Ashurbanipal (669-c.627 BC), was the last king of Assyria. He’s referred to (as “the great and noble Asnapper”) in the Bible, at Ezra 4:10. The Greek version of his name is Σαρδανάπαλλος (Sardanappalos). He was one of the few kings in antiquity who could read and write, and Assyrian culture flourished under him. Little is known about the last years of his reign, and nothing about the manner of his death. Fifteen years after he died, in 612, his capital, Nineveh (in modern Iraq, near Mosul), was sacked by the Medes under Napobalassar, and the Assyrian empire was finished.

The virtues of Ashurbanipal meant nothing to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (90-30 BC). His was not the conscientious method of Thucydides, who tried to cross-check every detail. His forty-book Bibliotheca Historica (“Historical Library”) gives the following sensational account of “Sardanapallos”:

Sardanapallus, the thirtieth in succession from Ninus, who founded the empire [he was the husband of Queen Semiramis, whom she murdered], and the last king of the Assyrians, outdid all his predecessors in luxury and sluggishness. For not to mention the fact that he was not seen by any man residing outside the palace, he lived the life of a woman, and spending his days in the company of his concubines and spinning purple garments and working the softest of wool, he had assumed the feminine garb and so covered his face and indeed his entire body with whitening cosmetics and the other unguents used by courtesans, that he rendered it more delicate than that of any luxury loving woman. He also took care to make even his voice to be like a woman’s, and at his carousals not only to indulge regularly in those drinks and viands which could offer the greatest pleasure, but also to pursue the delights of love with men as well as with women; for he practised sexual indulgence of both kinds without restraint, showing not the least concern for the disgrace attending such conduct. To such an excess did he go of luxury and of the most shameless sensual pleasure and intemperance, that he composed a funeral dirge for himself and commanded his successors upon the throne to inscribe it upon his tomb after his death; it was composed by him in a foreign language but was afterwards translated by a Greek as follows:

Knowing full well that thou wert mortal born,
Thy heart lift up, take thy delight in feasts;
When dead no pleasure more is thine. Thus I,
Who once o’er mighty Ninus ruled, am naught
But dust. Yet these are mine which gave me joy
In life – the food I ate, my wantonness,
And love’s delights. But all those other things
Men deem felicities are left behind.

1: Pronounced “Sar-dan-a-PAY-lus”: see below, I ii 8n.
Because he was a man of this character, not only did he end his own life in a disgraceful manner, but he caused the total destruction of the Assyrian Empire, which had endured longer than any other known to history. The facts are these: A certain Arbaces, a Mede by race, and conspicuous for his bravery and nobility of spirit, was the general of the contingent of Medes which was sent each year to Ninus. And having made the acquaintance during this service of the general of the Babylonians, he was urged by him to overthrow the empire of the Assyrians. Now this man’s name was Belesys [Byron’s Beleses], and he was the most distinguished of those priests whom the Babylonians call Chaldaeans. And since as a consequence he had the fullest experience of astrology and divination, he was wont to foretell the future unerringly to the people in general; therefore, being greatly admired for this gift, he also predicted to the general of the Medes, who was his friend, that it was certainly fated for him to be king over all the territory which was then held by Sardanapallus. Arbaces, commending the man, promised to give him the satrapy of Babylonia when the affair should be consummated, and for his part, like a man elated by a message from some god, both entered into a league with the commanders of the other nations and assiduously invited them all to banquets and social gatherings, establishing thereby a friendship with each of them. He was resolved also to see the king face to face and to observe his whole manner of life. Consequently he gave one of the eunuchs a golden bowl as a present and gained admittance to Sardanapallus; and when he had observed at close hand both his luxuriousness and his love of effeminate pursuits and practices, he despised the king as worthy of no consideration and was led all the more to cling to the hopes which had been held out to him by the Chaldaean. And the conclusion of the matter was that he formed a conspiracy with Beleys, whereby he should himself move the Medes and Persians to revolt while the latter should persuade the Babylonians to join the undertaking and should secure the help of the commander of the Arabs, who was his friend, for the attempt to secure the supreme control.

When the year’s time of their service in the king’s army had passed and, another force having arrived to replace them, the relieved men had been dismissed as usual to their homes, thereupon Arbaces persuaded the Medes to attack the Assyrian kingdom and the Persians to join in the conspiracy, on the condition of receiving their freedom. Belesys too in similar fashion both persuaded the Babylonians to strike for their freedom, and sending an embassy to Arabia, won over the commander of the people of that country, a friend of his who exchanged hospitality with him, to join in the attack. And after a year’s time all these leaders gathered a multitude of soldiers and came with all their forces to Ninus [that is, Nineveh], ostensibly bringing up replacements, as was the custom, but in fact with the intention of destroying the empire of the Assyrians. Now when these four nations had gathered into one place the whole number of them amounted to four hundred thousand men, and when they had assembled into one camp they tools counsel together concerning the best plan to pursue.

As for Sardanapallus, so soon as he became aware of the revolt, he led forth against the rebels the contingents which had come from the rest of the nations. And at first, when battle was joined on the plain, those who were making the revolt were defeated, and after heavy losses were pursued to a mountain which was seventy stades distant from Ninus; but afterwards, when they came down again into the plain and were preparing for battle, Sardanapallus marshalled his army against them and despatched heralds to the camp of the enemy to make this proclamation: “Sardanapallus will give two hundred talents of gold to anyone who slays Arbaces the Mede, and will make a present of twice that amount to anyone who delivers him up alive and will also appoint him governor over Media.” Likewise he promised to reward any who would either slay Beleys the Babylonian or take him alive. But since no man paid any attention to the proclamation, he joined battle, slew many of the rebels, and pursued the remainder of the multitude into their encampment in the mountains.

Arbaces, having lost heart because of these defeats, now convened a meeting of his friends and called upon them to consider what should be done. Now the majority said that they should retire to their respective countries, seize strong positions, and so far as possible prepare there whatever else would be useful for the war; but Belesys the Babylonian, by maintaining that the gods were promising them by signs that with labours and hardship they would bring their enterprise to a successful end, and encouraging them in every other way as much as he could, persuaded them all to remain to face further perils. So there was a third battle, and again the king was victorious, captured the camp of the rebels, and pursued the defeated foe as far as the boundaries of Babylonia; and it also happened that Arbaces himself, who had fought most brilliantly and had slain many Assyrians, was wounded. And now that the rebels had suffered defeats so decisive following one upon the other, their commanders, abandoning all hope of victory, were preparing to disperse each to his own country. But Belesys, who had passed a sleepless night in the open and had devoted himself to the observation of the stars, said to those who had lost hope in their cause, “If you will wait five days help will come of its own accord, and there will be a mighty change to the opposite in the whole situation; for from my long study of the stars I see the gods foretelling this to us.” And he appealed to them to wait that many days and test his own skill and the good will of the gods.
So after they had all been called back and had waited the stipulated time, there came a messenger with the news that a force which had been despatched from Bactriana to the king was near at hand, advancing with all speed. Arbaces, accordingly, decided to go to meet their generals by the shortest route, arguments to join in the revolt, they might resort to arms to force them to share with them in the same hopes. But the outcome was that the newcomers gladly listened to the call to freedom, first the commanders and then the entire force, and they all encamped in the same place.

It happened at this very time that the king of the Assyrians, who was unaware of the defection of the Bactrians and had become elated over his past successes, turned to indulgence and divided among his soldiers for a feast animals and great quantities of both wine and all other provisions. Consequently, since the whole army was carousing, Arbaces, taking along the best and most agile of his troops, so that, in case they should be unable to persuade the Bactrians by learning from some deserters of the relaxation and drunkenness in the camp of the enemy, made his attack upon it unexpectedly in the night. And as it was an assault of organized men upon disorganized and of ready men upon unprepared, they won possession of the camp, and after slaying many of the soldiers pursued the rest of them as far as the city. After this the king named for the chief command Galaemenes, his wife’s brother, and gave his own attention to the affairs within the city. But the rebels, drawing up their forces in the plain before the city, overcame the Assyrians in two battles, and they not only slew Galaemenes, but of the opposing forces they cut down some in their flight, while others, who had been shut out from entering the city and forced to leap into the Euphrates river, they destroyed almost to a man. So great was the multitude of the slain that the water of the stream, mingled with the blood, was changed in colour over a considerable distance. Furthermore, now that the king was shut up in the city and besieged there, many of the nations revolted, going over in each case to the side of liberty.

Sardanapallus, realizing that his entire kingdom was in the greatest danger, sent his three sons and two daughters together with much of his treasure to Paphlagonia to the governor Cotta, who was the most loyal of his subjects, while he himself, despatching letter-carriers to all his subjects, summoned forces and made preparations for the siege. Now there was a prophecy which had come down to him from his ancestors: “No enemy will ever take Ninus by storm unless the river shall first become the city’s enemy.” Assuming, therefore, that this would never be, he held out in hope, his thought being to endure the siege and await the troops which would be sent from his subjects.

The rebels, elated at their successes, pressed the siege, but because of the strength of the walls they were unable to do any harm to the men in the city; for neither engines for throwing stones, nor shelters for sappers, nor battering-rams devised to overthrow walls had as yet been invented at that time. Moreover, the inhabitants of the city had a great abundance of all provisions, since the king had taken thought on that score. Consequently the siege dragged on, and for two years they pressed their attack, making assaults on the walls and preventing the inhabitants of the city from going out into the country; but in the third year, after there had been heavy and continuous rains, it came to pass that the Euphrates, running very full, both inundated a portion of the city and broke down the walls for a distance of twenty stades. At this the king, believing that the oracle had been fulfilled and that the river had plainly become the city’s enemy, abandoned hope of saving himself. And in order that he might not fall into the hands of the enemy, he built an enormous pyre in his palace, heaped upon it all his gold and silver as well as every article of the royal wardrobe, and then, shutting his concubines and eunuchs in the room which had been built in the middle of the pyre, he consigned both them and himself and his palace to the flames.
The rebels, on learning of the death of Sardanapallus, took the city by forcing an entrance where the wall had fallen, and clothing Arbaces in the royal garb saluted him as king and put in his hands the supreme authority.

Thereupon, after the new king had distributed among the generals who had aided him in the struggle gifts corresponding to their several deserts, and as he was appointing satraps over the nations, Belesys the Babylonian, who had foretold to Arbaces that he would be king of Asia, coming to him, reminded him of his good services, and asked that he be given the governorship of Babylon, as had been promised at the outset. He also explained that when their cause was endangered he had made a vow to Belus that, if Sardanapallus were defeated and his palace went up in flames, he would bring its ashes to Babylon, and depositing them near the river and the sacred precinct of the god he would construct a mound which, for all who sailed down the Euphrates, would stand as an eternal memorial of the man who had overthrown the rule of the Assyrians. This request he made because he had learned from a certain eunuch, who had made his escape and come to Belesys and was kept hidden by him, of the facts regarding the silver and gold. Now since Arbaces knew nothing of this, by reason of the fact that all the inmates of the palace had been burned along with the king, he allowed him both to carry the ashes away and to hold Babylon without the payment of tribute. Thereupon Belesys procured boats and at once sent off to Babylon along with the ashes practically all the silver and gold; and the king, having been informed of the act which Belesys had been caught perpetrating appointed as judges the generals who had served with him in the war. And when the accused acknowledged his guilt, the court sentenced him to death, but the king, being a magnanimous man and wishing to make his rule at the outset known for clemency, both freed Belesys from the danger threatening him and allowed him to keep the silver and gold which he had carried off; likewise, he did not even take from him the governorship over Babylon which had originally been given to him, saying that his former services were greater than his subsequent misdeeds. When this act of clemency was noise about, he won no ordinary loyalty on the part of his subjects as well as renown among the nations, all judging that a man who had conducted himself in this wise towards wrongdoers was worthy of the kingship. Arbaces, however, showing clemency towards the inhabitants of the city, settled them in villages and returned to each man his personal possessions, but the city he levelled to the ground. Then the silver and gold, amounting to many talents, which had been left in the pyre, he collected and took off to Ecbatana in Media.

So the empire of the Assyrians, which had endured from the time of Ninus through thirty generations, for more than one thousand three hundred years, was destroyed by the Medes in the manner described above.

But to us it seems not inappropriate to speak briefly of the Chaldaeans of Babylon and of their antiquity, that we may omit nothing which is worthy of record. Now the Chaldaeans, belonging as they do to the most ancient inhabitants of Babylonia, have about the same position among the divisions of the state as that occupied by the priests of Egypt; for being assigned to the service of the gods they spend their entire life in study, their greatest renown being in the field of astrology. But they occupy themselves largely with soothsaying as well, making predictions about future events, and in some cases by purifications, in others by sacrifices, and in others by some other charms they attempt to effect the averting of evil things and the fulfilment of the good...

*Sardanapalus and history*

It was often Byron’s way to take a source-book, and, while remaining faithful to its facts, to reverse its moral and political values. This is the case here. What Diodorus Siculus condemns (on what would now be considered no evidence anyway), Byron elaborates and admires: his king is not just effeminate, but peace-loving. He is disillusioned with his people, who would prefer warfare to the peace he has brought them.

**The background**

Byron announces the start of *Sardanapalus’* writing in his Ravenna Journal entry for January 12th 1821 (see this website): it was a time when he expected the Carbonari of northern Italy to rise and support the Neapolitan insurrectionists in their struggle against the Austrians. The Carbonari did not rise, and the Neapolitans ran away from the Austrians, so the sense of the futility of political aspiration we find in the play mirrors that which Byron discovered in the events of his time, except that he portrays it, not from the point of view of the ruled who want to overthrow their rulers, but from that of a ruler who feels that the ruled have no reason to want to overthrow him.

As with *Marino Faliero*, where the chief plotter against the state is himself the head of the state, *Sardanapalus* gives little ammunition to those who think of Byron as a radical writer. What he writes of

kings in his journal (see next quotation) and what he writes in his plays, are different things. He’s all
in favour of revolt as long as it doesn’t affect the status quo.

The whole Ravenna Journal passage is relevant to Sardanapalus:

Read the Italian translation by Guido Sorelli of the German Grillparzer – a devil of a name, to be sure, for
posterity; but they must learn to pronounce it. With all the allowance for a translation, and above all, an Italian
translation (they are the very worst of translators, except from the Classics – Annibale Caro, for instance – and
there, the bastardy of their language helps them, as, by way of looking legitimate, they ape their fathers’
tongue) – but with every allowance for such a disadvantage, the tragedy of Sappho is superb and sublime! There
is no denying it. The man has done a great thing in writing that play. And who is he? I know him not; but ages
will. 'Tis a high intellect […] Grillparzer is grand – antique – not so simple as the ancients, but very simple for a
modern – too Madame de Staël-ish, now and then – but altogether a great and goodly writer.

January 13th, 1821, Saturday.

Sketched the outline and Drams. Pers. of an intended tragedy of Sardanapalus, which I have for some time
meditated. Took the names from Diodorus Siculus, (I know the history of Sardanapalus, and have known it since
I was twelve years old), and read over a passage in the ninth vol. octavo of Mitford’s Greece, where he rather
vindicates the memory of this last of the Assyrians.7

Dined – news come – the Powers mean to war with the peoples. The intelligence seems positive – let it be so
– they will be beaten in the end. The king-times are fast finishing. There will be blood shed like water, and tears
like mist; but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it.

I carried Teresa the Italian translation of Grillparzer’s Sappho, which she promises to read. She quarrelled
with me, because I said that love was not the loftiest theme for true tragedy; and, having the advantage of her
native language, and natural female eloquence, she overcame my fewer arguments. I believe she was right. I
must put more love into “Sardanapalus” than I intended. I speak, of course, if the times will allow me leisure.
That if will hardly be a peace-maker.8

Franz Grillparzer, bisexuality, and Teresa Guiccioli

Grillparzer’s tragedy Saffo – often performed in Central Europe in later years, though Byron never saw
it – is more important to Sardanapalus than the sad politics of Italy. Grillparzer (1791-1872) published
it in 1819, and Guido Sorelli translated it in the same year. Its bisexual heroine, derived in part from
myth, in part from de Staël’s Corinne, in part from Virgil’s Dido, finds, as Shakespeare does in the
Sonnets, her boyfriend, Phaon, and her girlfriend, Melitta, betraying her in one another’s arms, and hurls
herself from a rock into the sea in despair (compare CHP II st. 41, and Don Juan II st. 205, and IV st. 27:
though there she is exclusively heterosexual). Her girlfriend, the innocent eastern slave girl Melitta, is a
forerunner of Myrrha in Sardanapalus. The play’s verse carries an Ionian charm which may have set
Byron’s mind working. He would have been impressed by Grillparzer’s dramatization of love, and its
perennial victory against everything that judgement and commonsense can bring against it. Still more
would he, a bisexual, have been impressed by the bold, scarcely covert way in which Grillparzer
dramatises a monarch in love with two people at the same time, one of whom is of her own sex.

But if he had wanted to portray Sardanapalus with the same intensity with which Grillparzer
portrayed Sappho, he had two problems. Firstly, whereas a female bisexual was almost tolerable at the
time (if treated with discretion and taste), a male bisexual could not be treated with taste, and no work
about him could ever be published: certainly not if he were, as Diodorus Siculus writes, “to pursue the
delights of love with men as well as with women; for he practised sexual indulgence of both
kinds without restraint, showing not the least concern for the disgrace attending such conduct”. Secondly,
Byron had constantly at his elbow the romantic sentimentalist Teresa Guiccioli, his affair with
whom was still, over eighteen months after it started, still in progress. How could he write any work about
a man who had male as well as female lovers, if he had to give Teresa a daily account of the work?

1821 (BLJ VIII, 13–27) while writing Sardanapalus. See Don Juan XII, 19, 7–8: “And Mitford, in the nineteenth Century, /Gives with Greek truth the good old Greek the lie.” The Mitford passage (IX, 311-13) is printed as a note to Sardanapalus (CPW VI 615): “A monument representing Sardanapalus was found [by Alexander] … warranted by an inscription in Assyrian
characters, of course in the old Assyrian language, which the Greeks, whether well or ill, interpreted thus: ‘Saradanapalus son of
Anacyndaraxes in one day founded Achialus and Tarsus. Eat, drink, play; all other human joys are not worth a fillip.’”
4: Compare As You Like It, V iv, 97 (app.): Much virtue in “If”.
The major challenge presented by a reading of Diodorus Siculus, if Byron were to adhere to his normal method of inverting the moral values of his source, would have been to present the bisexuality of his defeated protagonist sympathetically: but it wasn’t possible for Byron, in Ravenna in 1821, to do that.

Rather than provide a bisexual Sardanapalus with a male partner, Byron provides him with women of two types: the one to whom you’re married, who is conventionally feminine, and the ones to whom you’re bonded (in one way or another), who are almost masculine. Zarina, his queen, referred to ominously at I i 92, turns out to be female, but stoic, accommodating, and undemanding enough, when she appears in Act IV. But Myrrha, his mistress, starting in a feminine vein, gains in toughness as the violence around her increases, until it’s clear that, like Catherine the Great, she gets great satisfaction from seeing men kill one another. As she sits by the sleeping Sardanapalus, and as – we gather afterwards – he dreams of the “semi-glorious human monster”, the “Man-Queen”, Semiramis, (who’s linked in our minds already with Bacchus / Dinoysos), we realise that her name, Myrrha, is embedded within that of her lover’s grandmother, (“Mira” – “Se-Mira-mis”). In the same way, Don Juan’s most politically powerful love, Catherine the Great, bears the same name as Byron’s mother, Catherine Gordon of Gight.

Such Freudian wordplay is revealed in the study, not on the stage.

Teresa Guiccioli was sufficiently naïve, self-deceived and arrogant to think that she was Byron’s muse, his Beatrice, his Laura, his Leonora, and that she had inspired him to include and elaborate the love-theme in the play:

Lord Byron was so modest that he would go so far as to accept advice and criticism from the young lady. He had then just finished sketching the outline of his new tragedy, Sardanapalus. He had been familiar with the history of that last monarch of Assyria since he was twelve years old. He had read of it in Mitford, the historian of Greece, and had been struck by the way this author had vindicated that sovereign’s memory. So Lord Byron’s choice of subject sprang from his recollections of childhood, as with almost all his poems. Thus the germ of Werner lay in the [Lee sisters’] Canterbury Tales, Manfred in the Prometheus of Aeschylus, the Oriental narratives in his reading as an adolescent; and there are many other examples.

At the time he was letting his study of the theme mature by perusing Diodorus Siculus. He planned to make it a classical and regular drama on the strict lines of Alfieri, whose excellence he was constantly hearing trumpeted around him [that is, by Teresa’s husband]. It would also be modeled on Greek tragedy, but without imitation, without a chorus, and adapted to our times and circumstances rather than following the system of the old English playwrights, whose gross faults, he said, were pardoned only for the beauty of their language.

So as better to portray the condition of that remote civilization and lend it the local color of its epoch and nation, he did not wish to introduce a love element; because, he maintained, not only was he unable to consider love the necessary and essential mainspring of tragedy, but also this sentiment, such as present-day poets traded upon, could scarcely have existed within the inferior status to which women were consigned by the ancients.

In challenging from the standpoint of art the sway which this emotion held over the stage, he argued from the drama of antiquity, asserting that when love found a place in their theatre it was only a furious and criminal passion in which the body was involved, not the soul, or it was vengeance from the gods, or else a crude and unchaste attachment. For all these reasons, then, he would refuse to let love into his play.

After the Countess had listened with distress to all the above, she retorted that her opinion was diametrically opposed to his. “In spite of the difference in manners and cultures,” [she said] “mankind cannot fundamentally alter its nature nor crush its affections. Instead of painting such and such a period or civilization exclusively, isn’t it wiser to be the interpreter of man’s universal and unchangeable nature, as you have been in the past, and to go on depicting the passions proper to human beings of every age and clime, even at the risk of tending towards anachronism? A play of yours”, she declared, “for all its most austere beauties, would be boring if love were absent. Without eliminating all local color or having to give your Assyrians the way of life of knights errant, your genius is perfectly capable of bringing in that noble passion, which does not detract in the least from the force and ultimate heroism of a character – passionate love, which, more than anything else, rouses and drives on to selfless deeds, and even makes death preferable to dishonor …” And so she proceeded in the same vein.

Lord Byron, who had begun by laughing as he listened to this tirade, grew serious; then he said, “Perhaps you are right – the eloquence of Santa Chiara will reform me; I’ll think it over.” Once he was back at home, he wrote in his Journal:

5: I ii 180. The syntax is such that the epithet could apply either to Semiramis or to Bacchus.
6: I i 43. The syntax is such that the epithet could apply either to Sardanapalus or to Semiramis.
7: See below, I ii 181n.
9: BLJ VIII, 26; letter of January 13, 1821.
[Teresa] quarrelled with me [this evening] because I said that love was not the loftiest theme for ... tragedy; and, having the advantage of her native language, and natural female eloquence, she overcame my ... arguments. I believe she was right. I must put more love into “Sardanapalus” than I intended.10

Myrrha’s sublime love was conceived on that very night.11

Of the “effeminacy” of Sardanapalus, Teresa never writes. Facts are what she’s not interested in. It’s more likely that, rather than act as a creative spur to Byron, she acted in this instance as a creative brake – though the underlying impossibility, in 1821, of writing the part of a male lover for the king, must have been a brake still stronger. Myrrha is in any case based on Grillparzer’s Melitta, to whom Teresa never refers either. We do not know her reaction to Sorelli’s translation of Saffo, which Byron says he sent her, and which he says she promised to read; but we can guess she would, at the least, have been puzzled by it.

**Sardanapalus as theatre.**

Byron crams, as can be seen in the above extract from Diodorus Siculus, the actions of several years into a single day. *Sardanapalus* is the second of his tragedies observing the supposedly “classical” unities of time, place and action. It was preceded by *Marino Faliero* and followed by *The Two Foscari*. None of his other plays or fragments wear such a straitjacket, which can, in the hands of a master, produce excellent drama. However, all three were written under the influence not of respectable “classical” theatre practitioners like Sophocles or Racine, but under that of the closet dramatist Vittorio Alfieri, probably mediated through the views and anecdotes of Teresa Guiccioli’s husband Alessandro, who had been a friend of Alfieri, and had acted in his plays in the 1790s. He had told Byron that Byron resembled Alfieri: “the likeness to Alfieri was asserted very seriously by an Italian who had known him in his younger days”.12 While watching Alfieri’s (very discreet) incest tragedy, *Mirra*, Byron had had convulsions:

Last night [August 11th 1819] I went to the representation of Alfieri’s Mirra – the two last acts of which threw me into convulsions. – I do not mean by that word – a lady’s hysterics – but the agony of reluctant tears – and the choaking shudder which I do not often undergo for fiction. – This is but the second time for anything under reality, the first was on seeing Kean’s Sir Giles Overreach.13

At the climax of the play, Mirra kills herself on her father’s sword rather than confess the incestuous love she feels for him.

The name “Mirra” changes quickly into “Myrrha”.

Alfieri is regarded nowadays as a stylist and writer for freedom, and his plays are rarely if ever performed; in any case, he regarded the squalid business of practical staging as a regrettable custom, best foregone – an interesting but strictly experimental byproduct of writing and reading them. Acting in Italy does not seem to have been good in his time, but he did occasionally act in his own plays himself. Byron was angered that his previous play, *Marino Faliero*, had been staged in London, and wrote to Murray about *Sardanapalus*, “I can only protest as heretofore against it’s being acted – it being expressly written not for the theatre”.14

Byron announces and defends his adherence to the unities in his Preface (see below), to the volume containing not only *Sardanapalus* but also *Cain* (which is not “unified” in terms of time or place), and *The Two Foscari*:

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

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10: BLJ VIII, 26; letter of January 13, 1821.
12: BLJ IX 11.
13: BLJ VI, 206.
14: BLJ VIII 129.
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 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.

It is one of the stupidest statements he ever committed himself to in print. Yes, Shakespeare was staged, in Byron’s day, in a way which disguised the full extent of his stagecraft; but to imply that in his method “there … can be no drama” is to blind oneself deliberately and stumble about walking into walls. “It” was never “the law of literature throughout the world”. Dr Johnson had demolished the theory behind the idea of the unities in his Preface to Shakespeare, and others pointed out that Byron’s classical models (whom Byron is careful never to name), often break the rules to which they are supposed to adhere. In a review in The Quarterly for “July” 1822 (it appeared in October),
15 Reginald Heber makes some very damaging, commonsense points about Byron’s obsession. He points out that all three Greek tragic writers often ignore unity of place (p.483), and that sometimes when French tragedies do observe unity of time, for instance Corneille in Le Cid, credibility is strained beyond any possible limit (p.486). “Merely to approach the unities, therefore” he writes, “is to do nothing, or worse than nothing. It is an abandonment of liberty without acquiring the supposed advantages of bondage” (483).

Despite this, Sardanapalus is often spoken of as the most stageworthy of Byron’s three classical dramas, having more incident than Faliero and more tension than Foscarì: as Faliero is almost devoid of incident, and Foscarì completely devoid of tension, this does not say much: but one distinguished senior Byronist has said that he refuses to die until he has seen Sardanapalus on stage.

One factor in the play’s greater success is the amount of physical action which Byron permits himself, in disobedience to “the rules”: the constant toing-and-froing of the attacks and counterattacks in Act III, would not be permitted in Racine, but are of course commonplace in Shakespeare (though no-one ever burns themselves alive in his work). Characters are not supposed to die onstage in classical drama, but here three do: Salamenes, Myrrha, and the protagonist himself.

Sardanapalus, Shakespeare, and Dryden

Try as he might to throw off the influence of Shakespeare in formal terms, quotations from Shakespeare outnumber those from all other writers, in Sardanapalus as elsewhere. There are buried quotations and allusions to Macbeth, Othello, Coriolanus and Hamlet, and the Assyrian king is himself an amalgam of Antony and Richard II.

Barry Weller, in his excellent edition of Sardanapalus for the Clarendon Byron, notes 16 that the scene in Act I between Sardanapalus and Salemenes should be compared with that between Ventidius and Antony in the first act of All for Love, Dryden’s “unity-observing” version of Antony and Cleopatra. This is true, though where Ventidius is trying to redeem a defeated Antony, Salemenes is trying to warn an as-yet-undefeated Sardanapalus. But what Weller may be too polite to say is how revealing the contrast is, in relation to the differing idioms of the two writers. At one point Antony laughs – at another, Ventidius weeps – finally, the men embrace. For All for Love is a professional play, designed to be acted by actors and to awaken the audience’s empathy and feelings. I don’t think it’s inaccurate to say that there is no laughter, no tears, and no physical affection expressed, in any play by Byron. All is noble, stoic restraint. Byron, perhaps trying to be as like Alfieri and as unlike Shakespeare as possible, fails – or refuses – to draw the audience into the action of the play, by employing a much smaller expressive palette, and by allowing his characters a much narrower range of emotions than are found in “real life”, or (dare I say it?) “real drama”.

Publication

Having begun the play on January 13th 1821, Byron finished it on May 27th, and had the proofs sent and returned to Murray by July 14th. It was published, in the same volume as Cain and The Two

16: CPW VI 614.
Foscari, on December 19th. Byron was paid 2,500 guineas for the volume, and for Don Juan Cantos III, IV and V, together.

I have been able to see neither the manuscript of Sardanapalus nor the presentation copy to Baron Lützerode in which Byron made textual emendations. For this edition I have consulted those of E.H.Coleridge (John Murray, rpt. 1924), and Barry Weller (Clarendon, 1991). Weller has been my guide on several textual points.
SARDANAPALUS

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS GOETHE17 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 compositions 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 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. 

DRAMATIS PERSONAE. 

MEN: SARDANAPALUS, King of Nineveh and Assyria, etc.18 

ARBACES, the Mede who aspired to the Throne. 
SALEMENES, the King’s Brother-in-Law. 
PANIA. 

BELESES, a Chaldean and Soothsayer. 
ALTADA, an Assyrian Officer of the Palace. 
ZAMES. 

WOMEN: ZARINA, the Queen.19 

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. 

17: Byron, though he never learned German, was anxious to make Goethe aware of his admiration. His anxiety resulted in the 
comical sequence of ever-shortening dedications to Goethe which he tried to affix, the first a long facetious one to Marino 
Faliero (CPW IV 544–7), then a shorter one to Sardanapalus (printed above), and finally – with success at last – a five-line one 
to Werner (CPW VI 383: though it may be by John Murray). 
18: Sardanapalus, Arbaces, and Beleses are the only characters taken from Diodorus Siculus. All the others are invented. 
19: The name “Zarina” occurs at Diodorus Siculus 2, 13, 5; she is Queen of the Sacae. 
20: B.’s original name for his heroine was Byblis, from Ovid’s character who commits incest with her brother (see 
Metamorphoses X). Mirra, in the tragedy by Alfieri, merely harbours incestuous feelings for her father (see Metamorphoses XI). 
The name “Myrrhanus” occurs at Diodorus Siculus 3, 65, 4: he is an Indian king punished by Bacchus during his invasion.
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 Nimrod 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 born, He 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,

21: This opening speech, critical of the hero, may usefully be compared with the corresponding one in Antony and Cleopatra.
22: For Nimrod, the mighty hunter, see Genesis 10 8-9.
23: Semiramis, Sardanapalus’ grandmother, a ninth-century queen of Nineveh, wife or mother of that Ninus whose tomb figures in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Subject of a tragedy by Voltaire and an opera by Rossini. Confused in myth with Astarte. See Don Juan V stanzas 60 and 61; and Appendix I below.
24: Perhaps an anachronistic glance at Tamberlane the Great, who was to be “born a peasant”.
25: Eunuchs.
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.

Sardanapalus
(speaking to some of his attendants): Let the pavilion over the Euphrates²⁶
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,²⁷
We’ll meet again in that the sweetest hour,
When we shall gather like the stars above us,
And you will form a heaven as bright as theirs.
Till then, let each be mistress of her time,²⁸
And thou, my own Ionian Myrrha, choose;²⁹
Wilt thou along with them or me?

Myrrha: My Lord –
Sardanapalus: 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?

Myrrha:
Sardanapalus: 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.

Myrrha: I would remain: I have no happiness Save in beholding thine; yet –

²⁶: The “pavilion” is often taken to be a joke about George IV’s Brighton Pavilion, but B. denied it: “The words Queen and pavilion occur, but it not an allusion to his Britannic Majesty, as you may tremulously (for the admiralty custom) imagine. This you will one day see (if I finish it), as I have made Sardanapalus brave (though voluptuous, as history represents him), and also as amiable as my poor powers could render him. So that it could neither be truth nor satire on any living monarch.” – letter to Murray, May 25th 1821 (BLJ VIII 126-7). B. pretended, or, perhaps, really thought, that such a phrase as the “Queen’s wrongs” would be supposed so contain an allusion to the trial of Queen Caroline (August-November 1820), and to the exclusion of her name from the State prayers. If the play had been put on the stage at this time, the pit and gallery would have applauded the sentiment to the echo. There was, too, but one “pavilion” in 1821, and that was not on the banks of the Euphrates, but at Brighton. Qui s’excuse s’accuse. B. was not above “paltering” with his readers “in a double sense.” (E.H.Coleridge, adapted.) Nevertheless, Sardanapalus is not at all like the obese and wimpish George IV: the joke is decorative only.

²⁷: To make the line scan, the hero’s name must have its penultimate syllable stressed.

²⁸: Compare Macbeth, III i 40-1: Let every man be master of his time.

²⁹ BYRON’S NOTE: “The Ionian name had been still more comprehensive; having included the Achaians and the Beotians, 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, vol. i, 199 (Sardanapalus, first edition, p.171).
Sardanapalus: Yet! what YET?
   Thy own sweet will shall be the only barrier
   Which ever rises betwixt thee and me.

Myrrha: I think the present is the wonted hour
   Of council; it were better I retire.

Salemenes (comes forward and says): The Ionian slave says well: let her retire.

Sardanapalus: Who answers? How now, brother?

Salemenes: The Queen’s brother,
   And your most faithful vassal, royal Lord.

Sardanapalus: (addressing his train): As I have said, let all dispose their hours
   Till midnight, when again we pray your presence.

The court retiring.

(To MYRRHA, who is going)
Myrrha! I thought thou wouldst remain.

Myrrha: Great King,
   Thou didst not say so.

Sardanapalus: But thou looked’st it:
   I know each glance of those Ionic eyes,
   Which said thou wouldst not leave me.

Myrrha: Sire! your brother –

Salemenes: His Consort’s brother, minion of Ionia!
   How darest thou name me and not blush?

Sardanapalus: Not blush!
   Thou hast no more eyes than heart to make her crimson
   Like to the dying day on Caucasus,
   Where sunset tints the snow with rosy shadows,
   And then reproach her with thine own cold blindness,
   Which will not see it. What! in tears, my Myrrha?

Salemenes: Let them flow on; she weeps for more than one,
   And is herself the cause of bitterer tears.

Sardanapalus: Cursed be he who caused those tears to flow!

Salemenes: Curse not thyself – millions do that already.

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

Salemenes: Would thou couldst!

Myrrha: My sovereign,
   I pray, and thou, too, Prince, permit my absence.

Sardanapalus: 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.

Salemenes: It may be,
   Thou wilt lose both – and both for ever!

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

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30: Again, echoes Macbeth at III i 40-1: *Let every man be master of his time …*

31: Echoes Antony to Cleopatra, I i 35: *Kingdoms are clay …*
Salemenes: 'Tis beyond
That easy – far too easy – idle nature,
Which I would urge thee. O that I could rouse thee!
Though 'twere against myself.

Sardanapalus: By the god Baal!\textsuperscript{32}
The man would make me tyrant.

Salemenes: 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 lustrs
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.

Sardanapalus: Why, what makes thee the mouth-piece of the people?
Salemenes: Forgiveness of the Queen, my sister’s 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.

Sardanapalus: What’s that?
Salemenes: To thee an unknown word.

Sardanapalus: Yet speak it;
I love to learn.

Salemenes: Virtue.

Sardanapalus: 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.\textsuperscript{33}

Salemenes: To change the irksome theme, then, hear of vice.

Sardanapalus: From whom?
Salemenes: Even from the winds, if thou couldst listen
Unto their echoes of the Nation’s voice.

Sardanapalus: Come, I’m indulgent, as thou knowest, patient,
As thou hast often proved – speak out, what moves thee?

Salemenes: Thy peril.

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

Sardanapalus: ’Gainst me! What would the slaves?
Salemenes: A king.

Sardanapalus: And what

\textsuperscript{32}: “Baal” is a semitic word meaning “Lord”: but Byron means his 1821 audience to think of Sardanapalus as the sympathetic worshipper of an Old Testament demon: see for example 1 Kings 18.

\textsuperscript{33}: Links Zarina, his queen, to the supposedly self-righteous Annabella, Lady Byron.
Am I then?

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

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

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

Sardanapalus: Whose then is the crime,
But the false satraps, who provide no better?

Salemenes: 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 shinest like a God
Through the long centuries of thy renown,
This, thy presumed descendant, ne’er beheld
As king the kingdoms thou didst leave as hero,
Won with thy blood, and toil, and time, and peril!
For what? to furnish imposts for a revel,
Or multiplied extortions for a minion.

Sardanapalus: I understand thee – thou wouldst have me go
Forth as a conqueror. By all the stars
Which the Chaldeans read – the restless slaves
Deserve that I should curse them with their wishes,
And lead them forth to glory.

Salemenes: Wherefore not?

Semiramis – a woman only – led
These our Assyrians to the solar shores of Ganges.

Sardanapalus: ’Tis most true. And how returned?

Salemenes: Why, like a man – a hero; baffled, but
Not vanquished. With but twenty guards, she made
Good her retreat to Bactria.

Sardanapalus: And how many
Left she behind in India to the vultures?

Salemenes: Our annals say not.

Sardanapalus: Then I will say for them –
That she had better woven within her palace
Some twenty garments, than with twenty guards
Have fled to Bactria, leaving to the ravens,
And wolves, and men – the fiercer of the three,
Her myriads of fond subjects. Is this Glory?
Then let me live in ignominy ever.

Salemenes: 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.

Sardanapalus: I sway them –

Salemenes: It may be ere long

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34: Satraps were governors of Persian provinces.
35: Bactria, famous for camels, was in modern Afghanistan and southern Tajikistan.
That they will need her sword more than your sceptre.

Sardanapalus: 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.  

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

Sardanapalus: And in his godship I will honour him – Not much as man. What, ho! my cupbearer!  

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

Enter Cupbearer.

Sardanapalus (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.

Salemenes: Is this moment A fitting one for the resumption of Thy yet unslept-off revels?

Re-enter Cupbearer, with wine.

Sardanapalus (taking the cup from him): Noble kinsman, If these barbarian Greeks of the far shores And skirts of these our realms lie not, this Bacchus Conquered the whole of India, did he not?  

Salemenes: He did, and thence was deemed a Deity.  

Sardanapalus: Not so: of all his conquests a few columns. Which may be his, and might be mine, if I Thought them worth purchase and conveyance, are The landmarks of the seas of gore he shed, The realms he wasted, and the hearts he broke. But here – here in this goblet is his title To immortality – the immortal grape From which he first expressed the soul, and gave To gladden that of man, as some atonement For the victorious mischiefs he had done. Had it not been for this, he would have been A mortal still in name as in his grave; And, like my ancestor Semiramis, A sort of semi-glorious human monster. Here’s that which deified him – let it now
Humanise thee; my surly, chiding brother,

36: For Bacchus’ conquest of India, see Ovid, Metamorphoses, IV, or Fasti, III.  
37: According to Plutarch, Alexander built great altars on the banks of the Ganges, on which the native kings were wont to “offer sacrifices in the Grecian manner.” Hence, perhaps, the legend of the columns erected by Dionysos.  
38: But Bacchus was not just a conqueror: he was the god of intoxication, and, under the name of Dionysos, the god of identity-switch, cross-dressing, playacting, and theatre. Sardanapalus’ hostility towards him does not bode well for the play.
Pledge me to the Greek God!

Salemenes: For all thy realms
I would not so blaspheme our country’s creed. 185

Sardanapalus: That is to say, thou thinkest him a hero,
That he shed blood by oceans; and no God,
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.) 190

Salemenes: Wilt thou resume a revel at this hour? 195
Sardanapalus: 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.

Salemenes: I would but have recalled thee from thy dream;
Better by me awakened than rebellion. 200

Sardanapalus: 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? 205

Salemenes: Of what thou hast done to me, I speak not.
Sardanapalus: But
Thou think’st that I have wronged the Queen – is’t not so?
Salemenes: Think! Thou hast wronged her!

Sardanapalus: 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 suppossedst I could link me 210
Like a Chaldean peasant to his mate,
Ye knew nor me – nor monarchs – nor mankind.

Salemenes: 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.

Sardanapalus: And why not her brother?
Salemenes: I only echo thee the voice of empires,
Which he who long neglects not long will govern. 220
Sardanapalus: The ungrateful and ungracious slaves! they murmur
Because I have not shed their blood, nor led them
To dry into the desart’s dust by myriads,
Or whiten with their bones the banks of Ganges;
Nor decimated them with savage laws, 225
Nor sweated them to build up Pyramids,
Or Babylonian walls.

Salemenes: 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. 235

Sardanapalus: 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?

Salemenes: ’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.

Sardanapalus: 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.”39

Salemenes: A worthy moral, and a wise inscription,
For a king to put up before his subjects!

Sardanapalus: 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.

Salemenes: Thy Sires have been revered as Gods –

39 BYRON’S NOTE: “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, vol. ix. 311, 312, and 313 (Sardanapalus, first edition, pp.171-3).
Sardanapalus: In dust
   And death, where they are neither Gods nor men.
Talk not of such to me! the worms are Gods;\textsuperscript{40}
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)
To be indulgent to my own.
Salemenes: Alas!
The doom of Nineveh is sealed. – Woe – woe
To the unrivalled city!
Sardanapalus: What dost dread?
Salemenes: Thou art guarded by thy foes: in a few hours
The tempest may break out which overwhelms thee,
And thine and mine; and in another day
What is shall be the past of Belus’ race.\textsuperscript{41}
Sardanapalus: What must we dread?
Salemenes: Ambitious treachery,
Which has environed thee with snares; but yet
There is resource: empower me with thy signet
To quell the machinations, and I lay
The heads of thy chief foes before thy feet.
Sardanapalus: The heads – how many?
Salemenes: Must I stay to number
   When even thine own’s in peril? Let me go;
Give me thy signet – trust me with the rest.
Sardanapalus: I will trust no man with unlimited lives.
When we take those from others, we nor know
What we have taken, nor the thing we give.
Salemenes: Wouldst thou not take their lives who seek for thine?
Sardanapalus: That’s a hard question – but I answer, Yes.
Cannot the thing be done without? Who are they
Whom thou suspectest? – Let them be arrested.
Salemenes: I would thou wouldst not ask me; the next moment
Will send my answer through thy babbling troop
Of paramours, and thence fly o’er the palace,
Even to the city, and so baffle all.
Trust me.
Sardanapalus: Thou knowest I have done so ever;
Take thou the signet. (\textit{Gives the signet})
Salemenes: I’ve one more request.
Sardanapalus: Name it.
Salemenes: That thou this night forbear the banquet
In the pavilion over the Euphrates.
Sardanapalus: 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;
\textsuperscript{40}: Compare \textit{Hamlet}, IV iii, 21-3: \textit{Your worm is your only emperor for diet ...}
\textsuperscript{41}: Belus is Baal.
Nor crown me with a single rose the less;  
Nor lose one joyous hour. I fear them not.

Salemenes: But thou wouldst arm thee, wouldst thou not, if needful?  
Sardanapalus: 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?  
Salemenes: Is this a time for such fantastic trifling?  
If need be, wilt thou wear them?  
Sardanapalus: 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.  
Salemenes: They say thy Sceptre’s turned to that already.  
Sardanapalus: 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.  
Salemenes: They did not speak thus of thy fathers.  
Sardanapalus: 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?

Salemenes: You have said they’re men;  
As such their hearts are something.  
Sardanapalus: 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,  
By mild reciprocal alleviation,  
The fatal penalties imposed on life:  
But this they know not, or they will not know.  
I have, by Baal! done all I could to soothe them:  
I made no wars, I added no new imposts,  
I interfered not with their civic lives,  
I let them pass their days as best might suit them:

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42: Hercules was infatuated with the Lydian queen Omphale, whose slave he became after killing his friend Iphitus. He was forced by Apollo to serve her in woman’s clothing.
Passing my own as suited me.

Salemenes: Thou stopp’st
Short of the duties of a king; and therefore
They say thou art unfit to be a monarch.

Sardanapalus: They lie. Unhappily, I am unfit
To be aught save a monarch; else for me
The meanest Mede might be the king instead.

Salemenes: There is one Mede, at least, who seeks to be so.

Sardanapalus: What mean’st thou! – ’tis thy secret; thou desir’st
Few questions, and I’m not of curious nature.
Take the fit steps; and, since necessity
Requires, I sanction and support thee. Ne’er
Was man who more desired to rule in peace
The peaceful only: if they rouse me, better
They had conjured up stern Nimrod from his ashes,
“Well the mighty hunter.” I will turn those realms
To one wide desert chase of brutes, who were,
But would no more, by their own choice, be inhuman.
What they have found me, they belie; that which
They yet may find me – shall defy their wish
To speak it worse; and let them thank themselves.

Salemenes: Then thou at last canst feel?

Sardanapalus: Feel! who feels not
Ingratitude!

Salemenes: I will not pause to answer
With words, but deeds. Keep thou awake that energy
Which sleeps at times, but is not dead within thee,
And thou may’st yet be glorious in thy reign,
An powerful in thy realm. Farewell!

Exit SALEMENES.

Sardanapalus (solus):

Farewell!

He’s gone; and on his finger bears my signet,
Which is to him a sceptre. He is stern
As I am heedless; and the slaves deserve
To feel a master. What may be the danger,
I know not: he hath found it, let him quell it.
Must I consume my life – this little life –
In guarding against all may make it less!
It is not worth so much! It were to die
Before my hour, to live in dread of death,
Tracing revolt; suspecting all about me,
Because they are near; and all who are remote,
Because they are far. But if it should be so –
If they should sweep me off from earth and empire,
Why, what is earth or empire of the earth?
I have loved, and lived, and multiplied my image; 43
To die is no less natural than those
Acts of this clay! ’Tis true I have not shed
Blood as I might have done, in oceans, till
My name became the synonyme of death –
A terror and a trophy. But for this

43: Compare Genesis 1, 22: And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply ...
I feel no penitence; my life is love:
If I must shed blood, it shall be by force.
Till now, no drop from an Assyrian vein
Hath flow’d for me, nor hath the smallest coin
Of Nineveh’s vast treasures o’er been lavish’d
On objects which could cost her Sons a tear:
If then they hate me, ’tis because I hate not:
If they rebel, ’tis because I oppress not.
Oh, men! ye must be ruled with scythes, not sceptres,
And mow’d down like the grass, else all we reap
Is rank abundance, and a rotten harvest
Of discontents infecting the fair soil,
Making a desert of fertility. –
I’ll think no more. – Within there, ho!

Enter an Attendant.

Slave, tell
The Ionian Myrrha we could crave her presence.

Attendant: King, she is here.

MYRRHA enters.

Sardanapalus (apart to Attendant): Away!

(Addressing MYRRHA): Beautiful being!
Thou dost almost anticipate my heart;
It throbb’d for thee, and here thou comest: let me
Deem that some unknown influence, some sweet oracle,
Communicates between us, though unseen,
In absence, and attracts us to each other.

Myrrha: I know there doth, but not its name:
What is it?

Myrrha: In my native land a God,
And in my heart a feeling like a God’s,
Exalted; yet I own ’tis only mortal;
For what I feel is humble, and yet happy –
That is, it would be happy; but – (MYRRHA pauses)

Sardanapalus: There comes
For ever something between us and what
We deem our happiness: let me remove
The barrier which that hesitating accent
Proclaims to thine, and mine is sealed.

Myrrha: My Lord! –

Sardanapalus: My Lord – my King – Sire – Sovereign; thus it is –
For ever thus, addressed with awe. I ne’er
Can see a smile, unless in some broad banquet’s
Intoxicating glare, when the buffoons
Have gorged themselves up to equality,
Or I have quaffed me down to their abasement.
Myrrha, I can hear all these things, these names,
Lord – King – Sire – Monarch – nay, time was I prized them;
That is, I suffered them – from slaves and nobles;
But when they falter from the lips I love,
The lips which have been pressed to mine, a chill
Comes o’er my heart, a cold sense of the falsehood
Of this my station, which represses feeling
In those for whom I have felt most, and makes me
Wish that I could lay down the dull tiara,
And share a cottage on the Caucasus
With thee – and wear no crowns but those of flowers.

Wish that we could!

Myrrha: And dost thou feel this? – Why?
Sardanapalus: Then thou wouldst know what thou canst never know.
Myrrha: And that is –
Sardanapalus: The true value of a heart;
Myrrha: At least, a woman’s.
Sardanapalus: I have proved a thousand –
Myrrha: A thousand, and a thousand.
Sardanapalus: I think so.
Myrrha: Not one! the time may come thou may’st.
Sardanapalus: It will.

Hear, Myrrha; Salemenes has declared –
Or why or how he hath divined it, Belus,
Who founded our great realm, knows more than I –
But Salemenes hath declared my throne
In peril.

Myrrha: He did well.
Sardanapalus: And say’st thou so?
Thou whom he spurned so harshly, and now dared
Drive from our presence with his savage jeers,
And made thee weep and blush?
Myrrha: I should do both
More frequently, and he did well to call me
Back to my duty. But thou spakest of peril –
Peril to thee –
Sardanapalus: Aye, from dark plots and snares
From Medes – and discontented troops and nations.
I know not what – a labyrinth of things –
A maze of muttered threats and mysteries:
Thou know’st the man – it is his usual custom.
But he is honest. Come, we’ll think no more on’t –
But of the midnight festival.
Myrrha: ‘Tis time
To think of aught save festivals. Thou hast not
Spurned his sage cautions?
Sardanapalus: What? – and dost thou fear?
Myrrha: Fear I – I’m a Greek, and how should I fear death?
A slave, and wherefore should I dread my freedom?
Sardanapalus: Then wherefore dost thou turn so pale?
Myrrha: I love.
Sardanapalus: And do not I? I love thee far – far more
Than either the brief life or the wide realm,
Which, it may be, are menaced; – yet I blench not.
Myrrha: That means thou lov’st nor thyself nor me;
For he who loves another loves himself,
Even for that other’s sake. This is too rash:
Kingdoms and lives are not to be so lost.
Sardanapalus: Lost! – why, who is the aspiring chief who dared
Assume to win them?

Myrrha: Who is he should dread
To try so much? When he who is their ruler
Forgets himself – will they remember him?

Sardanapalus: Myrrha!

Myrrha: Frown not upon me: you have smiled
Too often on me not to make those frowns
Bitterer to bear than any punishment
Which they may augur. – King, I am your subject!
Master, I am your slave! Man, I have loved you! –
Loved you, I know not by what fatal weakness,
Although a Greek, and born a foe to monarchs⁴⁴ –
A slave, and hating fetters – an Ionian,
And, therefore, when I love a stranger, more
Degraded by that passion than by chains!
Still I have loved you. If that love were strong
Enough to overcome all former nature,
Shall it not claim the privilege to save you?

Sardanapalus: Save me, my beauty! Thou art very fair,
And what I seek of thee is love – not safety.

Myrrha: And without love where dwells security?

Sardanapalus: I speak of woman’s love.

Myrrha: The very first
Of human life must spring from woman’s breast,
Your first small words are taught you from her lips,
Your first tears quenched by her, and your last sighs
Too often breathed out in a woman’s hearing,
When men have shrunk from the ignoble care
Of watching the last hour of him who led them.

Sardanapalus: My eloquent Ionian! thou speak’st music:
The very chorus of the tragic song
I’ve heard thee talk of as the favourite pastime

Myrrha: I weep not. But I pray thee, do not speak
About my fathers or their land.

Sardanapalus: Yet oft
Thou speakest of them.

Myrrha: True – true: constant thought
Will overflow in words unconsciously;
But when another speaks of Greeks, it wounds me.

Sardanapalus: Well, then, how wouldst thou save me, as thou saidst?

Myrrha: By teaching thee to save thyself, and not
Thyself alone, but these vast realms, from all
The rage of the worst war – the war of brethren.

Sardanapalus: Why, child, I loathe all war, and warriors;
I live in peace and pleasure: what can man
Do more?

Myrrha: Alas! my Lord, with common men
There needs too oft the show of war to keep
The substance of sweet peace; and, for a king,
’Tis sometimes better to be feared than loved.⁴⁵

Sardanapalus: And I have never sought but for the last.

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⁴⁴: B. credits Myrrha with democratic feelings well before Greece discovered democracy, even for men, let alone for women.
⁴⁵: The views of both Machiavelli and Caligula.
Myrrha: And now art neither.  
Sardanapalus: Do you say so, Myrrha?  
Myrrha: I speak of civic popular love, self-love,  
Which means that men are kept in awe and law,  
Yet not oppressed – at least they must not think so,  
Or, if they think so, deem it necessary,  
To ward off worse oppression, their own passions.  
A King of feasts, and flowers, and wine, and revel,  
And love, and mirth, was never King of Glory.  
540  
Sardanapalus: Glory! what’s that?  
Sardanapalus: They cannot answer; when the priests speak for them,  
’Tis for some small addition to the temple.  
545  
Myrrha: Look to the annals of thine Empire’s founders.  
Sardanapalus: They are so blotted o’er with blood, I cannot.  
But what wouldst have? the Empire has been founded.  
I cannot go on multiplying empires.  
550  
Myrrha: Preserve thine own.  
Sardanapalus: At least, I will enjoy it.  
Come, Myrrha, let us go on to the Euphrates:  
The hour invites, the galley is prepared,  
And the pavilion, decked for our return,  
In fit adornment for the evening banquet,  
Shall blaze with beauty and with light, until  
It seems unto the stars which are above us  
Itself an opposite star; and we will sit  
Crowned with fresh flowers like –  
555  
Myrrha: Victims.  
Sardanapalus: No, like sovereigns,  
The Shepherd Kings of patriarchal times, 46  
Who knew no brighter gems than summer wreaths,  
And none but tearless triumphs. Let us on.  
560  

Enter PANIA.  

Pania: May the King live for ever!  
Sardanapalus: Not an hour  
Longer than he can love. How my soul hates  
This language, which makes life itself a lie,  
Flattering dust with eternity. Well, Pania!  
Be brief.  
565  
Pania: I’m charged by Salemenes to  
Reiterate his prayer unto the King,  
That for this day, at least, he will not quit  
The palace: when the General returns,  
He will adduce such reasons as will warrant  
His daring, and perhaps obtain the pardon  
Of his presumption.  
570  
Sardanapalus: What! am I then cooped?  
Already captive? can I not even breathe  
The breath of heaven? Tell prince Salemenes,  
Were all Assyria raging round the walls  
575  

46: Compare Manfred, I ii 49-50.
In mutinous myriads, I would still go forth.

Pania: I must obey, and yet—

Myrrha: Oh, Monarch, listen.

How many a day and moon thou hast reclined
Within these palace walls in silken dalliance,57
And never shown thee to thy people’s longing;
Leaving thy subjects’ eyes ungratified,
The satraps uncontrolled, the Gods unworshipped,
And all things in the anarchy of sloth,
Till all, save evil, slumbered through the realm!
And wilt thou not now tarry for a day,–
A day which may redeem thee? Wilt thou not
Yield to the few still faithful a few hours,
For them, for thee, for thy past fathers’ race,
And for thy sons’ inheritance?

Pania: ’Tis true!

From the deep urgency with which the Prince
Despatched me to your sacred presence, I
Must dare to add my feeble voice to that
Which now has spoken.

Sardanapalus: No, it must not be.

Myrrha: For the sake of thy realm!

Sardanapalus: Away!

Pania: For that

Of all thy faithful subjects, who will rally
Round thee and thine.

Sardanapalus: These are mere fantasies:

There is no peril – ’tis a sullen scheme
Of Salemenes, to approve his zeal,
And show himself more necessary to us.

Myrrha: By all that’s good and glorious take this counsel.

Sardanapalus: Business to-morrow.

Myrrha: Aye – or death to-night.

Sardanapalus: Why let it come then unexpectedly,
Midst joy and gentleness, and mirth and love;
So let me fall like the plucked rose! – far better
Thus than be withered.

Myrrha: Then thou wilt not yield,

Even for the sake of all that ever stirred
A monarch into action, to forego
A trifling revel.

Sardanapalus: No.

Myrrha: Then yield for mine;

For my sake

Sardanapalus: Thine, my Myrrha!

Myrrha: ’Tis the first

Boon which I ever asked Assyria’s king.

Sardanapalus: That’s true, and, wer’t my kingdom, must be granted.

Well, for thy sake, I yield me. Pania, hence!
Thou hear’st me.

Pania: And obey.

Exit PANIA.

Sardanapalus: I marvel at thee. What is thy motive, Myrrha, thus to urge me?

Myrrha: Thy safety; and the certainty that nought Could urge the Prince thy kinsman to require Thus much from thee, but some impending danger.

Sardanapalus: And if I do not dread it, why shouldst thou?

Myrrha: Because thou dost not fear, I fear for thee.

Sardanapalus: To-morrow thou wilt smile at these vain fancies.

Myrrha: If the worst come, I shall be where none weep, And that is better than the power to smile. And thou?

Sardanapalus: I shall be King, as heretofore.

Myrrha: Where?

Sardanapalus: With Baal, Nimrod, and Semiramis, Sole in Assyria, or with them elsewhere. Fate made me what I am – may make me nothing – But either that or nothing must I be: I will not live degraded.

Myrrha: Hadst thou felt

Sardanapalus: Thus always, none would ever dare degrade thee.

Myrrha: And who will do so now?

Sardanapalus: Suspect! – that’s a spy’s office. Oh! we lose Ten thousand precious moments in vain words, And vainer fears. Within there! – ye slaves, deck The Hall of Nimrod for the evening revel; If I must make a prison of our palace, At least we’ll wear our fetters jocundly; If the Euphrates be forbid us, and The summer-dwelling on its beautious border, Here we are still unmenaced. Ho! within there!

Exit SARDANAPALUS.

Myrrha: (solus). Why do I love this man? My country’s daughters Love none but heroes. But I have no country! The slave hath lost all save her bonds. I love him; And that’s the heaviest link of the long chain – To love whom we esteem not. Be it so:
The hour is coming when he’ll need all love, And find none. To fall from him now were baser Than to have stabbed him on his throne when highest Would have been noble in my country’s creed: I was not made for either. Could I save him, I should not love him better, but myself; And I have need of the last, for I have fallen In my own thoughts, by loving this soft stranger: And yet, methinks, I love him more, perceiving That he is hated of his own barbarians, The natural foes of all the blood of Greece. Could I but wake a single thought like those Which even the Phrygians48 felt when battling long

48: Phrygians are Trojans. See Don Juan IV, 78, 8: ... but the devil a Phrygian.
'Twixt Ilion and the sea, within his heart,
He would tread down the barbarous crowds, and triumph. 660
He loves me, and I love him; the slave loves
Her master, and would free him from his vices.
If not, I have a means of freedom still,
And if I cannot teach him how to reign,
May show him how alone a King can leave 665
His throne. I must not lose him from my sight.

Exit.
ACT II.

SCENE I. – The Portal of the same Hall of the Palace.

Beleses (solus): The Sun goes down: methinks he sets more slowly, 
Taking his last look of Assyria’s Empire. 
How red he glares amongst those deepening clouds, 
Like the blood he predicts. If not in vain, 
Thou Sun that sinkest, and ye stars which rise, 
I have outwatched ye, reading ray by ray 
The edicts of your orbs, which make Time tremble 
For what he brings the nations, ’tis the furthest 
Hour of Assyria’s years. And yet how calm! 
An earthquake should announce so great a fall – 
A summer’s sun discloses it. Yon disk, 
To the star-read Chaldean, bears upon 
Its everlasting page the end of what 
Seemed everlasting; but oh! thou true Sun! 
The burning oracle of all that live, 
As fountain of all life, and symbol of 
Him who bestows it, wherefore dost thou limit 
Thy lore unto calamity? Why not 
Unfold the rise of days more worthy thine 
All-glorious burst from ocean? why not dart 
A beam of hope athwart the future years, 
As of wrath to its days? Hear me! oh, hear me! 
I am thy worshipper, thy priest, thy servant – 
I have gazed on thee at thy rise and fall, 
And bowed my head beneath thy mid-day beams, 
When my eye dared not meet thee. I have watched 
For thee, and after thee, and prayed to thee, 
And sacrificed to thee, and read, and feared thee, 
And asked of thee, and thou hast answered – but 
Only to thus much: while I speak, he sinks – 
Is gone – and leaves his beauty, not his knowledge, 
To the delighted West, which revels in 
Its hues of dying glory. Yet what is 
Death, so it be but glorious? ’Tis a sunset; 
And mortals may be happy to resemble 
The Gods but in decay.

Enter ARBACES by an inner door.

Arbaces: Beleses, why 
So wrapt in thy devotions? Dost thou stand 
Gazing to trace thy disappearing God 
Into some realm of undiscovered day? 
Our busines is with night – ’tis come.

Beleses: But not 
Gone.

49: Compare Manfred, his speech to the setting sun at III i 3-30.
50: Beleses, the Chaldean astrologer, connects with CHP III, I4: Like the Chaldean, he could watch the Stars, / Till he had peopled them with beings bright / As their own beams ...
51: Arbaces and Beleses are, with Sardanapalus, the only characters taken from Diodorus Siculus’ “Sardanapallos” narration.
52: Compare Julius Caesar, III i 1-2: Caesar: The Ides of March are come. – Soothsayer: Aye, Caesar. But not gone.
Arbaces:     Let it roll on – we are ready.
Beleses:   Yes.

Arbaces:     Would it were over!
Beleses:     Does the prophet doubt,
To whom the very stars shine Victory?
Arbaces:     I do not doubt of Victory – but the Victor.
Beleses:     I do not doubt of Victory – but the Victor.
Arbaces:     Well, let thy science settle that. Meantime,
I have prepared as many glittering spears
As will out-sparkle our allies – your planets.
There is no more to thwart us. The she-king,
That less than woman, is even now upon
The waters with his female mates. The order
Is issued for the feast in the pavilion.
The first cup which he drains will be the last
Quaffed by the line of Nimrod.

Beleses: 'Twas a brave one.
Arbaces: And is a weak one – 'tis worn out – we'll mend it.
Beleses: Art sure of that?
Arbaces: Its founder was a hunter –
I am a soldier – what is there to fear?

Beleses: The soldier.

Arbaces: And the priest, it may be: but
If you thought thus, or think, why not retain
Your king of concubines? why stir me up?
Why spur me to this enterprise? your own
No less than mine?

Beleses: Look to the sky!
Arbaces: I look.

Beleses: What seest thou?
Arbaces: A fair summer’s twilight, and
The gathering of the stars.
Beleses: And midst them, mark
Yon earliest, and the brightest, which so quivers,
As it would quit its place in the blue ether.

Arbaces: Well?

Beleses: 'Tis thy natal ruler – thy birth planet.

Arbaces (touching his scabbard): My star is in this scabbard: when it shines,
It shall out-dazzle comets. Let us think
Of what is to be done to justify
Thy planets and their portents. When we conquer,
They shall have temples – aye, and priests – and thou
Shalt be the pontiff of – what Gods thou wilt;
For I observe that they are ever just,
And own the bravest for the most devout.

Beleses: Aye, and the most devout for brave – thou hast not
Seen me turn back from battle.

Arbaces: No; I own thee
As firm in fight as Babylonia’s captain,
As skilful in Chaldea’s worship: now,
Will it but please thee to forget the priest,
And be the warrior?53

Beleses: Why not both?

53: Compare the line from Mr Puff’s play The Spanish Armada in Sheridan’s The Critic: The father softens, but the governor’s resolved (used incongruously by B. as epigraph to The Two Foscari).
Arbaces: The better;
And yet it almost shames me, we shall have
So little to effect. This woman’s warfare
Degrades the very conqueror. To have plucked
A bold and bloody despot from his throne,
And grappled with him, clashing steel with steel,
That were heroic or to win or fall;
But to upraise my sword against this silkworm,
And hear him whine, it may be –

Beleses: Do not deem it:
He has that in him which may make you strife yet;
And were he all you think, his guards are hardy,
And headed by the cool, stern Salemenes.

Arbaces: They’ll not resist.
Beleses: Why not? they’re soldiers.
Arbaces: True,
And therefore need a soldier to command them.
Beleses: That Salemenes is.
Arbaces: But not their King.
Besides, he hates the effeminate thing that governs,
For the Queen’s sake, his sister. Mark you not
He keeps aloof from all the revels?
Beleses: But
Not from the council – there he is ever constant.
Arbaces: And ever thwarted: what would you have more
To make a rebel out of? A fool reigning,
His blood dishonoured, and himself disdained:
Why, it is his revenge we work for.
Beleses: Could
He but be brought to think so: this I doubt of.
Arbaces: What, if we sound him?
Beleses: Yes – if the time served.

Enter BALEA.

Balea: Satraps! The king commands your presence at
The feast to-night.
Beleses: To hear is to obey.
Balea: In the pavilion?
Arbaces: How! in the palace? it was not thus ordered.
Balea: It is so ordered now.
Arbaces: And why?
Balea: I know not.
Arbaces: May I retire?
Beleses (to Arbaces, aside): Hush! let him go his way.

(Alternately to Balea): Yes, Balea, thank the Monarch, kiss the hem
Of his imperial robe, and say, his slaves
Will take the crumbs he deigns to scatter from
His royal table at the hour – was’t midnight?

Balea: It was: the place, the hall of Nimrod. Lords,
I humble me before you, and depart.

Exit BALEA.
Arbaces: I like not this same sudden change of place; There is some mystery: wherefore should he change it?
Beleses: Doth he not change a thousand times a day?
Sloth is of all things the most fanciful – And moves more parasangs\(^54\) in its intents
Than generals in their marches, when they seek To leave their foe at fault. Why dost thou muse?
Arbaces: He loved that gay pavilion – it was ever
His summer dotage.
Beleses: And he loved his Queen –
And thrice a thousand harlotry besides –
And he has loved all things by turns, except
Wisdom and Glory.
Arbaces: Still – I like it not.
If he has changed – why, so must we: the attack
Were easy in the isolated bower,
Beset with drowsy guards and drunken courtiers;
But in the hall of Nimrod –
Beleses: Is it so?
Methought the haughty soldier feared to mount
A throne too easily – does it disappoint thee
To find there is a slipperier step or two
Than what was counted on?
Arbaces: When the hour comes,
Thou shalt perceive how far I fear or no.
Thou hast seen my life at stake – and gaily played for:
But here is more upon the die – a kingdom.
Beleses: I have foretold already – thou wilt win it:
Then on, and prosper.
Arbaces: Now were I a soothsayer,
I would have boded so much to myself.
But be the stars obeyed – I cannot quarrel
With them, nor their interpreter. Who’s here?

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Enter SALEMENES.

Salemenes: Satraps!
Beleses: My Prince!
Salemenes: Well met – I sought ye both,
But elsewhere than the palace.
Arbaces: Wherefore so?
Salemenes: ’Tis not the hour.
Arbaces: The hour! – what hour?
Salemenes: Of midnight.
Beleses: Midnight, my Lord!
Salemenes: What, are you not invited?
Beleses: Oh! yes – we had forgotten.
Salemenes: Is it usual
Thus to forget a Sovereign’s invitation?
Arbaces: Why – we but now received it.
Salemenes: Then why here?
Arbaces: On duty.

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\(^{54}\): A parasang measured probably between 3 and 3½ miles.
Salemenes: On what duty?
Beleses: On the state’s
We have the privilege to approach the presence;
But found the Monarch absent.
Salemenes: And I too
Am upon duty.
Arbaces: May we crave its purport?
Salemenes: To arrest two traitors. Guards! Within there!

Enter Guards.

Salemenes (continuing): Satraps,
Your swords.
Beleses (delivering his): My lord, behold my scimitar.
Arbaces (drawing his sword): Take mine.
Salemenes (advancing): I will.
Arbaces: But in your heart the blade –
The hilt quits not this hand.
Salemenes (drawing): How! dost thou brave me?
’Tis well – this saves a trial, and false mercy.
Soldiers, hew down the rebel!
Arbaces: Soldiers! Aye –
Alone you dare not.
Salemenes: Alone! foolish slave –
What is there in thee that a Prince should shrink from
Of open force? We dread thy treason, not
Thy strength: thy tooth is nought without its venom –
The serpent’s, not the lion’s. Cut him down.
Beleses (interposing): Arbaces! Are you mad? Have I not rendered
My sword? Then trust like me our Sovereign’s justice.
Arbaces: No – I will sooner trust the stars thou prat’st of,
And this slight arm, and die a king at least
Of my own breath and body – so far that
None else shall chain them.
Salemenes (to the Guards): You hear him and me.
Take him not – kill.

The Guards attack ARBACES,
who defends himself valiantly and dexterously till they waver.

Salemenes: Is it even so; and must
I do the hangman’s office? Recreants! see
How you should fell a traitor.

SALEMENES attacks ARBACES.

Enter SARDANAPALUS and Train.

Sardanapalus: Hold your hands –
Upon your lives, I say. What, deaf or drunken?
My sword! O fool, I wear no sword: here, fellow,
Give me thy weapon. (To a Guard.)

55: Compare Othello at I ii 59: Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
SARDANAPALUS snatches a sword from one of the soldiers, and rushes between the combatants – they separate.

Sardanapalus: In my very palace!
What hinders me from cleaving you in twain,
Audacious brawlers?

Beleses: Sire, your justice.
Salemenes: Or –

Your weakness.

Sardanapalus (raising the sword): How?
Salemenes: Strike! so the blow’s repeated
Upon yon traitor – whom you spare a moment,
I trust, for torture – I’m content.

Sardanapalus: What – him!
Salemenes: Prince, you forget yourself. Upon what warrant?

Salemenes (showing the signet): Thine.
Arbaces (confused): The King’s!
Salemenes: Yes! and let the King confirm it.

Salemenes: I parted not from this for such a purpose.
Salemenes: You parted with it for your safety – I
Employed it for the best. Pronounce in person.
Here I am but your slave – a moment past
I was your representative.

Sardanapalus: Then sheathe
Your swords.

ARBACES and SALEMENES return their swords to the scabbards.

Salemenes: Mine’s sheathed: I pray you sheathe not yours:
’Tis the sole sceptre left you now with safety.

Sardanapalus: A heavy one; the hilt, too, hurts my hand.
(To a Guard) Here, fellow, take thy weapon back. Well, sirs,

What doth this mean?

Beleses: The Prince must answer that.
Salemenes: Truth upon my part, treason upon theirs.
Sardanapalus: Treason – Arbaces! treachery and Beleses!
That were an union I will not believe.

Beleses: Where is the proof?
Salemenes: I’ll answer that, if once

The king demands your fellow-traitor’s sword.

Arbaces (to Salemenes): A sword which hath been drawn as oft as thine
Against his foes.

Salemenes: And now against his brother,

And in an hour or so against himself.

Sardanapalus: That is not possible: he dared not; no –
No – I’ll not hear of such things. These vain bickerings
Are spawned in courts by base intrigues, and baser
Hirelings, who live by lies on good men’s lives.
You must have been deceived, my brother.

Salemenes: First

Let him deliver up his weapon, and
Proclaim himself your subject by that duty,
And I will answer all.

Sardanapalus: Why, if I thought so –
But no, it cannot be: the Mede Arbaces –
The trusty, rough, true soldier – the best captain
Of all who discipline our nations – No,
I’ll not insult him thus, to bid him render
The scimitar to me he never yielded
Unto our enemies. Chief, keep your weapon.

Salemenes (delivering back the signet): Monarch, take back your signet.

Sardanapalus: But use it with more moderation.

Salemenes: Sire,
I used it for your honour, and restore it
Because I cannot keep it with my own.
Bestow it on Arbaces.

Sardanapalus: So I should:

He never asked it.

Salemenes: Doubt not, he will have it,
Without that hollow semblance of respect.

Beleses: I know not what hath prejudiced the Prince
So strongly ’gainst two subjects, than whom none
Have been more zealous for Assyria’s weal.

Salemenes: Peace, factious priest, and faithless soldier! thou
Unit’st in thy own person the worst vices
Of the most dangerous orders of mankind.
Keep thy smooth words and juggling homilies
For those who know thee not. Thy fellow’s sin
Is, at the least, a bold one, and not tempered
By the tricks taught thee in Chaldea.

Beleses: Hear him,
My liege – the son of Belus! he blasphemes
The worship of the land, which bows the knee
Before your fathers.

Sardanapalus: Oh! for that I pray you
Let him have absolution. I dispense with
The worship of dead men; feeling that I
Am mortal, and believing that the race
From whence I sprung are – what I see them – ashes.

Balea: King! Do not deem so: they are with the stars,
And –

Sardanapalus: You shall join them ere they will rise,
If you preach farther – Why, this is rank treason.

Salemenes: My lord!

Sardanapalus: To school me in the worship of
Assyria’s idols! Let him be released –
Give him his sword.

Salemenes: My Lord, and King, and Brother,
I pray ye pause.

Sardanapalus: Yes, and be sermonised,
And dinned, and deafened with dead men and Baal,
And all Chaldea’s starry mysteries.

Balea: Monarch! respect them,

Sardanapalus: Oh! for that – I love them;
I love to watch them in the deep blue vault,
And to compare them with my Myrrha’s eyes;
I love to see their rays redoubled in
The tremulous silver of Euphrates’ wave,
As the light breeze of midnight crisps the broad
And rolling water, sighing through the sedges
Which fringe his banks: but whether they may be
Gods, as some say, or the abodes of Gods,
As others hold, or simply lamps of night,
Worlds – or the lights of Worlds – I know nor care not.
There’s something sweet in my uncertainty
I would not change for your Chaldean lore;
Besides, I know of these all clay can know
Of aught above it, or below it – nothing.
I see their brilliancy and feel their beauty!
When they shine on my grave I shall know neither.

Beleses: For neither, Sire, say better.
Sardanapalus: I will wait,
If it so please you, Pontiff, for that knowledge.
In the mean time receive your sword, and know
That I prefer your service militant
Unto your ministry – not loving either.

Salemenes (aside): His lusts have made him mad. Then must I save him,
Spite of himself.
Sardanapalus: Please you to hear me, Satraps!
And chiefly thou, my priest, because I doubt thee
More than the soldier; and would doubt thee all
Wert thou not half a warrior: let us part
In peace – I’ll not say pardon – which must be
Earned by the guilty; this I’ll not pronounce ye,
Although upon this breath of mine depends
Your own; and, deadlier for ye, on my fears.
But fear not – for that I am soft, not fearful –
And so live on. Were I the thing some think me,
Your heads would now be dripping the last drops
Of their attained gore from the high gates
Of this our palace, into the dry dust,
Their only portion of the coveted kingdom
They would be crowned to reign o’er – let that pass.
As I have said, I will not deem ye guilty,
Nor doom ye guiltless. Albeit better men
Than ye or I stand ready to arraign you;
And should I leave your fate to sterner judges,
And proofs of all kinds, I might sacrifice
Two men, who, whatsoe’er they now are, were
Once honest. Ye are free, sirs.

Arbaces: Sire, this clemency –
Beleses (interrupting him): Is worthy of yourself; and, although innocent,
We thank –
Sardanapalus: Priest! keep your thanksgivings for Belus;
His offspring needs none.

Beleses: But being innocent –
Sardanapalus: Be silent. – Guilt is loud. If ye are loyal,
Ye are injured men, and should be sad, not grateful.

Beleses: So we should be, were justice always done
By earthly power omnipotent; but Innocence
Must oft receive her right as a mere favour.
Sardanapalus: That's a good sentence for a homily, Though not for this occasion. Prithee keep it To plead thy Sovereign's cause before his people.

Beleses: I trust there is no cause.

Sardanapalus: No cause, perhaps; But many causers: if ye meet with such In the exercise of your inquisitive function On earth, or should you read of it in heaven In some mysteriously twinkling of the stars, Which are your chronicles, I pray you note, That there are worse things between earth and heaven\(^\text{56}\) Than him who ruleth many and slays none;\(^\text{57}\) And, hating not himself, yet loves his fellows Enough to spare even those who would not spare him Were they once masters – but that's doubtful. Satraps! Your swords and persons are at liberty To use them as ye will – but from this hour I have no call for either. Salemenes! Follow me.

_Exeunt_ SARDANAPALUS, SALEMENES, and the Train, etc.,_ leaving ARDACES and BELES.

Arbaces: Beleses!

Beleses: Now, what think you?

Arbaces: That we are lost.

Beleses: That we have won the kingdom.

Arbaces: What? thus suspected – with the sword slung o'er us But by a single hair,\(^\text{58}\) and that still wavering, To be blown down by his imperious breath Which spared us – why, I know not.

Beleses: Seek not why;

But let us profit by the interval.
The hour is still our own – our power the same –
The night the same we destined. He hath changed Nothing except our ignorance of all Suspicion into such a certainty As must make madness of delay.

Arbaces: And yet –

Beleses: What, doubting still?

Arbaces: He spared our lives, nay, more, Saved them from Salemenes.

Beleses: And how long

Will he so spare? till the first drunken minute.

Arbaces: Or sober, rather. Yet he did it nobly;
Gave royally what we had forfeited
Basely –

Beleses: Say bravely.

Arbaces: Somewhat of both, perhaps –
But it has touched me, and, whate'er betide,

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\(^{56}\) Compare Hamlet, at I v 166-7: _There are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamed of in your philosophy_ (used by B as epigraph to _Manfred_).

\(^{57}\) Compare _The Pisoner of Chillon_, 381-2: Nor slew I of my subjects one – / What Sovereign hath so little done?

\(^{58}\) Refers anachronistically to the Sword of Damocles, who suspended a sword over a man's head by a single hair, to illustrate the frailty of existence.
I will no further on.

Beleses: And lose the world!

Arbaces: Lose any thing except my own esteem.

Beleses: I blush that we should owe our lives to such
A king of distaffs!

Arbaces: But no less we owe them;
And I should blush far more to take the grantor’s!

Beleses: Thou may’st resolve whate’er thou wilt – the stars
Have written otherwise.

Arbaces: Though they came down,
And marshalled me the way in all their brightness,
I would not follow.

Beleses: This is weakness – worse
Than a scared beldam’s dreaming of the dead,
And waking in the dark. Go to – go to.

Arbaces: Methought he looked like Nimrod as he spoke,
Even as the proud imperial statue stands
Looking the monarch of the kings around it,
And sways, while they but ornament, the temple.

Beleses: I told you that you had too much despised him,
And that there was some royalty within him –
What then? he is the nobler foe.

Arbaces: But we
The meaner – would he had not spared us!

Beleses: Wouldst thou be sacrificed thus readily?

Arbaces: No – but it had been better to have died
Than live ungrateful.

Beleses: Oh, the souls of some men!
Thou wouldst digest what some call treason, and Fools treachery – and, behold, upon the sudden, Because for something or for nothing, this
Rash reveller steps, ostentatiously, ’Twixt thee and Salemenes, thou art turned Into – what shall I say? – Sardanapalus! I know no name more ignominious.

Arbaces: But
An hour ago, who dared to term me such
Had held his life but lightly – as it is,
I must forgive you, even as he forgave us – Semiramis herself would not have done it.

Beleses: No – the Queen liked no sharers of the kingdom, Not even a husband.

Arbaces: I must serve him truly –

Beleses: And humbly?

Arbaces: No, sir, proudly – being honest.
I shall be nearer thrones than you to heaven;
And if not quite so haughty, yet more lofty.
You may do your own deeming – you have codes, And mysteries, and corollaries of
Right and wrong, which I lack for my direction, And must pursue but what a plain heart teaches.

59: Compare Macbeth to the dagger, II i 42: Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going …
60: Diodorus Siculus writes how Semiramis imprisoned her husband, after he had given up his power to her temporarily.
And now you know me.

Beleses: Have you finished?
Arbaces: Yes –
With you.

Beleses: And would, perhaps, betray as well
As quit me?
Arbaces: That’s a sacerdotal thought,
And not a soldier’s.
Beleses: Be it what you will –
Truce with these wranglings, and but hear me.
Arbaces: No – There is more peril in your subtle spirit
Than in a phalanx.
Beleses: If it must be so –
I’ll on alone.
Arbaces: Alone!
Beleses: Thrones hold but one.
Arbaces: But this is filled.
Beleses: With worse than vacancy –
A despised monarch. Look to it, Arbaces:
I have still aided, cherished, loved, and urged you;
Was willing even to serve you, in the hope
To serve and save Assyria. Heaven itself
Seemed to consent, and all events were friendly,
Even to the last, till that your spirit shrunk
Into a shallow softness; but now, rather
Than see my country languish, I will be
Her saviour or the victim of her tyrant –
Or one or both – for sometimes both are one;
And if I win – Arbaces is my servant.

Arbaces: Your servant!
Beleses: Why not? better than be slave,
The pardoned slave of the Sardanapalus!

Enter PANIA.

Pania: My Lords, I bear an order from the king.
Arbaces: It is obeyed ere spoken.
Beleses: Notwithstanding,
Let’s hear it.  

Pania: Forthwith, on this very night,
Repair to your respective satrapies
Of Babylon and Media.
Beleses: With our troops?

Pania: My order is unto the Satraps and
Their household train.
Arbaces: But –
Beleses: It must be obeyed:
Say, we depart.

Pania: My order is to see you
Depart, and not to bear your answer.

Beleses (aside): Aye!
Well, Sir – we will accompany you hence.

61: These two lines are almost a joke.
62: The banishment of Arbaces and Beleses echoes that of Mowbray and Bolingbroke in Richard II, I iii.
Pania: I will retire to marshal forth the guard Of honour which befits your rank, and wait Your leisure, so that it the hour exceeds not. 

*Exit PANIA.*

Beleses: Now then obey!

Arbaces: Doubtless.

Beleses: Yes, to the gates
That grate the palace, which is now our prison – No further.

Arbaces: Thou hast harped the truth indeed!
The realm itself, in all its wide extension, Yawns dungeons at each step for thee and me.

Beleses: Graves!

Arbaces: If I thought so, this good sword should dig One more than mine.

Beleses: It shall have work enough.

Let me hope better than thou augurest;
At present, let us hence as best we may.
Thou dost agree with me in understanding This order as a sentence?

Arbaces: Why, what other Interpretation should it bear? it is
The very policy of Orient monarchs – Pardon and poison – favours and a sword – A distant voyage, and an eternal sleep.
How many Satraps in his father’s time – For he I own is, or at least was, bloodless –

Beleses: But *will* not – *can* not be so now.

Arbaces: I doubt it.

How many Satraps have I seen set out In his Sire’s day for mighty Vice-royalties, Whose tombs are on their path! I know not how, But they all sickened by the way, it was So long and heavy.

Beleses: Let us but regain The free air of the city, and we’ll shorten The journey.

Arbaces: ‘Twill be shortened at the gates, It may be.

Beleses: No; they hardly will risk that. They mean us to die privately, but not Within the palace or the city walls, Where we are known, and may have partisans: If they had meant to slay us here, we were No longer with the living. Let us hence.

Arbaces: If I but thought he did not mean my life –

Beleses: Fool! hence – what else should despotism alarmed Mean? Let us but rejoin our troops, and march.

Arbaces: Towards our provinces?

Beleses: No; towards your kingdom.

There’s time – there’s heart, and hope, and power, and means – Which their half measures leave us in full scope. – Away!
Arbaces: And I even yet repenting must
Relapse to guilt!

Beleses: Self-defence is a virtue,
Sole bulwark of all right. Away, I say!
Let’s leave this place, the air grows thick and choking,
And the walls have a scent of night-shade – hence!
Let us not leave them time for further council.
Our quick departure proves our civic zeal;
Our quick departure hinders our good escort,
The worthy Pania, from anticipating
The orders of some parasangs from hence:
Nay, there’s no other choice, but – hence, I say.

Exit with ARBACES, who follows reluctantly.

Enter SARDANAPALUS and SALEMENES.

Sardanapalus: Well, all is remedied, and without bloodshed,
That worst of mockeries of a remedy;
We’re now secure by these men’s exile.

Salemnes: Yes,
As he who treads on flowers is from the adder
Twined round their roots.63

Sardanapalus: Why, what wouldst have me do?

Salemnes: Undo what you have done.

Sardanapalus: Revoke my pardon?

Salemnes: Replace the crown now tottering on your temples.

Sardanapalus: But sure.

Sardanapalus: We are so.

Sardanapalus: What danger can they work upon the frontier?

Salemnes: They are not there yet – never should they be so,
Were I well listened to.

Sardanapalus: Nay, I have listened
Impartially to thee – why not to them?

Salemnes: You may know that hereafter; as it is,
I take my leave to order forth the guard.

Sardanapalus: And you will join us at the banquet?

Salemnes: Sire,
Dispense with me – I am no wassailer:
Command me in all service save the Bacchant’s.

Sardanapalus: Nay, but ’tis fit to revel now and then.

Salemnes: And fit that some should watch for those who revel
Too oft. Am I permitted to depart?

Sardanapalus: Yes – Stay a moment, my good Salemnes,
My brother – my best subject – better Prince
Than I am King. You should have been the monarch,
And I – I know not what, and care not; but
Think not I am insensible to all
Thine honest wisdom, and thy rough yet kind,
Though oft-reproving sufferance of my follies.
If I have spared these men against thy counsel,
That is, their lives – it is not that I doubt

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63: Compare Lady Macbeth at I iv 61-2: *Look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t.*
The advice was sound; but, let them live: we will not
Cavil about their lives – so let them mend them.
Their banishment will leave me still sound sleep,
Which their death had not left me.

Salemenes: Thus you run
The risk to sleep for ever, to save traitors –
A moment’s pang now changed for years of crime.
Still let them be made quiet.

Sardanapalus: Tempt me not;
My word is past.

Salemenes: But it may be recalled.

Sardanapalus: ’Tis royal.

Salemenes: And should therefore be decisive.
This half-indulgence of an exile serves
But to provoke – a pardon should be full,
Or it is none.

Sardanapalus: And who persuaded me
After I had repealed them, or at least
Only dismissed them from our presence, who
Urged me to send them to their satrapies?

Salemenes: True; that I had forgotten; that is, Sire,
If they e’er reached their Satrapies – why, then,
Reprove me more for my advice.

Sardanapalus: And if
They do not reach them – look to it! – in safety,
In safety, mark me – and security –
Look to thine own.

Salemenes: Permit me to depart;
Their safety shall be cared for.

Sardanapalus: Get thee hence, then;
And, prithee, think more gently of thy brother.

Salemenes: Sire, I shall ever duly serve my sovereign.

Exit SALEMENES.

Sardanapalus (solus): That man is of a temper too severe;
Hard but as lofty as the rock, and free
From all the taints of common earth – while I
Am softer clay, impregnated with flowers;
But as our mould is, must the produce be.
If I have erred this time, ’tis on the side
Where Error sits most lightly on that sense,
I know not what to call it; but it reckons
With me oftimes for pain, and sometimes pleasure;
A spirit which seems placed about my heart
To count its throbs, not quicken them, and ask
Questions which mortal never dared to ask me,
Nor Baal, though an oracular deity –
Albeit his marble face majestical
Frowns as the shadows of the evening dim
His brows to changed expression, till at times
I think the statue looks in act to speak.
Away with these vain thoughts, I will be joyous –
And here comes Joy’s true herald.
Enter MYRRHA.

Myrrha:

Is overcast, and musters muttering thunder,
In clouds that seem approaching fast, and show
In forked flashes a commanding tempest.
Will you then quit the palace?

Sardanapalus:

Tempest, say’st thou?

Myrrha:

Aye, my good lord.

Sardanapalus:

For my own part, I should be
Not ill content to vary the smooth scene,
And watch the warring elements; but this
Would little suit the silken garments and
Smooth faces of our festive friends. Say, Myrrha,
Art thou of those who dread the roar of clouds?

Myrrha:

In my own country we respect their voices
As auguries of Jove.

Sardanapalus:

Jove! aye, your Baal –
Ours also has a property in thunder,
And ever and anon some falling bolt
Proves his divinity – and yet sometimes
Strikes his own altars.

Myrrha:

That were a dread omen.

Sardanapalus:

Yes – for the priests. Well, we will not go forth
Beyond the palace walls to-night, but make
Our feast within.

Myrrha:

Now, Jove be praised! that he
Hath heard the prayer thou wouldst not hear. The Gods
Are kinder to thee than thou to thyself,
And flash this storm between thee and thy foes,
To shield thee from them.

Sardanapalus:

Child, if there be peril,
Methinks it is the same within these walls
As on the river’s brink.

Myrrha:

Not so; these walls
Are high and strong, and guarded. Treason has
To penetrate through many a winding way,
And massy portal; but in the pavilion
There is no bulwark.

Sardanapalus:

No, nor in the palace,
Nor in the fortress, nor upon the top
Of cloud-fenced Caucasus, where the eagle sits
Nested in pathless clefts, if treachery be:
Even as the arrow finds the airy king,
The steel will reach the earthly. But be calm;
The men, or innocent or guilty, are
Banished, and far upon their way.

Myrrha:

They live, then?

Sardanapalus:

So sanguinary? Thou!

Myrrha:

I would not shrink
From just infliction of due punishment
On those who seek your life: were’t otherwise,
I should not merit mine. Besides, you heard
The princely Salemenes.

Sardanapalus:

This is strange;
The gentle and the austere are both against me,
And urge me to revenge.

Myrrha: ’Tis a Greek virtue. 580
Sardanapalus: But not a kingly one – I’ll none on’t; or
If ever I indulge in’t, it shall be
With kings – my equals.

Myrrha: These men sought to be so.
Sardanapalus: Myrrha, this is too feminine, and springs
From fear –

Myrrha: For you.
Sardanapalus: No matter, still ’tis fear. 585
I have observed your sex, once roused to wrath,
Are timidly vindictive to a pitch
Of perseverance, which I would not copy.
I thought you were exempt from this, as from 589
The childish helplessness of Asian women.

Myrrha: My Lord, I am no boaster of my love,
Nor of my attributes; I have shared your splendour,
And will partake your fortunes. You may live
To find one slave more true than subject myriads:
But this the Gods avert! I am content 595
To be beloved on trust for what I feel,
Rather than prove it to you in your grief,
Which might not yield to any cares of mine.

Sardanapalus: Grief cannot come where perfect love exists,
Except to heighten it, and vanish from 600
That which it could not scare away. Let’s in –
The hour approaches, and we must prepare
To meet the invited guests who grace our feast.

Exeunt.
ACT III.

SCENE I. – The Hall of the Palace illuminated –
SARDANAPALUS and his Guests at Table. –
A storm without, and Thunder occasionally heard during the Banquet.

Sardanapalus: Fill full! why this is as it should be:64 here
Is my true realm, amidst bright eyes and faces
Happy as fair! Here sorrow cannot reach.

Zames: Nor elsewhere – where the King is, pleasure sparkles.

Sardanapalus: Is not this better now than Nimrod’s huntings,
Or my wild Grandam’s chase in search of kingdoms
She could not keep when conquered?

Altada: Mighty though
They were, as all thy royal line have been,
Yet none of those who went before have reached
The acme of Sardanapalus, who
Has placed his joy in peace – the sole true glory.

Sardanapalus: And pleasure, good Altada, to which glory
Is but the path. What is it that we seek?
Enjoyment! We have cut the way short to it,
And not gone tracking it through human ashes,
Making a grave with every footstep.

Zames: No;
All hearts are happy, and all voices bless
The King of peace65 – who holds a world in jubilee.

Sardanapalus: Art sure of that? I have heard otherwise;
Some say that there be traitors.

Zames: Traitors they
Who dare to say so! ’Tis impossible.
What cause?

Sardanapalus: What cause? true – fill the goblet up;
We will not think of them: there are none such,
Or if there be, they are gone.

Altada: Guests, to my pledge!
Down on your knees, and drink a measure to
The safety of the King – the monarch, say I?
The God Sardanapalus!

ZAMES and the Guests kneel, and exclaim:

Mightier than
His father Baal, the God Sardanapalus!

It thunders as they kneel; some start up in confusion.

Zames: Why do you rise, my friends? in that strong peal
His father gods consented.

Myrrha: Menaced, rather.

Sardanapalus: King, wilt thou bear this mad impiety?
Impiety! nay, if the sires who reigned
Before me can be Gods, I’ll not disgrace

---

64: Romeo and Juliet IV ii 29. Capulet’s dramatically ironical exclamation on hearing that Juliet has agreed to marry Paris.
65: One of several phrases linking Saradanapalus with Jesus.
Their lineage. But arise, my pious friends; 
Hoard your devotion for the Thunderer there: 
I seek but to be loved, not worshipped. 35

Altada:
Both – 
Both you must ever be by all true subjects.

Sardanapalus:
Methinks the thunders still increase: it is 
An awful night.66

Myrrha: 
Oh yes, for those who have 
No palace to protect their worshippers. 40

Sardanapalus: 
That’s true, my Myrrha; and could I convert 
My realm to one wide shelter for the wretched, 
I’d do it.

Myrrha: 
Thou’rt no God, then – not to be 
Able to work a will so good and general, 
As thy wish would imply.

Sardanapalus: 
And your Gods, then, 
Who can, and do not?

Myrrha: 
Do not speak of that, 
Lest we provoke them.

Sardanapalus: 
True – they love not censure 
Better than mortals. Friends, a thought has struck me: 
Were there no temples, would there, think ye, be 
Air worshippers? that is, when it is angry, 
And pelting as e’en now.

Myrrha: 
The Persian prays 
Upon his mountain.

Sardanapalus: 
Yes, when the Sun shines.

Myrrha: 
And I would ask if this your palace were 
Unroofed and desolate, how many flatterers 
Would lick the dust in which the King lay low? 55

Altada: 
The fair Ionian is too sarcastic 
Upon a nation whom she knows not well; 
The Assyrians know no pleasure but their King’s, 
And homage is their pride.

Sardanapalus: 
Nay, pardon, guests, 
The fair Greek’s readiness of speech. 

Altada: 
We honour her of all things next to thee. 
Pardon! sire: 60

Zames: 
That! nothing but the jar 
Of distant portals shaken by the wind.

Altada: 
It sounded like the clash of – hark again!

Zames: 
The big rain pattering on the roof.

Sardanapalus: 
No more. 65

Myrrha, my love, hast thou thy shell in order? 
Sing me a song of Sappho;67 
her, thou know’st, 
Who in thy country threw –68

Enter PANIA, With his sword and garments bloody, and disordered. 
The guests rise in confusion.

66: Compare Macbeth at II iii 59: ‘Twas a rough night.
67: Myrrha could not have known Sappho; the reference is anachronistic. B. recalls Grillparzer’s Sappho.
68: “Threw [herself off a rock in despair]”. All read this as a reference to the legend whereby Sappho was heterosexual: but in Grillparzer’s tragedy, she despairs because her young lovers of each sex, Phaon and Melitta, prefer one another to her.
Pania: (to the Guards): Look to the portals; And with your best speed to the walls without. Your arms! To arms! The King’s in danger. Monarch! Excuse this haste – ’tis faith.

Sardanapalus: Speak on.
Pania: It is As Salemenes feared; the faithless Satraps –

Sardanapalus: You are wounded – give some wine. Take breath, good Pania.
Pania: ’Tis nothing – a mere flesh wound. I am worn More with my speed to warn my sovereign, Than hurt in his defence.

Myrrha: Well, Sir, the rebels?
Pania: Soon as Arbaces and Beleses reached Their stations in the city, they refused To march; and on my attempt to use the power Which I was delegated with, they called Upon their troops, who rose in fierce defiance.

Myrrha: All?
Pania: Too many.

Sardanapalus: Spare not of thy free speech, To spare mine ears – the truth.
Pania: My own slight guard Were faithful, and what’s left of it is still so.

Myrrha: And are these all the force still faithful?
Pania: No –

The Bactrians, now led on by Salemenes, Who even then was on his way, still urged By strong suspicion of the Median chiefs, Are numerous, and make strong head against The rebels, fighting inch by inch, and forming An orb around the palace, where they mean To centre all their force, and save the King. (He hesitates.) I am charged to –

Myrrha: ’Tis no time for hesitation.
Pania: Prince Salemenes doth implore the King To arm himself although but for a moment, And show himself unto the soldiers: his Sole presence in this instant might do more Than hosts can do in his behalf.

Sardanapalus: What, ho!

Myrrha: And wilt thou?
Pania: Will I not?

Ho, there! – but seek not for the buckler: ’tis Too heavy: a light cuirass and my sword.

Where are the rebels?

Sardanapalus: Scarce a furlong’s length From the outward wall the fiercest conflict rages.

Sardanapalus: Then I may charge on horseback. Sfero, ho!

Order my horse out. There is space enough Even in our courts, and by the outer gate, To marshal half the horsemen of Arabia.

69: Compare Laertes at Hamlet, V ii 256: This is too heavy, let me see another.
Exit SFERO for the armour.

Myrrha: How I do love thee!
Sardanapalus: I ne’er doubted it.
Myrrha: But now I honour thee.
Sardanapalus (to his Attendant): Bring down my spear too – Where’s Salemenes?
Pania: Where a soldier should be,
In the thick of the fight.
Sardanapalus: Then hasten to him – is
The path still open, and communication
Left ’twixt the palace and the phalanx?
Pania: ’Twas
When I late left him, and I have no fear;
Our troops were steady, and the phalanx formed.
Sardanapalus: Tell him to spare his person for the present,
And that I will not spare my own – and say,
I come.
Pania: There’s victory in the very word.

Exit PANIA.

Sardanapalus: Altada – Zames – forth, and arm ye! There
Is all in readiness in the armoury.
See that the women are bestowed in safety
In the remote apartments: let a guard
Be set before them, with strict charge to quit
The post but with their lives – command it, Zames.
Altada, arm yourself, and return here;
Your post is near our person.

Exeunt ZAMES, ALTADA, and all save MYRRHA.

Enter SFERO and others with the King’s Arms, etc.

Sfero: King! your armour.
Sardanapalus: (arming himself). Give me the cuirass\textsuperscript{70} – so: my baldric,\textsuperscript{71} now.
My sword: I had forgot the helm\textsuperscript{72} – where is it?
That’s well – no, ’tis too heavy; you mistake, too –
It was not this I meant, but that which bears
A diadem around it.

Sfero: Sire, I deemed
That too conspicuous from the precious stones
To risk your sacred brow beneath – and trust me,
This is of better metal, though less rich.

Sardanapalus: You deemed! Are you too turned a rebel? Fellow!
Your part is to obey: return, and – no –
It is too late – I will go forth without it.

Sfero: At least, wear this.

Sardanapalus: Wear Caucasus! why, ’tis
A mountain on my temples.

Sfero: Sire, the meanest
Soldier goes not forth thus exposed to battle.

\textsuperscript{70}: The cuirass is the breast-and-backplate in armour, buckled together.
\textsuperscript{71}: The baldric is the belt worn across the shoulder, supporting the scabbard for the sword.
\textsuperscript{72}: A helm is a helmet.
All men will recognise you – for the storm
Has ceased, and the moon breaks forth in her brightness.

Sardanapalus: I go forth to be recognised, and thus
Shall be so sooner. Now – my spear! I’m armed.

In going stops short, and turns to Sfero.

Sfero – I had forgotten – bring the mirror.73
The mirror, Sire?

Sardanapalus: Yes, sir, of polished brass,
Brought from the spoils of India – but be speedy.

Exit SFERO.

Sardanapalus: Myrrha, retire unto a place of safety.
Why went you not forth with the other damsels?

Myrrha: Because my place is here.

Sardanapalus: And when I am gone –

Myrrha: I follow,

Sardanapalus: You! to battle?

Myrrha: If it were so,
’Twere not the first Greek girl had trod the path.
I will await here your return.

Sardanapalus: The place
Is spacious, and the first to be sought out,
If they prevail; and, if it be so,
And I return not –

Myrrha: Still we meet again.

Sardanapalus: How?

Myrrha: In the spot where all must meet at last –
In Hades! if there be, as I believe,
A shore beyond the Styx; and if there be not,
In ashes.

Sardanapalus: Darest thou so much?

Myrrha: I dare all things except survive what I have loved, to be
A rebel’s booty: forth, and do your bravest.

Re-enter SFERO with the mirror.

Sardanapalus: (looking at himself).74 This cuirass fits me well, the baldric better,
And the helm not at all. Methinks I seem

Flings away the helmet after trying it again.

Passing well in these toys; and now to prove them.

Altada! Where’s Altada?

Sfero: Waiting, Sire,
Without: he has your shield in readiness.

Sardanapalus: True – I forgot – he is my shield-bearer
By right of blood, derived from age to age.

Myrrha, embrace me75 – yet once more – once more –
Love me, whate’er betide. My chiefest glory
Shall be to make me worthier of your love.

Myrrha: Go forth, and conquer!

Exeunt SARDANAPALUS and SFERO.

Now, I am alone.76
All are gone forth, and of that all how few
Perhaps return! Let him but vanquish, and
Me perish! If he vanquish not, I perish;
For I will not outlive him. He has wound
About my heart, I know not how nor why.
Not for that he is King; for now his kingdom
Rocks underneath his throne, and the earth yawns
To yield him no more of it than a grave;
And yet I love him more. Oh, mighty Jove!
Forgive this monstrous love for a barbarian,
Who knows not of Olympus! yes, I love him
Now – now – far more than – Hark – to the war shout!
Methinks it nears me. If it should be so,

She draws forth a small vial.

This cunning Colchian77 poison, which my father
Learned to compound on Euxine shores,78 and taught me
How to preserve, shall free me! It had freed me
Long ere this hour, but that I loved, until
I half forgot I was a slave: where all
Are slaves save One, and proud of servitude,
So they are served in turn by something lower
In the degree of bondage: we forget
That shackles worn like ornaments no less
Are chains. Again that shout! and now the clash
Of arms – and now – and now –

Enter ALTADA.

Altada: Ho, Sfero, ho!
Myrrha: He is not here; what wouldst thou with him? How
Goes on the conflict?
Altada: Dubiously and fiercely.
Myrrha: And the King?
Altada: Like a king. I must find Sfero,
And bring him a new spear with his own helmet.
He fights till now bare-headed, and by far
Too much exposed. The soldiers knew his face,
And the foe too; and in the moon’s broad light,
His silk tiara and his flowing hair
Make him a mark too royal. Every arrow
Is pointed at the fair hair and fair features,
And the broad fillet79 which crowns both.

Myrrha: Ye Gods,
Who fulmine o’er my fathers’ land, protect him!
Were you sent by the King? 210

Altada: By Salemenes,
Who sent me privily upon this charge,
Without the knowledge of the careless sovereign.
The King! the King fights as he revels! ho!
What, Sfero! I will seek the armoury –
He must be there.

Exit ALTADA.

Myrrha: ’Tis no dishonour – no –
’Tis no dishonour to have loved this man.
I almost wish now, what I never wished
Before – that he were Grecian. If Alcides80
Were shamed in wearing Lydian Omphale’s
She-garb, and wielding her vile distaff, surely
He, who springs up a Hercules at once,
Nursed in effeminate arts from youth to manhood,
And rushes from the banquet to the battle,
As though it were a bed of love, deserves
That a Greek girl should be his paramour,
And a Greek bard his minstrel – a Greek tomb
His monument. How goes the strife, sir?

Enter an Officer.

Officer: Lost,
Lost almost past recovery. Zames! Where
Is Zames?

Myrrha: Posted with the guard appointed
To watch before the apartment of the women.

Exit Officer.

Myrrha (sola): He’s gone; and told no more than that all’s lost!
What need have I to know more? In those words,
Those little words, a kingdom and a king,
A line of thirteen ages, and the lives
Of thousands, and the fortune of all left
With life, are merged; and I, too, with the great,
Like a small bubble breaking with the wave
Which bore it, shall be nothing. At the least,
My fate is in my keeping: no proud victor
Shall count me with his spoils.81

79: A fillet is a head-band.
80: Alcides is Hercules (see Antony and Cleopatra IV xii 44); for Omphale, see above, I ii 330&n.
81: Compare Cleopatra’s defiance at Antony and Cleopatra, V ii 214-20.
Enter PANIA.

Pania: Away with me, 240
Myrrha, without delay; we must not lose
A moment – all that’s left us now.

Myrrha: The King?

Pania: Sent me here to conduct you hence, beyond
The river, by a secret passage.

Myrrha: Then

Pania: He lives –
And charged me to secure your life, 245
And beg you to live on for his sake, till
He can rejoin you.

Myrrha: Will he then give way?

Pania: Not till the last. Still, still he does whate’er
Despair can do; and step by step disputes
The very palace.

Myrrha: They are here, then: aye, 250
Their shouts come ringing through the ancient halls,
Never profaned by rebel echoes till
This fatal night. Farewell, Assyria’s line
Farewell to all of Nimrod! Even the name
Is now no more.

Pania: Away with me – away! 255
Myrrha: No: I’ll die here! Away, and tell your King
I loved him to the last.

Enter SARDANAPALUS and SALEMEN ES with Soldiers.
PANIA quits MYRRHA, andranges himself with them.

Sardanapalus: Since it is thus, 260
We’ll die where we were born – in our own halls.
Serry your ranks – stand firm. I have despatched
A trusty satrap for the guard of Zames,
All fresh and faithful; they’ll be here anon.
All is not over. – Pania, look to Myrrha.

PANIA returns towards MYRRHA.

Salomenes: We have breathing time; yet once more charge, my friends –
One for Assyria!

Sardanapalus: Rather say for Bactria! 265
My faithful Bactrians, I will henceforth be
King of your nation, and we’ll hold together
This realm as province.

Salomenes: Hark! they come – they come.

Enter BELESES and ARBACES with the Rebels.

Arbaces: Set on, we have them in the toil. Charge! charge!

Beleses: On! on! Heaven fights for us, and with us – On!

They charge the King and SALEMENES with their troops, who defend themselves till the arrival of
ZAMES with the Guard before mentioned.
The Rebels are then driven off, and pursued by SALEMENES, etc.
As the King is going to join the pursuit, BELESES crosses him.

Beleses: Ho! tyrant – I will end this war.
Sardanapalus: E’en so,
My warlike priest, and precious prophet, and
Grateful and trusty subject: yield, I pray thee.
I would reserve thee for a fitter doom,
Rather than dip my hands in holy blood.

Beleses: Thine hour is come.
Sardanapalus: No, thine. I’ve lately read,
Though but a young astrologer, the stars;
And ranging round the zodiac, found thy fate
In the sign of the Scorpion, which proclaims
That thou wilt now be crushed.

Beleses: But not by thee.

They fight; BELESES is wounded and disarmed.

Sardanapalus (raising his sword to despatch him, exclaims):
Now call upon thy planets; will they shoot
From the sky to preserve their seer and credit?

A party of Rebels enter and rescue BELESES.
They assail the King, who in turn, is rescued by a Party of his Soldiers, who drive the Rebels off.

The villain was a prophet after all.
Upon them – ho! there – victory is ours.

Exit in pursuit.

Myrrha: (to Pan.). Pursue! Why stand’st thou here, and leav’st the ranks
Of fellow-soldiers conquering without thee?
Pania: The King’s command was not to quit thee.
Myrrha: Me!
Think not of me – a single soldier’s arm
Must not be wanting now. I ask no guard,
I need no guard: what, with a world at stake,
Keep watch upon a woman? Hence, I say,
Or thou art shamed! Nay, then, I will go forth,
A feeble female, ’midst their desperate strife,
And bid thee guard me there – where thou shouldst shield
Thy sovereign.

Exit MYRRHA.

Pania: Yet stay, damsel! She’s gone.
If aught of ill betide her, better I
Had lost my life. Sardanapalus holds her
Far dearer than his kingdom, yet he fights
For that too; and can I do less than he,
Who never flashed a scimitar till now?
Myrrha, return, and I obey you, though
In disobedience to the monarch.
Exit PANIA.

Enter ALTADA and SFERO by an opposite door.

Altada: Myrrha!

What, gone? yet she was here when the fight raged,
And Pania also. Can aught have befallen them?

Sfero: I saw both safe, when late the rebels fled;
They probably are but retired to make
Their way back to the harem.

Altada: If the King
Prove victor, as it seems even now he must,
And miss his own Ionian, we are doomed
To worse than captive rebels.

Sfero: Let us trace them:
She cannot be fled far; and, found, she makes
A richer prize to our soft sovereign
Than his recovered kingdom.

Altada: Baal himself
Ne’er fought more fiercely to win empire, than
His silken son to save it: he defies
All augury of foes or friends; and like
The close and sultry summer’s day, which bodes
A twilight tempest, bursts forth in such thunder
As sweeps the air and deluges the earth.
The man’s inscrutable.

Sfero: Not more than others.
All are the sons of circumstance: away –
Let’s seek the slave out, or prepare to be
Tortured for his infatuation, and
Condemned without a crime.

Exeunt.

Enter SALEMENES and Soldiers, etc.

Salemenes: The triumph is
Flattering: they are beaten backward from the palace,
And we have opened regular access
To the troops stationed on the other side
Euphrates, who may still be true; nay, must be,
When they hear of our victory. But where
Is the chief victor? Where’s the King?

Enter SARDANAPALUS, cum suis, etc., and MYRRHA.

Sardanapalus: Here, brother.

Salemenes: Unhurt, I hope.

Sardanapalus: Not quite; but let it pass.

Salemenes: We’ve cleared the palace –

Sardanapalus: And I trust the city.

Salemenes: Our numbers gather; and I’ve ordered onward
A cloud of Parthians, hitherto reserved,
All fresh and fiery, to be poured upon them
In their retreat, which soon will be a flight.

Sardanapalus: It is already, or at least they marched
Faster than I could follow with my Bactrians,  
Who spared no speed. I am spent: give me a seat.

Sahlenes:  
There stands the throne, Sire.

Sardanapalus:  
'Tis no place to rest on,  
For mind nor body: let me have a couch,  

They place a seat.

A peasant’s stool, I care not what: so – now  
I breathe more freely.

Sahlenes:  
This great hour has proved  
The brightest and most glorious of your life.

Sardanapalus:  
And the most tiresome. Where’s my cupbearer?  
Bring me some water.

Sahlenes (smiling):  
'Tis the first time he  
Ever had such an order: even I,  
Your most austere of counsellors, would now  
Suggest a purpler beverage.

Sardanapalus:  
Blood – doubtless.  
But there’s enough of that shed; as for wine,  
I have learned to-night the price of the pure element:  
Thrice have I drank of it, and thrice renewed,  
With greater strength than the grape ever gave me,  
My charge upon the rebels. Where’s the soldier  
Who gave me water in his helmet?  

One of the Guards:  
Slain, Sire!  
An arrow pierced his brain, while, scattering  
The last drops from his helm, he stood in act  
To place it on his brows.

Sardanapalus:  
Slain unrewarded!  
And slain to serve my thirst: that’s hard, poor slave!  
Had he but lived, I would have gorged him with  
Gold: all the gold of earth could ne’er repay  
The pleasure of that draught; for I was parched  
As I am now.

They bring water – he drinks.

I live again – from henceforth  
The goblet I reserve for hours of love,  
But war on water.

Sahlenes:  
And that bandage, Sire,  
Which girds your arm?

Sardanapalus:  
A scratch from brave Beleses.

Myrrha:  
Oh! he is wounded!

Sardanapalus:  
Not too much of that;  
And yet it feels a little stiff and painful,  
Now I am cooler.

Myrrha:  
You have bound it with –  

Sardanapalus:  
The fillet of my diadem: the first time  
That ornament was ever aught to me,  
Save an incumbrance.

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82: E.H.Coleridge compares *The Deformed Transformed*, II i 44: Arnold: *Tis a scratch. ... / In the shoulder, not the sword arm  
– / And that’s enough. I am thirsty: would I had / A helm of water! Compare also Coriolanus’ behaviour in I ix.
Myrrha (to the Attendants): Summon speedily
    A leech of the most skilful: pray, retire:
    I will unbind your wound and tend it.
Sardanapalus: Do so,
For now it throbs sufficiently: but what
Know’st thou of wounds? yet wherefore do I ask?
Know’st thou, my brother, where I lighted on
This minion?
Salemenes: Herding with the other females,
    Like frightened antelopes.
Sardanapalus: No: like the dam
    Of the young lion, femininely raging –
    (And femininely meareth furiously,
Because all passions in excess are female,)
Against the hunter flying with her cub,
    She urged on with her voice and gesture, and
    Her floating hair and flashing eyes, the soldiers,
    In the pursuit.
Salemenes: Indeed!
Sardanapalus: You see, this night
    Made warriors of more than me. I paused
    To look upon her, and her kindled cheek;
    Her large black eyes, that flashed through her long hair
    As it streamed o’er her; her blue veins that rose
    Along her most transparent brow; her nostril
    Dilated from its symmetry; her lips
    Apart; her voice that clove through all the din,
    As a lute pierceth through the cymbal’s clash,
    Jarred but not drowned by the loud brattling; her
    Waved arms, more dazzling with their own born whiteness
    Than the steel her hand held, which she caught up
    From a dead soldier’s grasp – all these things made
    Her seem unto the troops a prophetess
    Of victory, or Victory herself,
    Come down to hail us hers.
Salemenes (aside): This is too much.
    Again the love-fit’s on him, and all’s lost,
    Unless we turn his thoughts. (Aloud.) But pray thee, Sire,
    Think of your wound – you said even now ’twas painful.
Sardanapalus: That’s true, too; but I must not think of it.
Salemenes: I have looked to all things needful, and will now
    Receive reports of progress made in such
    Orders as I had given, and then return
    To hear your further pleasure.
Sardanapalus: Be it so.
Salemenes (in retiring): Myrrha!
Myrrha: Prince!
Salemenes: You’ve shown a soul to-night,
Which, were he not my sister’s lord – But now
I have no time: thou lovest the King?
Myrrha: I love
Sardanapalus.

83: A leech is a doctor.
84: Echoes Coleridge, *Kubla Khan* 50: *... his flashing eyes, his floating hair!*
Salemenes: But wouldst have him King still?
Myrrha: I would not have him less than what he should be.
Salemenes: Well then, to have him King, and yours, and all
He should, or should not be; to have him live,
Let him not sink back into luxury.
You have more power upon his spirit than
Wisdom within these walls, or fierce rebellion
Raging without: look well that he relapse not.
Myrrha: There needed not the voice of Salemenes
To urge me on to this: I will not fail.
All that a woman’s weakness can –
Salemenes: Is power
Omnipotent o’er such a heart as his:
Exert it wisely.

Exit SALEMENES.

Sardanapalus: Myrrha! what, at whispers
With my stern brother?85 I shall soon be jealous.
Myrrha: (smiling) You have cause, Sire; for on the earth there breathes not
A man more worthy of a woman’s love,
A soldier’s trust, a subject’s reverence,
A king’s esteem – the whole world’s admiration!
Sardanapalus: Praise him, but not so warmly. I must not
Hear those sweet lips grow eloquent in aught
That throws me into shade; yet you speak truth.
Myrrha: And now retire, to have your wound looked to,
Pray lean upon me.
Sardanapalus: Yes, love! but not from pain.

