Howard Brenton’s *Bloody Poetry*

1. The People in the Play

- **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792-1822)
  - English poet from wealthy family
  - 1811 elopes with Harriet Westbrook (later marriage; 2 children)
  - 1814 elopes with Mary Godwin (marriage in 1816 after Harriet's suicide; 3 children) accompanied by Claire Clairmont
  - 1816 meets Byron at Lake Geneva
  - 1822 drowns in the Gulf of Spezia

- **Harriet Westbrook** (1795-1816)
  - Shelley's first wife (2 children)
  - left by Shelley when pregnant with her second child
  - 1816 drowns herself in the Serpentine, Hyde Park, London

- **Mary Godwin Shelley** (1797-1851)
  - daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft
  - 1816-17 writes *Frankenstein*
  - 1816 son William born; dies 1819
  - 1817 daughter Clara born; dies 1818
  - 1819 son Percy born

- **Claire Clair(e)mont** (1798-1879)
  - stepsister of Mary Shelley
  - 1816 mistress of Lord Byron
  - 1817 daughter Allegra born
  - 1822 Allegra dies

- **Lord George Gordon Byron** (1788-1824)
  - 1813 affair with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh (1 child)
  - 1816 affair with Claire Clairmont; moves to Venice
  - 1817 daughter Allegra born to Claire
  - 1818 meets Shelleys in Italy

- **John William Polidori** (1791-1827)
  - 1816 becomes Lord Byron's personal physician and biographer and accompanies him to Switzerland

2. Summary

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The action starts in 1819, and in a kind of flashback the fictional Shelley recalls to the audience's/reader's mind his and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's elopement from England. The entire first act is concerned with the first meeting between the Shelleys, i.e. Percy, Mary, and Mary's half-sister Claire Clairmont, and Lord Byron at Lake Geneva in May 1816. Here we witness the famous genesis of *Frankenstein*; Shelley's strikingly bizarre fit, in which imagines the nipples of Mary's breasts changing to eyes; the play also provides a thorough analysis of the deep impression Byron and Shelley left on each other.

The second act, then opens with a key event which shaped/s the lives of both the real and the fictional Shelley. Harriet Westbrook, Shelley's first wife committed suicide drowning herself in the Serpentine in the Hyde Park while expecting another child (from Shelley?). Other slices of Shelley's life touch on the crucial year of 1818, when Shelley is denied the custody of children with Harriet, which makes him and Mary leave England for good; their settling in Bagni di Lucca; Shelley and Claire's trip to see Byron and Allegra; the tragic death of Shelley and Mary's daughter Clara. The play moves on to 1819, the year of the Peterloo Massacre and Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy", and finally closes upon the cremation of Shelley's body on August 15, 1822.

3. The Play on Stage

- two acts
  - act 1: 6 scenes
  - act 2: 13 more or less unconnected scenes
- bare stage: information on time/place only through dialogue
- first staged 1 October 1984 at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester
- reception by critics better than *The Romans in Britain*

4. Main Topics in the Play

- **history**: characters are aware of history, each producing their own version
- **relationships**: desire for 'free love', but failure due to egotism and irresponsibility
- **utopia**: attempt to remodel humanity through art, but restriction by society

5. Discussion of Three Selected Scenes

- Plato's Cave (263-268)
- Mary's proposal (281-283)
- Clara's death (300-302)

Bibliography:


