...Mrs. Shelley.

(kisses her hand, raises eyebrow at Percy)

Just how many wives do you have?

(Percy and Mary exchange nervous glances. Byron laughs)

POLIDORI

Do forgive him, he has a wicked sense of humor.

BYRON

I am very badly behaved. But I do not desire to be forgiven.

(Byron gestures for them to take a seat - Mary & Percy sit together on the end, but there's awkwardness for the others. Claire follows Byron to get a seat next to him - Polidori tries to cut in, but Claire is insistent and looks at him questioningly. Being a gentleman, Polidori is forced to relinquish the seat. He goes to the other side of Byron)

BYRON (CONT'D)

You see, I get restless when kept indoors. I hope the skies clear tomorrow, to allow for the activities I have planned.

CLAIRE

Nothing too strenuous, I hope.

BYRON

Oh? You used to enjoy physical exertion.

CLAIRE

Yes, but that was before I acquired a passenger.

(Claire places a hand on her stomach, smiling. Lord Byron pales, John Polidori rubs his temple like it hurts)

MARY

Claire! That is such wonderful news!

PERCY

Willmouse shall have a playmate!

BYRON

Willmouse?

MARY

Our son, William. He was born early this year.

BYRON

You should have told me of the child, Mary - I would have broadened my invitation.

MARY

Oh, that's kind of you. But Wilmouse is far too small to enjoy a place such as this.

PERCY

Who is the child's father, Claire?

BYRON

Is that question rhetorical, or do you truly not know?

PERCY

Excuse me?

MARY

There has never been impropriety between Percy and my stepsister.

BYRON

Six weeks of travel with any person would lead me to impropriety.

(to Claire)

You think it is mine, no doubt.

CLAIRE

I do not think it. I know it.

BYRON

Indeed! Because there was no other.

CLAIRE

Precisely.

(Beat. Awkward, fidgety silence)

POLIDORI

Would you like to see Byron's menagerie?

PERCY

Where is it?

POLIDORI

Hey have the run of the house. I should almost call it an aviary, as there is a predominance of birds ranging from falcons and parrots to herons, peacocks, and Egyptian cranes. But we have mammals as well.

BYRON

I brought in a fox last week, and two monkeys. The monkeys are charming.

POLIDORI

Yes, charming... I must use a ladder when I clean, due to their *charming* sport. Watch out for the honey badger, the crocodile, the bear, and most of all, Lyon.

CLAIRE

Lion!?

POLIDORI

Yes, the dog. He's sulking after an incident with the bear - of all the animals in this house, he's the one most likely to bite.

(They exit Stage Left following Polidori, except for Mary, whose hand Byron catches to stop her)

BYRON

Wait. May I speak with you a moment?

MARY

All right.

(Mary sits down beside Byron, who leans in to her with intensity)

BYRON

Mary-

MARY

If you are about to claim undying love for me at first sight, I must warn you of my complete disinterest.

(Byron is flustered, if only for a moment)

BYRON

Your knowledge of my character is severely lacking, if you think that such a warning would be a deterrent. But that wasn't my aim - I'm merely curious.

MARY

About what?

BYRON

That painter of nightmares, Fuseli - you have his look, only feminine.

MARY

He...was a close acquaintance of my mother.

BYRON

I know. From what I understand, your mother was a radical little hellion - I admire that greatly.

MARY

Thank you...I think. I never met her - all I know of her is from her writings.

BYRON

Well, all I know of you is what I heard second-hand in London. Something about a scandal?

MARY

(nods)

I was pregnant before William. I became very ill...my physician said that stress was to blame... Father was very angry with me. Percy was avoiding creditors. I was alone. But once again, I was the one who survived, while another died. My... mother died shortly after giving birth to me, you see. My little girl lived for only a few days.

(beat)

Some said I lost her because I wasn't wed to Percy.

BYRON

(shakes his head)

Young lady, marriage is overrated - I know this from recent experience. I am here for the very reason of... recovery from a marriage.

MARY

You need not lecture. Percy and I are not married - he is still married to another who needs his support.

BYRON

You introduced yourself with the name of missus Shelley.

MARY

Why is that so strange? It prevents too many awkward questions. But the woman who legally owns the name is not the one functioning in the capacity of a wife.

(beat)

Not very often, anyway.

BYRON

Ah! But see, that is the other side of it! Percy espouses a belief in free love, a philosophy I embrace.

MARY

As do I.

BYRON

Yet, when I assumed Percy to be the father of Claire's child, you insisted that was impossible.

MARY

It is. Her child is yours, Byron.

BYRON

Anyway, it is quite clear the rules Percy has laid for himself - but has he encouraged you to take other lovers?

MARY

Yes. There is a close friend of his, who he thought would be a good match for me.

BYRON

And you no doubt seized upon this opportunity, being that you are also a disciple of free-love.

MARY

...I became pregnant with Wilmouse, by Percy.

BYRON

Oh yes, that would make it impossible, wouldn't it?

MARY

What can I say? Maternal instincts consumed me.

BYRON

And what about now? Do you think Percy would mind overly much, if the two of us were to have a connection?

MARY

If I wanted to make such a connection, he would not say a word against it.

BYRON

Then surely I must be repulsive to you.

MARY

(laughs)

Oh yes, horribly!

BYRON

And they call me wicked! Lady, you toy with me - you know very well what I'm trying to get at. What has Percy done to earn such devotion from one such as you?

MARY

He takes me to see scientific exhibitions.

BYRON

That's his idea of a romantic outing?

MARY

Yes, and mine.

BYRON

A woman for whom science is an aphrodisiac... well, then you should not be adverse to experimentation.

(He rises to help Mary up - she thinks - then pulls her into a kiss just as the others return from Stage Left)

POLIDORI

Master!

CLAIRE

What is the meaning of this?!

(Byron defiantly stands between Mary and Percy)

BYRON

Shelley, I am taking your woman as my own!

(A beat. Percy tries to look past at Mary, but Byron makes sure to block his view)

BYRON (CONT'D)

How do you wish to settle this? With swords, or pistols?

PERCY

Neither. It seems a settled issue to me already, provided Mary does not object.

(A beat. Byron laughs)

BYRON

Oh no! It is real! It's all real! A woman impervious to charm, a man impervious to jealousy!

MARY

I told you so.

BYRON

Ah, bless you both!

(Byron embraces puzzled Percy, lets go)

BYRON (CONT'D)

Percy, I would never want to ruin a union such as yours - Love is by far the best of all human virtues, and the two of you are absolutely mad with it!

(BLACKOUT. Everyone except Percy and Claire exit)

SCENE IV

(The sound of pelting rain, a roaring and crackling log fire. Lights up, an orange glow: Polidori is center stage. Percy is curled up on the sofa next to a stack of books, head on a pillow, holding his stomach with pain. Claire gives him a dose of laudanum)

POLIDORI

1816, later to be known as The Year Without A Summer. Volcanic ash darkened the sky. Temperatures were freezing, Rain, fog and famine ruled the land. Our group was undeterred: we hiked the alps, rode horseback, explored castles and dungeons, and sailed Lake Geneva. But then the storms came, and we were forced indoors.

(Byron and Mary, the latter of whom is wrapped in a blanket, enter from Stage Right, approaching Polidori. Polidori loses the use of one foot - Byron catches hold of him, and supports him, limping to the seats - Mary follows, shivering)

CLAIRE

What happened?!

BYRON

Polidori can't jump.

POLIDORI

I can, and I did! It was the landing that I miscalculated.

(Mary takes Claire's place beside Percy, he rises from the pillow to put his head on her shoulder. Meanwhile, Claire goes to sit next to Byron)

MARY

Byron saw me walking through the mud and drizzle, and challenged Polidori to leap from the balcony in order to offer his arm to me.

BYRON

Anyone should have been able to make it from that height.
(to Percy)
Now that you have Mary, may I take the pillow?

PERCY

Ah, yes of course.

(Percy hands him the pillow, and Byron carefully places it under Polidori's twisted ankle)

POLIDORI

I didn't know you had so much feeling. Yesterday you were all too eager to shoot me in Percy's stead.

BYRON

(hand on Percy's shoulder)
Though Percy has some scruples about dueling, I have none and shall be at all times ready. Claire, is that laudanum? Pain is making Polidori more insufferable than usual.

(Byron takes the bottle from Claire, gives Polidori a sip)

MARY

(cradles Percy's head)
One injured, the other afflicted with nephritis... to think, that the two doctors should be in the worst health!

CLAIRE

Byron, you didn't finish the Coleridge poem from the night before – I think it was 'Christabel'? Perhaps we should resume?

BYRON

Yes, some diversion is in order! And we were at the best part – where the monster-woman is revealed!
(grabs copy of 'Christabel', reads)
Beneath the lamp the lady bowed/And slowly rolled her eyes around/Then drawing in her breath aloud/Like one that shuddered, she unbound/The cincture from beneath her breast:

(Percy lifts his head and stares deliriously at Mary's chest)

BYRON (CONT'D)

Her silken robe, and inner vest/Dropped to her feet, and full in view, Behold! Her bosom and half her side- a sight to dream of, not to tell! O shield her! Shield sweet Christabel!

(Percy shrieks and leaps off the sofa)

MARY

Percy! What is wrong?!

PERCY

(points at Mary's chest)

E-e-e-EYES!

BYRON

What? Have I missed something?

PERCY

(holds head, trembling)

THERE ARE EYES ON HER CHEST! EYES IN PLACE OF...!

(Byron leans in to inspect - Mary indignantly shoves him back)

POLIDORI

Claire, how much laudanum has Percy taken?

CLAIRE

Um... I'm not sure?

(Percy scurries off Stage Left repeating 'shield me!' Byron cackles)

BYRON

Has such a high-pitched sound ever been heard from the throat of a man?!

POLIDORI

Laudanum makes him paranoid, it seems.

MARY

Will he be all right? Maybe I should go to him...

BYRON

I wouldn't recommend it, he thinks you have eyes for-

CLAIRE

I think there's been enough of that talk for one night! Someone should attend to Percy!

POLIDORI

Splash cold water on his face. I'll attend to him shortly.

(Claire nods, and exits Stage Left)

BYRON

I should hate to continue reading without Percy here to enjoy it. Since we are deprived of physical exercise, perhaps we should move on to the intellectual?

MARY

What have you in mind?

BYRON

Well, being that we are all supposedly writers, I issue a challenge: whichever one of us who creates a story of the macabre to rival Shelley's hallucinations, wins.

MARY

I have only written poetry.

BYRON

Hence the challenge. Your poems are lovely, but the child of Wollstonecraft can go to much darker realms of the imagination, I'm sure.

(BLACKOUT. Byron, Polidori exit Stage Left, Mary moves to the sofa)

SCENE V

(Lightning flashes illuminate Mary, asleep on the sofa, twitching, groaning as thunder rolls. Percy enters Stage Left with a CANDLE and stands over her, worried. She wakes up with a gasp, startling Percy)

PERCY

Mary! Are you all right?

MARY

Are you?

PERCY

Yes. The laudanum wore off. I apologize if I worried any of you.
(sits beside her)

What was it you were dreaming of?

MARY

I...I dreamed of the baby.

PERCY

Wilmouse?

MARY

No... *her*. Clara. I dreamed she was lying on a table, with the pallor of death, and you were standing over her... and there was a large machine, powered by lightning...and she moved... she opened her eyes...she

was alive...

PERCY

If only such a thing were possible-

MARY

Pray, do not say that! If you had seen my dream, you would never wish such a thing. It was monstrous.

