

Late Plays and Poems

Late Plays and Poems

by

Lord Byron

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

classic texts



Late Plays and Poems, by Lord Byron

This book in its current typographical format first published 2009 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-0969-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0969-6

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SARDANAPALUS: A TRAGEDY

TO
THE ILLUSTRIOUS GOETHE
A STRANGER PRESUMES TO OFFER THE HOMAGE
OF A LITERARY VASSAL TO HIS LIEGE LORD,
THE FIRST OF EXISTING WRITERS,
WHO HAS CREATED
THE LITERATURE OF HIS OWN COUNTRY,
AND ILLUSTRATED THAT OF EUROPE.
THE UNWORTHY PRODUCTION
WHICH THE AUTHOR VENTURES TO INSCRIBE TO HIM
IS ENTITLED
SARDANAPALUS.

PREFACE

In publishing the following Tragedies' I have only to repeat, that they were not composed with the most remote view to the stage. On the attempt made by the managers in a former instance, the public opinion has been already expressed. With regard to my own private feelings, as it seems that they are to stand for nothing, I shall say nothing.

for the historical foundation of the following coin-positions the reader is referred to the Notes.

The Author has in one instance attempted to preserve, and in the other to approach, the "unities;" conceiving that with any very distant departure from them, there may be poetry, but can be no drama. He is aware of the unpopularity of this notion in present English literature; but it is not a system of his own, being merely an opinion, which, not very long ago, was the law of literature throughout the world, and is still so in the more civilised parts of it. But "nous avons changé tout cela," and are reaping the advantages of the change. The writer is far from conceiving

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that any thing he can adduce by personal precept or example can at all approach his regular, or even irregular predecessors: he is merely giving a reason why he preferred the more regular formation of a structure, however feeble, to an entire abandonment of all rules whatsoever. Where he has failed, the failure is in the architect,—and not in the art.

In this tragedy it has been my intention to follow the account of Diodorus Siculus; reducing it, however, to such dramatic regularity as I best could, and trying to approach the unities. I therefore suppose the rebellion to explode and succeed in one day by a sudden conspiracy, instead of the long war of the history.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

MEN.

SARDANAPALUS, King of Nineveh and Assyria, etc.

ARBACES, the Mede who aspired to the Throne.

BELESES, a Chaldean and Soothsayer.

SALEMENES, the King's Brother-in-Law.

ALTADA, an Assyrian Officer of the Palace.

PANIA.

ZAMES.

SFERO.

BALEA.

WOMEN.

ZARINA, the Queen.

MYRRHA, an Ionian female Slave, and the Favourite Mistress of SARDANAPALUS.

Women composing the Harem of SARDANAPALUS, Guards, Attendants, Chaldean Priests, Medes, etc., etc.

Scene.—A Hall in the Royal Palace of Nineveh.

ACT I

Scene I

A Hall in the Palace.

Salemenes (solus). He hath wronged his queen, but still he is her lord;
He hath wronged my sister—still he is my brother;
He hath wronged his people—still he is their sovereign—
And I must be his friend as well as subject:
He must not perish thus. I will not see
The blood of Niinrod and Semiramis
Sink in the earth, and thirteen hundred years
Of Empire ending like a shepherd's tale;
He must be roused. In his effeminate heart
There is a careless courage which Corruption
Has not all quenched, and latent energies,
Repressed by circumstance, but not destroyed —
Steeped, but not drowned, in deep voluptuousness.
If born a peasant, he had been a man
To have reached an empire: to an empire horn,
lie will bequeath none; nothing but a name,
Which his sons will not prize in heritage
Yet -not all lost—even yet he may redeem
His sloth and shame, by only being that
Which he should be, as easily as the thing
He should not be and is. Were it less toil
To sway his nations than consume his life?
To head an army than to rule a harem?
He sweats in palling pleasures, dulls his soul,

And saps his goodly strength, in toils which yield not
 Health like the chase, nor glory like the war—
 He must be roused. Alas! there is no sound

(Sound of soft music heard from within.)

To rouse him short of thunder. Hark! the lute—
 The lyre—the timbrel; the lascivious tinklings
 Of lulling instruments, the softening voices
 Of women, and of beings less than women,
 Must chime in to the echo of his revel,
 While the great King of all we know of earth
 Lolls crowned with roses, and his diadem
 Lies negligently by to be caught up
 By the first manly hand which dares to snatch it.
 Lo, where they come! already I perceive
 The reeking odours of the perfumed trains,
 And see the bright gems of the glittering girls,
 At once his Chorus and his Council, flash
 Along the gallery, and amidst the damsels,
 As femininely garbed, and scarce less female,
 The grandson of Semiramis, the Man-Queen.—
 He comes! Shall I await him? yes, and front him,
 And tell him what all good men tell each other,
 Speaking of him and his. They come, the slaves
 Led by the monarch subject to his slaves.

Scene II

Enter SARDANAPALUS effeminately dressed, his Head crowned with Flowers, and his Robe negligently flowing, attended by a Train of Women and young Slaves.

SAR. (*speaking to some of his attendants*). Let the pavilion over the
Euphrates

Be garlanded, and lit, and furnished forth
For an especial banquet; at the hour
Of midnight we will sup there: see nought wanting,
And bid the galley be prepared. There is
A cooling breeze which crisps the broad clear river:
We will embark anon. Fair Nymphs, who deign
To share the soft hours of Sardanapalus,
We'll meet again in that the sweetest hour,
When we shall gather like the stars above us, ro
And you will form a heaven as bright as theirs;
Till then, let each be mistress of her time,
And thou, my own Ionian Myrrha,ⁱ choose
Wilt thou along with them or me?

i. "The Ionian name had been still more comprehensive; having included the Achaians and the Bœotians, who, together with those to whom it was afterwards confined, would make nearly the whole of the Greek nation; and among the Orientals it was always the general name for the Greeks."—MITFORD'S *Greece*, 1818, i. 199.

MYR. My Lord—

SAR. My Lord!—my Life! why answerest thou so coldly?
It is the curse of kings to be so answered.
Rule thy own hours, thou rulest mine—say, wouldst thou
Accompany our guests, or charm away
The moments from me?

MYR. The King's choice is mine.

SAR. I pray thee say not so: my chiefest joy
Is to contribute to thine every wish.
I do not dare to breathe my own desire,
Lest it should clash with thine; for thou art still
Too prompt to sacrifice thy thoughts for others.

And is herself the cause of bitterer tears.

SAR. Cursed be he who caused those tears to flow!

SAL. Curse not thyself—millions do that already.

SAR. Thou dost forget thee: make me not remember
I am a monarch.

SAL. Would thou couldst!

MYR. My sovereign,

I pray, and thou, too, Prince, permit my absence.

SAR. Since it must be so, and this churl has checked
Thy gentle spirit, go; but recollect
That we must forthwith meet: I had rather lose
An empire than thy presence.

(Exit MYRRHA.)

SAL. It may be,
Thou wilt lose both—and both for ever!

SAR. Brother!
I can at least command myself, who listen
To language such as this: yet urge me not
Beyond my easy nature.

SAL. 'Tis beyond
That easy—far too easy—idle nature,
Which I would urge thee. O that I could rouse thee!
Though 'twere against myself.

SAR. By the god Baal!
The man would make me tyrant.

SAL. So thou art.
Think'st thou there is no tyranny but that
Of blood and chains? The despotism of vice,
The weakness and the wickedness of luxury,

The negligence, the apathy, the evils
 Of sensual sloth—produce ten thousand tyrants,
 Whose delegated cruelty surpasses
 The worst acts of one energetic master,
 However harsh and hard in his own bearing.
 The false and fond examples of thy lusts
 Corrupt no less than they oppress, and sap
 In the same moment all thy pageant power
 And those who should sustain it; so that whether
 A foreign foe invade, or civil broil
 Distract within, both will alike prove fatal:

The first thy subjects have no heart to conquer;
 The last they rather would assist than vanquish.

SAR. Why, what makes thee the mouth-piece of the people?

SAL. Forgiveness of the Queen, my sister wrongs;
 A natural love unto my infant nephews;
 Faith to the King, a faith he may need shortly,
 In more than words; respect for Nimrod's line;
 Also, another thing thou knowest not.

SAR. What's that?

SAL. To thee an unknown word.

SAR. Yet speak it;

I love to learn.

SAL. Virtue.

SAR. Not know the word!

Never was word yet rung so in my ears—
 Worse than the rabble's shout, or splitting trumpet:
 I've heard thy sister talk of nothing else.

SAL. To change the irksome theme, then, hear of vice.

SAR. From whom?

SAL. Even from the winds, if thou couldst listen
Unto the echoes of the Nation's voice.

SAR. Come, I'm indulgent, as thou knowest, patient,
As thou hast often proved—speak out, what moves thee?

SAL. Thy peril.

SAR. Say on.

SAL. Thus, then: all the nations,
For they are many, whom thy father left
In heritage, are loud in wrath against thee.

SAR. 'Gainst *me*!! What would the slaves?

SAL. A king.

SAR. And what
Am I then?

SAL. In their eyes a nothing; but
In mine a man who might be something still.

SAR. The railing drunkards! why, what would they have?
Have they not peace and plenty?

SAL. Of the first
More than is glorious; of the last, far less
Than the King recks of.

SAR. Whose then is the crime,
But the false satraps, who provide no better?

SAL. And somewhat in the Monarch who ne'er looks
Beyond his palace walls, or if he stirs
Beyond them, 'tis but to some mountain palace,
Till summer heats wear down. O glorious Baal!
Who built up this vast empire, and wert made
A God, or at the least shimest like a God

SAL. All warlike spirits have not the same fate.
Semiramis, the glorious parent of
A hundred kings, although she failed in India,
Brought Persia—Media—Bactria—to the realm
Which she once swayed—and thou *mightst* sway.

SAR. *I sway them—*
She but subdued them.

SAL. It may be ere long
That they will need her sword more than your sceptre.

SAR. There was a certain Bacchus, was there not?
I've heard my Greek girls speak of such—they say
He was a God, that is, a Grecian god,
An idol foreign to Assyria's worship,

Who conquered this same golden realm of Ind
Thou prat'st of, where Semiramis was vanquished.

SAL. I have heard of such a man; and thou perceiv'st
That he is deemed a God for what he did.

SAR. And in his godship I will honour him—
Not much as man. What, ho! my cupbearer!

SAL. What means the King?

Sar. To worship your new God
And ancient conqueror. Some wine, I say.

Enter Cupbearer.

SAR. (*addressing the Cupbearer*). Bring me the golden goblet thick with
gems,

Which bears the name of Nimrod's chalice. Hence,
Fill full, and bear it quickly.

(Exit Cupbearer.)

SAL. Is this moment

Because he turned a fruit to an enchantment,
Which cheers the sad, revives the old, inspires
The young, makes Weariness forget his toil,
And Fear her danger; opens a new world
When this, the present, palls. Well, then *I* pledge thee
And *him* as a true man, who did his utmost
In good or evil to surprise mankind.

(Drinks.

SAL. Wilt thou resume a revel at this hour?

SAR. And if I did, 'twere better than a trophy,
Being bought without a tear. But that is not
My present purpose: since thou wilt not pledge me,
Continue what thou pleasest. *(To the Cupbearer.)* Boy, retire.

(Exit Cupbearer.

SAL. I would but have recalled thee from thy dream;
Better by me awakened than rebellion.

SAR. Who should rebel? or why? what cause? pretext?
I am the lawful King, descended from
A race of Kings who knew no predecessors.

What have I done to thee, or to the people,
That thou shouldst rail, or they rise up against me?

SAL. Of what thou hast done to me, I speak not.

SAR. But

Thou think'st that I have wronged the Queen: is't not so?

SAL. *Think!* Thou hast wronged her!

SAR. Patience, Prince, and hear me.

She has all power and splendour of her station,
Respect, the tutelage of Assyria's heirs,
The homage and the appanage of sovereignty.

I married her as monarchs wed—for state,
 And loved her as most husbands love their wives.
 If she or thou supposedst I could link me
 Like a Chaldean peasant to his mate,
 Ye knew nor me—nor monarchs—nor mankind.

SAL. I pray thee, change the theme: my blood disdains
 Complaint, and Salemenes' sister seeks not
 Reluctant love even from Assyria's lord!
 Nor would she deign to accept divided passion
 With foreign strumpets and Ionian slaves.
 The Queen is silent.

SAR. And why not her brother?

SAL. I only echo thee the voice of empires,
 Which he who long neglects not long will govern.

SAR. The ungrateful and ungracious slaves! murmur
 Because I have not shed their blood, nor led them
 To dry into the desert's dust by myriads,
 Or whiten with their bones the banks of Ganges;
 Nor decimated them with savage laws,
 Nor sweated them to build up Pyramids,
 Or Babylonian walls.

SAL. Yet these are trophies
 More worthy of a people and their prince
 Than songs, and lutes, and feasts, and concubines,
 And lavished treasures, and contemned virtues.

SAR. Or for my trophies I have founded cities:
 There's Tarsus and Anchialus, both built
 In one day—what could that blood-loving beldame,
 My martial grandam, chaste Semiramis,

Do more, except destroy them?

SAL. 'Tis most true;

I own thy merit in those founded cities,

Built for a whim, recorded with a verse

Which shames both them and thee to coming ages.

SAR. Shame me! By Baal, the cities, though well built,

Are not more goodly than the verse! Say what

Thou wilt 'gainst me, my mode of life or rule,

But nothing 'gainst the truth of that brief record.

Why, those few lines contain the history

Of all things human: hear—"Sardanapalus,

The king, and son of Anacyndaraxes,

In one day built Anchialus and Tarsus.

Eat, drink, and love; the rest's not worth a fillip."ⁱ

i. "For this expedition he took only a small chosen body of the phalanx, but all his light troops. In the first day's march he reached Anchialus, a town said to have been founded by the king of Assyria, Sardanapalus. The fortifications, in their magnitude and extent, still in Arrian's time, bore the character of greatness, which the Assyrians appear singularly to have affected in works of the kind. A monument representing Sardanapalus was found there, warranted by an inscription in Assyrian characters, of course in the old Assyrian language, which the Greeks, whether well or ill, interpreted thus: 'Sardanapalus, son of Anacyndaraxes, in one day founded Anchialus and Tarsus. Eat, drink, play; all other human joys are not worth a fillip.' Supposing this version nearly exact (for Arrian says it was not quite so), whether the purpose has not been to invite to civil order a people disposed to turbulence, rather than to recommend immoderate luxury, may perhaps reasonably be questioned. What, indeed, could be the object of a king of Assyria in founding such towns in a country so distant from his capital, and so divided from it by an immense extent of sandy deserts and lofty mountains, and, still more, how the inhabitants could be at once in circumstances to abandon themselves to the intemperate joys which their prince has been supposed to have recommended, is not obvious. But it may deserve observation that, in that line of coast, the southern of Lesser Asia, ruins of cities, evidently of an age after Alexander, yet barely named in history, at this day astonish the adventurous traveller by their magnificence and elegance amid the desolation which, under a singularly barbarian government, has for so many centuries been daily spreading in the finest countries of the globe. Whether more from soil and climate, or from opportunities for commerce, extraordinary means must have been found for communities to flourish there; whence it may seem that the measures of Sardanapalus were directed by juster views than have been commonly ascribed to

him. But that monarch having been the last of a dynasty ended by a revolution, obloquy on his memory would follow of course from the policy of his successors and their partisans. The inconsistency of traditions concerning Sardanapalus is striking in Diodorus's account of him."—MITFORD'S *Greece*, 1820, ix. 311–313, and *note* 1.

SAL. A worthy moral, and a wise inscription,

For a king to put up before his subjects!

SAR. Oh, thou wouldst have me doubtless set up edicts—

"Obey the king—contribute to his treasure—

Recruit his phalanx—spill your blood at bidding—

Fall down and worship, or get up and toil."

Or thus—"Sardanapalus on this spot

Slew fifty thousand of his enemies.

These are their sepulchres, and this his trophy."

I leave such things to conquerors; enough

For me, if I can make my subjects feel

The weight of human misery less, and glide

Ungroaning to the tomb: I take no license

Which I deny to them. We all are men.

SAL. Thy Sires have been revered as Gods—

SAR.

In dust

And death, where they are neither Gods nor men.

Talk not of such to me! the worms are Gods;

At least they banqueted upon your Gods,

And died for lack of farther nutriment.

Those Gods were merely men; look to their issue—

I feel a thousand mortal things about me,

But nothing godlike,—unless it may be

The thing which you condemn, a disposition

To love and to be merciful, to pardon

The follies of my species, and (that's human)

Even to the city, and so baffle all.—

Trust me.

SAR. Thou knowest I have done so ever;

Take thou the signet.

(Gives the signet.

SAL. I have one more request.

SAR. Name it.

SAL. That thou this night forbear the banquet

In the pavilion over the Euphrates.

SAR. Forbear the banquet! Not for all the plotters

That ever shook a kingdom! Let them come,

And do their worst: I shall not blench for them:

Nor rise the sooner; nor forbear the goblet:

Nor crown me with a single rose the less;

Nor lose one joyous hour.—I fear them not.

SAL. But thou wouldst arm thee, wouldst thou not, if needful?

SAR. Perhaps. I have the goodliest armour, and

A sword of such a temper, and a bow,

And javelin, which might furnish Nimrod forth:

A little heavy, but yet not unwieldy.

And now I think on't, 'tis long since I've used them,

Even in the chase. Hast ever seen them, brother?

SAL. Is this a time for such fantastic trifling?—

If need be, wilt thou wear them?

SAR. Will I not?

Oh! if it must be so, and these rash slaves

Will not be ruled with less, I'll use the sword

Till they shall wish it turned into a distaff.

SAL. They say thy Sceptre's turned to that already.

SAR. That's false! but let them say so: the old Greeks,
 Of whom our captives often sing, related
 The same of their chief hero, Hercules,
 Because he loved a Lydian queen: thou seest
 The populace of all the nations seize
 Each calumny they can to sink their sovereigns.

SAL. They did not speak thus of thy fathers.

SAR. No;
 They dared not. They were kept to toil and combat;
 And never changed their chains but for their armour:
 Now they have peace and pastime, and the license
 To revel and to rail; it irks me not.

I would not give the smile of one fair girl
 For all the popular breath that e'er divided
 A name from nothing. What are the rank tongues
 Of this vile herd, grown insolent with feeding,
 That I should prize their noisy praise, or dread
 Their noisome clamour?

SAL. You have said they are men;
 As such their hearts are something.

SAR. So my dogs' are;
 And better, as more faithful:—but, proceed;
 Thou hast my signet:—since they are tumultuous,
 Let them be tempered, yet not roughly, till
 Necessity enforce it. I hate all pain,
 Given or received; we have enough within us,
 The meanest vassal as the loftiest monarch,
 Not to add to each other's natural burthen
 Of mortal misery, but rather lessen,