(Percy draws her in close. BLACKOUT)

SCENE VI

(Lights up: the group is convened once more, seated in front of the fireplace. The storm is gone, replaced with soft sunlight.)

BYRON

How are the stories coming?

CLAIRE

Stories?

MARY

Byron challenged us all to write a frightening story last night.

CLAIRE

This is the first I've heard of it. I shall need more time.

BYRON

(sighs)

Don't worry about it.

PERCY

I will need more time as well. I am thinking mine will be about ghosts.

(Percy and Mary exchange glances. Percy squeezes her hand)

POLIDORI

I jotted down notes last night about a woman with a skull stripped of flesh, but I got no further than that. Do you have a story, Byron?

BYRON

An inkling of one. I've been fascinated with a creature called a vampire, a corpse which rises to feed off the blood of its victims.

POLIDORI

If that's all you've come up with, I have a suggestion: make the vampire alluring. Attractive, genteel,

preying on the young and vulnerable.

BYRON

Perhaps, in order to have access to blood without arousing suspicion, he should pose as a physician?

POLIDORI

Do what you wish. It is your story.

BYRON

No. You've already thought of more concerning my vampire than you did with your skull-head woman – you clearly know what should be done with it, so it is yours. What will you call your new vampire story?

POLIDORI

The...Vampyre?

BYRON

(rolls eyes, groans)

And you, Mary?

MARY

...I had a dream last night.

(they all lean in)

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts, kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of...

(glances at Percy)

...a man, stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stirs with an uneasy, half vital motion.

(shudders and 'oohs' from all)

BYRON

What sort of man is the doctor, and what is the nature of the thing he creates?

MARY

(looks at Percy)

The doctor...lost someone, wishes he could bring them back.

(glances at Claire)

There is a girl he loves. To him, she represents everything natural and beautiful.

(looks at Byron)

But his love is possessive, and he is desirous of harnessing the power of creation.

POLIDORI

Is the girl with him during these experiments?

MARY

She would never understand or condone what he is doing. He would not risk telling her.

POLIDORI

Does he have an assistant, then?

BYRON

Yes, a little minion do to his bidding, limping around saying 'Yes, master!'

(simultaneous expressions of disapproval from all)

MARY

I cannot abide people who serve no purpose but to listen and obey the will of their master. I could not bear to create such a character in my novels.

PERCY

I see what he's getting at though - I'm not sure it will be understood why the doctor would wish to create a frightening creature.

MARY

The doctor means for him to be beautiful, of course. But he cannot create a man out of whole cloth. He takes the best parts he can from dead bodies, and patches them together. The result cannot be anything but horrifying.

BYRON

What would this story be called?

PERCY

What about... 'The Modern Prometheus'?

BYRON

Hm. As much as I love your 'Prometheus Unbound', I don't think it conveys the proper tonality. What would be the monster's name?

MARY

The doctor considers him a failure, and leaves him unnamed.

BYRON

The name of the doctor, then?

MARY

His namesake is the castle, Frankenstein.

BYRON

Good. That should be the title.

MARY

'Frankenstein' does not say what it is. It sounds like a biography, and does not even hint at the creature.

BYRON

'Frankenstein' is a surname, correct? So wouldn't his 'child' receive his name?

MARY

If he lays such a claim to it - I don't think he would.

PERCY

Poor innocent creature! He did not choose a mockery of natural life, yet his father abandons him!

POLIDORI

As Lucifer was abandoned by his, in 'Paradise Lost'.

PERCY

Without his father to guide him, he seeks companionship.

MARY

And when he is repeatedly denied, he becomes increasingly wrathful, until he wreaks vengeance upon all.

BYRON

So the creature is simply a primitive, until the world shuns him and forces him to become a monster. Interesting.

PERCY

Which is the monster - Frankenstein, or his creature?

(murmurs and nods of approval)

BYRON

(takes Mary's hand)

Though it may be too soon to call, I say we have a winner.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE VII

(Lights up: Percy and Claire seated closely on the sofa, reading a newspaper. Spotlight on Polidori, seated near the fireplace)

POLIDORI

Never did I see the Shelleys again, and never were we as happy as we were that summer in Geneva. Immediately after I left Byron's employ I found myself adrift and in debt. Mary, Claire, and Percy experienced much the same, though their winter was more eventful: jealous that she was not invited to the villa, Mary's sister Fanny imbibed a lethal dose of laudanum. Percy's wife Harriet, heavy with child and lamenting Percy's abandonment, drowned herself in Hyde Park's Serpentine Lake. 2 weeks later a wedding was held for Mary and Percy, and Claire gave birth to Allegra. But Death had cast a shadow

over these events. Without the Elect to occupy her, Mary spent most of her days secluded in her bedroom, and wrote all hours of the night. Her story was about a happy young boy in Geneva, who loses his mother and then his sanity, as he embarks on a quest to resurrect life...

(Spotlight dims on Polidori. Mary enters Stage Left, looking tired and miserable. She stares at Percy and Claire - the seated pair laugh, and embrace. Enraged, Mary grabs Claire by her hair and pulls her up. Claire screams.

PERCY

Mary! What are you doing?!

MARY

(releases Claire)

Did I not make myself clear, that Claire was off limits?!

PERCY

Calm down! Claire hasn't done anything!

MARY

She never does.

CLAIRE

(lifts up newspaper)

We were reading the reviews for 'Frankenstein'!

(Mary freezes, looks at the paper. Claire shoves it into her hand)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Glowing reviews, all. The booksellers are having trouble keeping stock.

(Mary sits down on the sofa)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Percy and I were waiting for you to awake so we could tell you the good news, and congratulate you.

(Mary silently sobs)

PERCY

What is this, Mary?

MARY

What am I to think? You and Claire go out each evening, to heaps of places together!

CLAIRE

I have asked repeatedly if you wished to go with us!

MARY

Us?! Us! That is the problem, don't you see?! I don't wish to go with you and Percy, I want to spend time

with my husband, alone! Is that really so much to ask?

(Mary covers her mouth, horrified by her own outburst)

CLAIRE

Don't blame ME for keeping you from your husband, when you stay shut up in your room all day long! You do so of your own free will, and if I take on the duties you neglect-

MARY

You think you have the right to replace me, because I'm not doing a good enough job?! How dare you!

CLAIRE

I meant that I am more a mother to your son than you are!

MARY

Yes, and Percy like a father to your daughter! I suppose she needs one, after all. Just as you need a man that you can view as a lover.

CLAIRE

You're being horrible!

MARY

Am I? Why ever did I marry Percy, if the two of you wished to play the happy parents together?!

PERCY

Mary, that's not fair. Please tell us what is prompting this.

(Beat, Mary is seething and speaks slow and deliberate)

MARY

I cannot bear it - the looks on people faces. The rumors-

PERCY

What rumors?

MARY

They think Allegra is yours.

PERCY

You know that isn't true.

MARY

What does it matter, what is true? They see the three of us living together. They see that Claire is never missing from your company. And they know that you believe in free love. What else are they to think, Percy?

PERCY

We told everyone she was adopted.

MARY

No one believes that, Percy. They know the child is Claire's.

CLAIRE

Why do you care what anyone believes? Even were it true, why would it matter? You and I believe in free-love, after all - at least, you say you do.

MARY

Claire, don't be naive. Regardless of what we believe, society has ways of punishing that which it perceives as sin.

CLAIRE

Punishing how? Everyone has to contend with looks and rumors - not even the saintly escape it! Mary, even Father holds you in high esteem again.

MARY

But if it appears that Percy has already tossed me aside for you? How long before all of us are shunned again?

PERCY

What do you want us to do, Mary? I will do whatever it takes to make you happy.

CLAIRE

As will I. I don't wish to be burdensome to you.

MARY

(sighs, takes her hand)

Too many bad things have happened in quick succession. My temper flares too easily...

PERCY

No - this arrangement has become untenable, and I apologize for not realizing it sooner.

MARY

It's not your fault. We all should have pressed Byron to support his child, rather than trying to make do ourselves.

CLAIRE

Yes! You're right! Byron is the one I- I mean, we - should be living with.

PERCY

...I don't know.

(The two women give him hard looks)

PERCY (CONT'D)

Even if Byron should accept the two of you... How can I say this? Claire, he might not be as you hope.

MARY

Claire isn't a child anymore. She knows how to manage her own expectations.

PERCY

Do you?

MARY

Whatever do you mean?

PERCY

You haven't been truly happy since Geneva, when we stayed at Byron's villa.

(Mary looks away)

MARY

Please don't misunderstand, Percy. I am not trying to use Claire and the baby as lures for Byron. I'm not infatuated with him.

PERCY

You are, but no more so than Polidori. It's the The Elect that you love - you want the group back together.

MARY

(nods)

Yes. I do. I would give anything to return to the way things were that summer.

PERCY

Then I hope, for all our sakes, that Byron is reasonable.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE VIII

(Spotlight on Polidori on the sofa. Byron is seated, smiling at something offstage. He has a bottle in his hand and looks the worse for wear: hair a mess, collar undone, haphazardly dressed. Claire, Percy and Mary sit near, apprehensive)

POLIDORI

Our group always seemed to experience similar things at once, as if we were one entity stitched together with invisible thread. Byron and I had developed a fiendish taste for drink and gambling, though I was in England and he was in Italy. Mary, Percy and Claire traveled to Byron's new home in Venice - a bustling and lively city, but the conditions were unsanitary and disease was rampant. The trip was very hard on Allegra, as well as the children of Percy and Mary. By the time they arrived on Byron's doorstep, the

shared desperation of our group had reached a fever pitch...and for some of us, the invitation to live again came too late. I was already dead.

(Spotlight dims on Polidori)

BYRON

See how stubbornly she pouts! It is just like my own face, staring back at me through a mirror.

CLAIRE

I'm so glad that you like Allegra.

BYRON

Yes, quite. I haven't been fond of females showing up on my doorstep since Caro Lamb made a habit of it, but having someone in the house who is free of ulterior motives might be a salve for my soul.

PERCY

Then, you believe she is yours?

BYRON

Of course she's mine! No child of yours could be that handsome. Even her cleverness is more in my vein than yours, though that is not to demean you - I took your advice from Geneva.

PERCY

Which advice?

BYRON

The idea to write a contemporary epic. I've just begun writing it - it's a satire called Don Juan.

PERCY

Splendid! I am anxious to read it.

BYRON

And I am equally anxious to hear your thoughts.

(smirks at Mary)

I can only hope that it is to romantic literature what 'Frankenstein' is to the modern Gothic genre.

CLAIRE

Yes, we're all proud of her.

BYRON

Proud of her? I'm proud for me!

MARY

What do you mean for you?

BYRON

Without the electric effect of my challenge galvanizing you into action, you would still be writing love-poems to Percy.

MARY

Oh my, every copy of 'Frankenstein' is missing the name of its co-creator - and to think, all the money I owe you!

PERCY

Now just a moment, I have to point out that there is a marked similarity between myself and Victor Frankenstein - I believe I am entitled to some credit of inspiration.

BYRON

You are nothing like him - you never would have denied the monster a companion! No, Frankenstein is a dark, complex, selfish character, most clearly modeled after me.

PERCY

You have a habit of weaving self-flattery and self-criticism. It makes you impervious to correction.

MARY

I correct both of you. Frankenstein is a product of imagination, not merely copied from my own heart. Byron, aren't you forgetting that my story was not the only one to be produced by the challenge? Won't you also take credit for Polidori's?

(Byron's face falls. He looks away)

MARY (CONT'D)

Is he not living here?

(Byron shakes his head, picks up bottle)

Where is he, then?

BYRON

(takes a swig from his drink)

Dead. He hung himself from the rafters.

MARY

Oh no. I'm sorry.

BYRON

...Or was it poison? I don't remember. After I discharged him, he didn't know what to do with himself. Other than gamble. So it's no great loss.

CLAIRE

You do a poor job of pretending to be callous, Byron - we all know you loved him.

(Claire places a hand on him, comfortingly. Byron pulls it off him)

BYRON

Make no mistake, Claire - when I said someone would stay in this house, I did not mean you.

(Claire jumps up, as does everyone else)

CLAIRE

What are you talking about?

BYRON

(rises)

I am taking Allegra, because I can provide for her better than the three of you combined. But on the condition that Claire stay out of my sight.

PERCY

Allegra needs her mother, Byron!

BYRON

And I need my sanity.

MARY

I didn't know you still had any.

BYRON

You know exactly what I am speaking of, Mary - she is driving you insane. Otherwise you wouldn't be here, trying to pawn her off on me.

MARY

This attitude is rather unbecoming of a gentleman. What has Claire done to upset you so?

BYRON

What has she done? Ha! Mary, you do not know what it is like to be Lord Byron, chosen obsession of the female gender!

MARY

(laughs unkindly)

Oh really Byron, stop! Do you honestly expect us to feel sorry for you?

BYRON

You very much should: I am relentlessly pursued, hounded, and otherwise harassed to distraction.

MARY

A behavior you don't encourage at all.

BYRON

I don't, as a matter of fact. I loathe being pursued.

MARY

Yet love pursuing.

BYRON

Indeed. There is nothing that intrigues me more than a woman who is pure, chaste and indifferent.

MARY

In other words, if a woman doesn't want you, you want her all the more?

BYRON

Precisely.

MARY

Then you don't actually want their affections.

BYRON

I do want their affections.

MARY

But when they give it to you, does that not inherently prove they are no longer indifferent?

BYRON

I am a walking contradiction, and have never pretended to be otherwise. It's part of my appeal.

MARY

You flatter yourself. It's not a contradiction at all: you want the challenge of a woman who is unattainable, and once she is attained you see her as sullied, and must chase after another prize. Do you not see that it's cruel?

BYRON

Cruel? A woman accusing me of cruelty, what a jest! Let me tell you something: women are sensible and cultured as long as you don't indulge them. The moment you do, they go mad.

MARY

But don't you see? You drive them to madness!

(Percy groans, sits and rubs his eyes)

PERCY

I knew this was a bad idea...

MARY

Anna and Caro were intelligent women who knew trouble when they saw it. You are the one that laid siege to their defenses, and then when they surrendered you tortured them like a barbarian!

(Byron almost launches into several passionate defenses, but each one fizzles before it leaves his mouth – he settles:

BYRON

I did no such thing to Claire, and that is the issue at hand. Claire was not the besieged - she was the ravishing invader!

CLAIRE

Yes, and you enjoyed every moment of it!

(Percy chuckles, as Claire advances on Byron)

For all your protesting, when I went to see you after the summer in Geneva, you welcomed me with open arms!

BYRON

Yes, and you responded with open legs!

PERCY

Are you saying you were incapable of refusing her?

BYRON

Well... when a young woman of her generous physical blessings appears, prancing about...a man is a man, after all...

(Mary and Percy lean into each other)

MARY

Oh Percy, Byron's virtue has been compromised! Our Claire has turned predator!

PERCY

I know, it is horrible - taking advantage of him in his manly weakness. She must be stopped.

BYRON

Laugh all you want. My hand will not be forced.

PERCY

Claire, gather up Allegra. We're leaving.

CLAIRE

(to Byron)

...Would you let me visit my daughter?

BYRON

Of course, as long as I am not also present when you do.

PERCY

Claire! What are you doing?

CLAIRE

(to Percy & Mary)

Even if I cannot relieve you of myself, you should not be responsible for Allegra's care.

MARY

(restrains Percy)

We must let her make her own decisions. It's for the best.

CLAIRE

(to Byron again)

Promise me that she will never be without the company of one of her parents, at all times?

BYRON

You have my word - she will want for nothing.

(to the Shelleys)

As a gesture of good faith, I will help you secure a home within the city and provide anything the three of you might need. Claire can arrange to meet with her daughter whenever she likes.

CLAIRE

Thank you. I will say goodbye to Allegra.

(Claire exits Stage Left. Mary and Percy exchange confused looks)

MARY

That was... generous of you.

BYRON

No, it's actually rather selfish.

(pulls them both into an embrace)

Despite all your irritating flaws of character, I've sorely missed the both of you.

(Lights out, except for spotlight on Polidori. Byron exits. A TUB is brought Stage Right where the Headstone prop was, with blood-drenched rags hanging over the side. Mary sits in the tub - Percy is outside the tub by her side)

POLIDORI

Mary, Claire and Percy moved into their new Italian home, and set about resurrecting their circle of the Elect. My vacant position was filled by a man named Edward Trelawney, a pirate-looking fellow whose life story was a web of tall tales, plucked from adventure novels and patched together like Frankenstein's monster. Claire steered clear of Byron, anxious not to violate their agreement, though he had yet to arrange a single visit for her to see Allegra. On the surface, all seemed to be back on track - until the Shelley's son, nicknamed Wilmouse, became ill and died. As she was mourning the loss of her last living child, Mary was pregnant again. At least, for a little while...

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE IX

(Lights up on unconscious Mary in the tub Stage Right, Percy by her side, cradling her head & shoulders against

him. Claire enters from Stage Left)

CLAIRE

Oh my god, what happened?!

PERCY

She's bleeding. I-I can't make it stop...

(Claire runs to the other side of the tub)

CLAIRE

The baby?

(Percy shakes his head. Claire grabs Mary's hand out of the tub)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Her hand! It's so cold!

PERCY

Ice water.

CLAIRE

Is that the right thing to do?

PERCY

I don't know...I was never a practicing physician! I only worked on things which were already...

(chokes)

The doctor should be here any moment....

CLAIRE

I can't find a pulse! Percy, is she...?!

PERCY

(checks wrist)

No...no it's there, it's just...so faint...

(Claire squeezes Mary's hand tightly)

CLAIRE

This is what happened to her mother, before she...

PERCY

This is different! She's going to be fine...

(Percy checks Mary's breath)

No...

PERCY (CONT'D)

What is it?

CLAIRE

She's not breathing!

PERCY

(Percy shakes her. Mary takes a sharp intake of breath. She groans, shivering. Percy is overjoyed.)

P...Percy?

MARY

SHE'S ALIVE!!!

PERCY

(He covers the top of her head with kisses. Mary's eyes flutter open).

The...baby...?

MARY
(looks at Claire)

(Claire shakes her head)

You brought me back.

MARY (CONT'D)
(at Percy)

Did I?

PERCY

Yes. You always bring me back to life.

MARY
(looks him in the eye)

Next time...don't.

(Spotlight on Polidori, looking over them sadly, Center stage)

POLIDORI

The physician, when he arrived, told Percy that by placing her in a tub of ice-water, he had indeed saved her life - without such intervention, Mary would have bled to death. But other things, besides the body, can perish. The monster was whole again, its various parts reassembled... but now the monster needed a life to call its own.

(BLACKOUT. Claire exits Stage Right, Mary climbs out of the tub. Mary sits at the sofa, while Percy pulls up a chair and sits nearby)

SCENE X

(Lights up: Mary stares at the floor despondently. Percy is watching her - he gets up, sits down next to her on the sofa. He tries to put an arm around her, she shudders and pulls away)

PERCY

Mary?

(Mary gets up and goes to the seat he vacated, curls up on it).

PERCY (CONT'D)

My dearest Mary, wherefore hast thou gone, and left me in this dreary world alone?

(Beat. Mary responds only with tears)

PERCY (CONT'D)

Thy form is here indeed, a lovely one. But thou art fled, gone down a dreary road, that leads to Sorrow's most obscure abode. Thou sitteth on the hearth of pale despair, where..for thine own sake I cannot follow thee... do thou return for mine.

(Percy rises and walks as if to exit Stage Right, but runs into Claire as she enters from Stage Right)

CLAIRE

How is she?

PERCY

Bad, I'm afraid. I can't get through to her.

(Percy exits Stage Right. Claire approaches Mary).

CLAIRE

Mary?

MARY

Leave me be.

CLAIRE

Why are you doing this to yourself? Or, for that matter, to Percy? He's worried sick about you.

MARY

He should leave me too.

CLAIRE

Don't say that.

MARY

Claire, don't you understand? I'm cursed. Maybe Percy's first wife, with her dying breath, cursed me to this misery...

CLAIRE

Her note said nothing of you, and she wished Percy well.

MARY

Fanny, then.

CLAIRE

Fanny wouldn't curse you, you know that. Mary, it isn't like you to be superstitious.

MARY

What does it matter? You prefer the scientific approach? That my mother passed on this... fragility to me? Fine, then - it does not change how it feels. I am not blessed to bring life into this world. Death haunts me like a shadow.

(Claire steps away from her, quietly rejoining Percy as he re-enters from Stage Right, a BUNDLE in his arms)

CLAIRE

I feel strange about this.

PERCY

I do as well. But I don't know what else to try.

(Percy takes the baby to Mary, kneeling beside her)

PERCY (CONT'D)

Mary? I have a surprise for you.

MARY

A baby? Where did it come from?

PERCY

She's a foundling.

(Mary leans in to see it, gazes at it)

MARY

She? It's a little girl...

(Percy places the bundle into her arms)

MARY (CONT'D)

She's beautiful. Where will she go?

PERCY

I was thinking...maybe you would like to take care of her.

(She looks at the baby, conflicted)

PERCY (CONT'D)

She has no one else. No one to care for her.

MARY

(smiles at the baby)

I will, then.

(looks at Percy)

We will.

(BLACKOUT)

SCENE XI

(Lights up. Byron is seated, arms folded stubbornly, with Mary, Percy, and Claire standing around him. Spotlight on Polidori, who stands downstage of them)

POLIDORI

Once again, rumors swirled that the baby was not an orphan at all, but rather the second child to be fathered by Percy with Claire. This rumor was passed around, like a disease, until it was inevitably picked up by Lord Byron. Byron, hearing the same opinion from multiple sources at once, took it as fact and responded accordingly. He ignored all requests from Claire to visit her daughter. Months passed without a word - then, when a letter came, it was to inform Claire that her little daughter Allegra had been sent to a convent. The ties which bound the Elect were now completely unraveled.

(Spotlight dims on Polidori)

CLAIRE

How could you?! You gave me your word!

BYRON

(points to Claire)

What is she doing here?

MARY

You haven't held up your end of the bargain - why should she?

BYRON

Bargain? You sound as though I bought Allegra at a market! She is my daughter - as her father, it is my right to make a judgment call when I feel circumstance demands it.

PERCY

What circumstance? What could possibly warrant this betrayal?

BYRON

(stands up)

Betrayal? Yes, let us speak of betrayal - yours.

PERCY

Mine?

BYRON

Don't bother playing the innocent. Allegra is undoubtedly mine - she proved it more and more to me every day. But this new child that has appeared-

CLAIRE

You've been listening to those rumors, haven't you? Did one of your little whores tell you?

BYRON

The adulterer accuses me of betrayal, and the whore accuses me of whoring. My my, did all of you come here to make me giggle?

MARY

The child was an orphan, Byron. But more important than your foolish assumption, why would it be the cause of this spite?

BYRON

And the fool calls me a fool. Now the farce is complete.

MARY

I would have known if Claire had been pregnant.

BYRON

Yes, I assumed you were in on it - my apologies for giving you too much credit. I don't care if the child was Claire's or not, the point is that the three of you are irresponsible radicals who have no business influencing my child.

MARY

Now you're going to make me laugh.

BYRON

Mary, the world is still a cruel place for bastards and young women. I do not intend to support Allegra all

her life - I intend for her to marry a decent man who will support her. The convent will be her best chance at social acceptance.

PERCY

My God. You really think that what you're saying is reasonable, don't you?

BYRON

Speaking cruel truths does not make me cruel. By the way, why do you say 'My God' when you don't have one?

PERCY

It's a figure of speech. Stop avoiding the issue by playing word games, Byron, and explain why you have done this.

BYRON

That's what I'm doing. Allegra will have a difficult enough time becoming a gentlewoman without radical influences.

CLAIRE

Gentlewoman! If what you call 'gentlewoman' are the convent-stifled whores you cavort with, then I would die to save Allegra from such a fate!

BYRON

I don't know where this vitriol comes from - convent-trained women tend to marry well, for they have many qualities of subtlety and grace which a woman like you sorely lacks.

CLAIRE

Oh, damn you to hell! You horrible, libelous fiend!

BYRON

See? No convent-trained lady would say such a thing. And by the way, you meant 'slanderous' - libel is written.

MARY

We've heard our own rumors, Byron - that Allegra was moved from family to family before you sent her away to the convent.

BYRON

I am no person for her to model herself after - nor the type of man she should judge other men by.

PERCY

Is that why you didn't respond to her letter?

BYRON

What?!

PERCY

Allegra told me she had sent you a letter, asking if you would visit her.

(Byron sits back down)

BYRON

You shouldn't have done that - you shouldn't have gone to visit her behind my back.

MARY

He shouldn't have had to - you promised that she would never be without one of her parents! Now honor your pledge, and release her back to us!

BYRON

I cannot, in good conscience, extract her from a safe and loving environment to which she is now accustomed.

PERCY

That's not how I would describe it. She was pale, quiet... not at all the vibrant girl I remembered.

BYRON

That 'vibrant little girl' would have gotten herself into trouble: she was spoiled, demanding-

CLAIRE

The truth emerges! Did she prove too close of a mirror for you? Did you begin to see more of yourself than you wanted to, things which you despise? Is that why you punished her?

BYRON

I didn't punish her!

(at Percy)

You overstepped your bounds, Percy!

MARY

Overstepped? You forget, Allegra was born in our household.

BYRON

I did not forget - the lingering effects were appalling. You were starving her, as you have done with all your offspring.

PERCY

We fed her plenty!

BYRON

You fed her only greenery - in order to spare the lives of animals, you were willing to sacrifice hers.

MARY

Careful, Byron - you are not one to speak of sacrifice! Even though she is not of our blood, we have

shown her more affection than you have ever deigned to give her!

BYRON

Mary, when you have raised a healthy child to maturity, then you may lecture me on how to be a parent.

(Mary turns away, stricken as if she had been slapped)

PERCY

What have you become, Byron, that you would say such a thing to my wife?

MARY

Don't, Percy. You can't shame a rabid dog.

BYRON

You also can't shame hysterical women who revert to name-calling when they don't get their way.

(rises, gets in Percy's face)

Take your two wives and leave my home.

(They stare each other down for a beat - until Percy finally looks away, shaking his head with disappointment, and exits Stage Right).

MARY

You have no idea what you've lost tonight, Byron. Do you know what Percy called his new boat?

(Claire takes Mary's hand to lead her away. Mary pulls away to look at Byron).

MARY (CONT'D)

He called it 'The Don Juan'.

(Mary storms out Stage Right with Claire, leaving Byron alone. BLACKOUT)

SCENE XII

(Claire, letter in hand, paces around a contemplating Percy. He is dizzied by her orbit and stops her)

CLAIRE

We must do something, Percy! Perhaps...perhaps you could forge Byron's signature?!

PERCY

No.

CLAIRE

(grabs him by the shirt)

Why not?!

PERCY

Because I cannot. I will not lie and kidnap a child.

CLAIRE

Byron kidnapped her first!

PERCY

Two wrongs don't make a right. Besides, Claire, think: Byron would hunt us down-

CLAIRE

Then we run!

PERCY

How would you propose we do that?

CLAIRE

Your boat! We'll take her and sail away!

PERCY

(harsh laugh)

Run away from Byron aboard 'The Don Juan'...

CLAIRE

But, I thought you renamed it?

PERCY

I did. 'Ariel' was painted in its stead, and then during the night someone painted the original name on the mainsail.

CLAIRE

That bastard. Do you need any further evidence that we must save Allegra from this insanity?!

PERCY

She's ill, Claire! Bedridden! We cannot move a sick child from place to place, it would kill her!

CLAIRE

That place is killing her!

PERCY

We can't do anything more for her than the Sisters would. Claire, I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do for her now.

CLAIRE

...You warned me. You warned me not to give her to Byron. And now I'm alone...

PERCY

Not alone.

(Percy kisses her. Mary enters from Stage Right in a hat and carrying a bag - they pull apart).

MARY

Well. Don't mind me, I don't mean to interrupt.

(Mary walks on past)

PERCY

Mary! This isn't what it-

MARY

(whirls around)

It's exactly what it looks like. Don't try to insult my intelligence by saying otherwise.

(takes off hat)

I have bad news. Allegra is dead.

PERCY

What?! Who told you this?

MARY

Trelawney. Oh yes, I have my own companion now.

(Claire and Percy exchange looks. Claire sits down, stunned)

PERCY

Mary, please. I don't know what came over me-

MARY

I understand perfectly. And since you had a shared bond with Allegra it is quite necessary, you need to help each other grieve.

PERCY

I was comforting Claire, and got carried away.

MARY

Good. I've been plenty comforted as well. Isn't it funny how it took me this long to attend to my own needs? Byron was right, I am a fool.

PERCY

What are your needs, Mary? How am I supposed to fulfill them if you won't tell me? You have withdrawn from me!

MARY

Yes, you poor thing! All you want is physical pleasure, and I've starved you.

PERCY

That's not what this is about.

MARY

Is it not?

(pulls papers out of bag)

Then explain these - your poems from the last few months! I've been carrying them around, in case I need to jolt myself back to reality. "The snake has been denied paradise?" I wonder what that means.

PERCY

It means I love you!

(Mary laughs bitterly)

MARY

Except, you weren't talking about me. I do not possess the physical features you describe in these poems. I apologize, Percy - I didn't know that the one request I made years ago would prove so torturous to you. Oh, I know you love me. The problem is you also love Claire, and you loved the maid-

PERCY

The maid?!

MARY

The maid who bore that 'orphan' child. She's begun to ask for money in return for her silence, and I am debating whether I care enough to pay her.

CLAIRE

(holds head)

Stop. Just stop...

MARY

Claire, you should be flattered - Percy has been pining for you in silence, for some time now. Isn't it nice to be on the receiving end, for a change?

(Claire jumps up)

CLAIRE

I don't give a damn about any of this! MY DAUGHTER IS DEAD!!

MARY

And how many of my children have died? I've lost count. All of them, save one. But I watched each of his siblings die, and their ghosts haunt me in my sleep. I've had but brief moments of respite from death, whereas for you this is your first. Welcome to my nightmare. Experience three more and then I will feel sorry for you.

(Claire slaps her hard. Percy gasps)

CLAIRE

You're a monster.

(Claire runs offstage Right, crying. Percy approaches Mary, concerned about her cheek and reaching out to look. Mary turns away)

MARY

You should go comfort her.

(Percy recoils, hurt. Lights fade out. Spotlight on Polidori Center Stage, as a funeral pyre is brought on Stage Right).

POLIDORI

Percy did not go to Claire - instead, he decided to clear his head by sailing. It was a clear summer's day when he embarked on his ship, 'Ariel', named after the storm-bringing sprite in 'The Tempest'. Just as in the Bard's play, Percy's ship was caught in a sudden, violent storm. But when the battered ship arrived upon the shore, its crew did not emerge. Trelawney found the body, and went to break the news to the rest of the Elect. They gathered there, on the beach, to build a funeral pyre for Percy Shelley.

(reads from the 'Frankenstein' book)

On the last page of Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein', it reads: "I shall ascend my funeral pyre triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea."

(Polidori closes the book)

Percy's body was set ablaze, and from out of the ashes of the pyre, one thing was saved: his heart. For the years to come, it remained in the possession of the one to whom it had always belonged: Mary Shelley.

SCENE XIII

(Lightning flashes, followed by thunder. Lights up: Percy's body lies atop the pyre. Byron sits on the ground nearby, shivering from cold and horror - Polidori stands behind Byron, watching Mary enter with Claire, clinging to her. Claire sees the body, gasps, and buries her face against Mary)

CLAIRE

No! That isn't him! It can't be!

BYRON

"I saw the hideous phantasm of a man, stretched out... "

CLAIRE

Do not speak of him as a monster!

MARY

You're right. He never was the monster. He once called me a 'child of love and light', but he was mistaken - the one he spoke of was himself.

BYRON

(rises unsteadily)

You warned me, Mary - only now do I understand what you meant. I never thought... Mary, please forgive me! It's too late to ask forgiveness from him!

(Byron and Mary embrace)

MARY

Byron, you take too much credit, as usual. He never...he never would have gone out if I hadn't been so cold toward him...I made him think I didn't love him, that I loved another...

CLAIRE

What? You... you weren't in love with Trelawney?

MARY

Claire, Trelawney spoke of no one but you. I only told Percy that to wound him.

(looks at the body)

And thus I struck the mortal blow. It was I who was the monster.

CLAIRE

Oh Mary, I didn't mean that!

(Claire pushes Byron aside to embrace Mary)

BYRON

(apologetic)

Claire, I...

(Claire whirls around on him)

CLAIRE

You! Don't you dare ask me for forgiveness, for you will never receive any from me! You murdered my daughter, and I hate you. I will hate you for as long as I draw breath!

BYRON

So be it. I deserve as much.

(Claire runs and casts herself down beside the pyre, sobbing)

BYRON (CONT'D)

(to Mary)

You may now criticize me over Allegra, if you wish - I said that you could lecture me, if you raised a healthy child, and your son seems as healthy as any...despite his diet.

MARY

Your actual stipulation was 'raised to maturity'. He is barely three.

BYRON

You know what I mean.

(beat)

You told me I drove those who love me mad... it stings with truth. Out of harsh words and harsher actions, I have fashioned my own ghosts, my own demons, my own monsters to haunt me. Polidori. Claire. Percy. Who knows, even Trelawney I may eventually break, like all the others. But of all the monsters I've created... you are, by far, my favorite.

(Mary loses her composure, and cries. Byron comforts her. After a few moments, she regains control and pulls away)

BYRON (CONT'D)

...What are you going to do now?

MARY

Keep him alive in the only ways I can - take care of the son who bears his name, as well as his works.

BYRON

Is that all? Will you do nothing for yourself?

MARY

I'm sure I will continue writing. But I do not care if I am remembered.

(Mary slowly drifts away, and stands over the pyre)

BYRON

Oh, but you will be... you will be...

(Byron exits Stage Right, taking Claire with him. Lights go out, except spotlight on Mary over the pyre. Lightning flashes, followed by darkness and rolling thunder. BLACKOUT)

- CURTAIN -