Exeunt omnes.

85: He means “brother-in-law”.
ACT IV.

SCENE I. – SARDANAPALUS discovered sleeping upon a Couch, and occasionally disturbed in his slumbers, with MYRRHA watching.

Myrrha (sola, gazing): I have stolen upon his rest, if rest it be, Which thus convulses slumber, shall I wake him? No, he seems calmer. Oh, thou God of Quiet! Whose reign is o’er sealed eyelids and soft dreams, Or deep, deep sleep, so as to be unfathomed, Look like thy brother, Death, so still, so stirless – For then we are happiest, as it may be, we Are happiest of all within the realm Of thy stern, silent, and unwakening Twin. Again he moves – again the play of pain Shoots o’er his features, as the sudden gust Crisps the reluctant lake that lay so calm Beneath the mountain shadow; or the blast Ruffles the autumn leaves, that drooping cling Faintly and motionless to their loved boughs. I must awake him – yet not yet; who knows From what I rouse him? It seems pain; but if I quicken him to heavier pain? The fever Of this tumultuous night, the grief too of His wound, though slight, may cause all this, and shake Me more to see than him to suffer. No: Let Nature use her own maternal means, And I await to second, not disturb her.

Sardanapalus (awakening): Not so – although he multiplied the stars, And gave them to me as a realm to share From you and with you! I would not so purchase The empire of Eternity. Hence – hence – Old Hunter of the earliest brutes! and ye, Who hunted fellow-creatures as if brutes! Once bloody mortals – and now bloodier idols, If your priests lie not! And thou, ghastly Beldame! Dripping with dusky gore, and trampling on The carcasses of Inde – away! away! Where am I? Where the spectres? Where – No – that Is no false phantom: I shoule know it ’midst All that the dead dare gloomily raise up From their black gulf to daunt the living. Myrrha!

Myrrha: Alas! thou art pale, and on thy brow the drops Gather like night dew. My beloved, hush – Calm thee. Thy speech seems of another world, And thou art lord of this. Be of good cheer; All will go well.

Sardanapalus: Thy hand – so – ’tis thy hand;

86: Compare Don Juan II, 196 7-8: [Many] feel rapture; but not such true joy are reaping / As they who watch o’er what they love while sleeping.
87: Compare Manfred, 1 i 3-5: My Slumbers – if I slumber – are no sleep, / But a continuance of enduring thought, / Which then I can resist not ...
88: Compare How wonderful is Death / Death and his brother Sleep! Shelley’s Queen Mab, 11.2 (E.H.Coleridge).
89: Nimrod.
90: Semiramis.
'Tis flesh; grasp – clasp – yet closer, till I feel
Myself that which I was.

Myrrha: At least know me
For what I am, and ever must be – thine.

Sardanapalus: I know it now. I know this life again.
Ah, Myrrha! I have been where we shall be.

Myrrha: My lord!

Sardanapalus: I’ve been i’ the grave – where worms are lords
And kings are91 – but I did not deem it so;
I thought ’twas nothing.

Myrrha: So it is; except
Unto the timid, who anticipate
That which may never be.

Sardanapalus: Oh, Myrrha! if
Sleep shows such things, what may not Death disclose?

Myrrha: I know no evil Death can show, which Life
Has not already shown to those who live
Embodied longest. If there be indeed
A shore where Mind survives, ’twill be as Mind
All unincorporate: or if there flits
A shadow of this cumbrous clog of clay,
Which stalks, methinks, between our souls and heaven,
And fetters us to earth – at least the phantom,
Whate’er it have to fear, will not fear Death.

Sardanapalus: I fear it not; but I have felt – have seen –
A legion of the dead.

Myrrha: And so have I.
The dust we tread upon was once alive,
And wretched. But proceed: what hast thou seen?
Speak it, ’twill lighten thy dimmed mind.

Sardanapalus: Methought –

Myrrha: Yet pause, thou art tired – in pain – exhausted; all
Which can impair both strength and spirit: seek
Rather to sleep again.

Sardanapalus: Not now – I would not
Dream; though I know it now to be a dream
What I have dreamt: and canst thou bear to hear it?

Myrrha: I can bear all things, dreams of life or death,
Which I participate with you in semblance
Or full reality.

Sardanapalus: And this looked real,
I tell you: after that these eyes were open,
I saw them in their flight – for then they fled.

Myrrha: Say on.

Sardanapalus: I saw, that is, I dreamed myself
Here – here – even where we are, guests as we were,
Myself a host that deemed himself but guest,
Willing to equal all in social freedom;
But, on my right hand and my left, instead
Of thee and Zames, and our customed meeting,
Was ranged on my left hand a haughty, dark,
And deadly face; I could not recognise it,
Yet I had seen it, though I knew not where:

91: Compare Hamlet at IV iii 20 (app.): Your worm is your only emperor for diet …
The features were a Giant’s, and the eye
Was still, yet lighted; his long locks curled down
On his vast bust, whence a huge quiver rose
With shaft-heads feathered from the eagle’s wing,
That peeped up bristling through his serpent hair.
I invited him to fill the cup which stood
Between us, but he answered not; I filled it;
He took it not, but stared upon me, till
I trembled at the fixed glare of his eye:
I frowned upon him as a king should frown;
He frowned not in his turn, but looked upon me
With the same aspect, which appalled me more,
Because it changed not; and I turned for refuge
To milder guests, and sought them on the right,
Where thou wert wont to be. But – (He pauses.)

Myrrha: What instead?

Sardanapalus: In thy own chair – thy own place in the banquet –
I sought thy sweet face in the circle – but
Instead – a grey-haired, withered, bloody-eyed,
And bloody-handed, ghastly, ghostly thing,
Female in garb, and crowned upon the brow,
Furrowed with years, yet sneering with the passion
Of vengeance, leering too with that of lust,
Sate – my veins curdled!

Myrrha: Is this all?

Sardanapalus: Upon
Her right hand – her lank, bird-like, right hand – stood
A goblet, bubbling o’er with blood; and on
Her left, another, filled with – what I saw not,
But turned from it and her. But all along
The table sate a range of crowned wretches,
Of various aspects, but of one expression.

Myrrha: And felt you not this a mere vision?

Sardanapalus: No:
It was so palpable, I could have touched them.
I turned from one face to another, in
The hope to find at last one which I knew
Ere I saw theirs: but no – all turned upon me,
And stared, but neither ate nor drank, but stared,
Till I grew stone, as they seemed half to be,
Yet breathing stone, for I felt life in them,
And life in me: there was a horrid kind
Of sympathy between us, as if they
Had lost a part of death to come to me,
And I the half of life to sit by them.
We were in an existence all apart
From heaven or earth – And rather let me see
Death all than such a being!

Myrrha: And the end?

Sardanapalus: At last I sate, marble, as they, when rose
The Hunter and the Crone; and smiling on me –
Yes, the enlarged but noble aspect of

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92: The first spectre is Nimrod.
93: The second nightmare figure is Semiramis.
94: In the diary for Nov 23rd 1813 (BLJ III 216) B. alludes to a dream which “chilled his blood” – E.H.Coleridge (adapted).
The Hunter smiled upon me – I should say,  
His lips, for his eyes moved not – and the woman’s  
Thin lips relaxed to something like a smile.  
Both rose, and the crowned figures on each hand  
Rose also, as if aping their chief shades –  
Mere mimics even in death – but I sate still:  
A desperate courage crept through every limb,  
And at the last I feared them not, but laughed  
Full in their phantom faces. But then – then  
The Hunter laid his hand on mine: I took it,  
And grasped it – but it melted from my own;  
While he too vanished, and left nothing but  
The memory of a hero, for he looked so.

Myrrha: And was: the ancestor of heroes, too,  
And thine no less.

Sardanapalus: Aye, Myrrha, but the woman,  
The female who remained, she flew upon me,  
And burnt my lips up with her noisome kisses;  
And, flinging down the goblets on each hand,  
Methought their poisons flowed around us, till  
Each formed a hideous river. Still she clung;  
The other phantoms, like a row of statues,  
Stood dull as in our temples, but she still  
Embraced me, while I shrunk from her, as if,  
In lieu of her remote descendant, I  
Had been the son who slew her for her incest.95  
Then – then – a chaos of all loathsome things  
Thronged thick and shapeless: I was dead, yet feeling –  
Buried, and raised again – consumed by worms,  
Purged by the flames, and withered in the air!  
I can fix nothing further of my thoughts,  
Save that I longed for thee, and sought for thee,  
In all these agonies, – and woke and found thee.

Myrrha: So shalt thou find me ever at thy side,  
Here and hereafter, if the last may be.  
But think not of these things – the mere creations  
Of late events, acting upon a frame  
Unused by toil, yet over-wrought by toil –  
Such as might try the sternest.

Sardanapalus: I am better.  
Now that I see thee once more, what was seen  
Seems nothing.

Enter SALEMENES.

Salemenes: Is the king so soon awake?  
Sardanapalus: Yes, brother, and I would I had not slept;  
For all the predecessors of our line  
Rose up, methought, to drag me down to them.  
My father was amongst them, too; but he,  
I know not why, kept from me, leaving me  
Between the hunter-founder of our race,  
And her, the homicide and husband-killer,  

---

95: In some legends Semiramis wedded and bedded her own son, Ninus (as in “This is old Ninny’s tomb”).
Whom you call glorious.

Salemnes: So I term you also,
Now you have shown a spirit like to hers.
By day-break I propose that we set forth,
And charge once more the rebel crew, who still
Keep gathering head, repulsed, but not quite quelled.  

Sardanapalus: How wears the night?
Salemnes: There yet remain some hours
Of darkness: use them for your further rest.
Sardanapalus: No, not to-night, if 'tis not gone: methought
I passed hours in that vision.

Myrrha: Scarcely one;
I watched by you: it was a heavy hour,  
But an hour only.

Sardanapalus: Let us then hold council;
To-morrow we set forth.
Salemnes: But ere that time,
I had a grace to seek.
Sardanapalus: 'Tis granted.
Salemnes: Hear it
Ere you reply too readily; and 'tis
For your ear only.

Myrrha: Prince, I take my leave. 

Exit MYRRHA.

Salemnes: That slave deserves her freedom.
Sardanapalus: Freedom only!
That slave deserves to share a throne.
Salemnes: Your patience –
'Tis not yet vacant, and 'tis of its partner
I come to speak with you.
Sardanapalus: How! of the Queen?
Salemnes: Even so. I judged it fitting for their safety,
That, ere the dawn, she sets forth with her children
For Paphlagonia, where our kinsman Cotta\textsuperscript{96}
Governs; and there, at all events, secure
My nephews and your sons their lives, and with them
Their just pretensions to the crown in case –  

Sardanapalus: I perish – as is probable: well thought –
Let them set forth with a sure escort.
Salemnes: That
Is all provided, and the galley ready
To drop down the Euphrates; but ere they
Depart, will you not see –
Sardanapalus: My sons? It may
Unman my heart, and the poor boys will weep;
And what can I reply to comfort them,
Save with some hollow hopes, and ill-worn smiles?
You know I cannot feign.
Salemnes: But you can feel!
At least, I trust so: in a word, the Queen
Requests to see you ere you part – for ever.

\textsuperscript{96}: Cotta was not a kinsman of Sardanapalus, but a loyal tributary. – E.H.Coleridge, adapted.
Sardanapalus: Unto what end? what purpose? I will grant
Aught – all that she can ask – but such a meeting.

Salemenes: You know, or ought to know, enough of women,
Since you have studied them so steadily,
That what they ask in aught that touches on
The heart, is dearer to their feelings or
Their fancy, than the whole external world.
I think as you do of my sister’s wish;
But ’twas her wish – she is my sister – you
Her husband – will you grant it?

Sardanapalus: ’Twill be useless:
But let her come.

Salemenes: I go.

Exit SALEMENES.

Sardanapalus: We’ve lived asunder
Too long to meet again – and now to meet!
Have I not cares enow, and pangs enow,
To bear alone, that we must mingle sorrows,
Who’ve ceased to mingle love?

Re-enter SALEMENES and ZARINA.

Salemenes: My sister! Courage:
Shame not our blood with trembling, but remember
From whence we sprung. The Queen is present, Sire.

Zarina: I pray thee, brother, leave me.

Salemenes: Since you ask it.

Exit SALEMENES.

Zarina: Alone with him! How many a year has passed
Though we are still so young, since we have met,
Which I have worn in widowhood of heart.
He loved me not: yet he seems little changed –
Changed to me only – would the change were mutual!
He speaks not – scarce regards me – not a word,
Nor look – yet he was soft of voice and aspect,
Indifferent, not austere. My Lord!

Sardanapalus: Zarina!

Zarina: No, not Zarina – do not say Zarina.
That tone – That word – annihilate long years,
And things which make them longer.

Sardanapalus: ’Tis too late
To think of these past dreams. Let’s not reproach –
That is, reproach me not – for the last time –

Zarina: And first. I ne’er reproached you.

Sardanapalus: ’Tis most true;
And that reproof comes keener on my heart
Than – but our hearts are not in our own power.

Zarina: Nor hands; but I gave both.

97: B. must often have pictured to himself an unexpected meeting with his wife. In certain moods he would write letters to her which were never sent, or never reached her hands. The scene between Sardanapalus and Zarina reflects the sentiments contained in one such letter, dated November 17th, 1821 (BLJ IX 64-6). – E.H.Coleridge, adapted.
Sardanapalus: Your brother said
It was your will to see me, ere you went
From Nineveh with – (He hesitates.)

Zarina: Our children: it is true.
I wish to thank you that you have not divided
My heart from all that’s left it now to love –
Those who are yours and mine, who look like you,
And look upon me as you looked upon me
Once – but they have not changed.

Sardanapalus: Nor ever will.
I fain would have them dutiful.

Zarina: I cherish
Those infants, not alone from the blind love
Of a fond mother, but as a fond woman.
They’re now the only tie between us.

Sardanapalus: Deem not
I have not done you justice: rather make them
Resemble your own line than their own Sire.
I trust them with you – to you: fit them for
A throne, or, if that be denied – You have heard
Of this night’s tumults?

Zarina: I had half forgotten,
And could have welcomed any grief save yours,
Which gave me to behold your face again.

Sardanapalus: The throne – I say it not in fear – but ’tis
In peril: they perhaps may never mount it;
But let them not for this lose sight of it.
I will dare all things to bequeath it them;
But if I fail, then they must win it back
Bravely – and, won, wear wisely, not as I
Have wasted down my royalty.

Zarina: They ne’er
Shall know from me of aught but what may honour
Their father’s memory.

Sardanapalus: Rather let them hear
The truth from you than from a trampling world.
If they be in adversity, they’ll learn
Too soon the scorn of crowds for crownless Princes.
And find that all their father’s sins are theirs.
My boys! – I could have borne it were I childless.

Zarina: Oh! do not say so – do not poison all
My peace left, by unwilling that thou wert
A father. If thou conquerest, they shall reign,
And honour him who saved the realm for them,
So little cared for as his own; and if –

Sardanapalus: ’Tis lost, all Earth will cry out, “Thank your father!”
And they will swell the echo with a curse.

Zarina: That they shall never do; but rather honour
The name of him, who, dying like a king,
In his last hours did more for his own memory
Than many monarchs in a length of days,
Which date the flight of time, but make no annals.

Sardanapalus: Our annals draw perchance unto their close;
But at the least, whate’er the past, their end
Shall be like their beginning – memorable.
Zarina: Yet, be not rash – be careful of your life,  
Live but for those who love.

Sardanapalus: And who are they?  
A slave, who loves from passion – I’ll not say  
Ambition – she has seen thrones shake, and loves;  
A few friends who have revelled till we are  
As one, for they are nothing if I fall;  
A brother I have injured – children whom  
I have neglected, and a spouse –  
Who loves.

Zarina: And pardons?

Sardanapalus: I have never thought of this,  
And cannot pardon till I have condemned.

Zarina: My wife!

Sardanapalus: Now blessings on thee for that word!

Zarina: I never thought to hear it more – from thee.

Sardanapalus: Oh! thou wilt hear it from my subjects. Yes –  
These slaves whom I have nurtured, pampered, fed,  
And swoln with peace, and gorged with plenty, till  
They reign themselves – all monarchs in their mansions –  
Now swarm forth in rebellion, and demand  
His death, who made their lives a jubilee;  
While the few upon whom I have no claim  
Are faithful! This is true, yet monstrous.

Zarina: 'Tis  
Perhaps too natural; for benefits  
Turn poison in bad minds.

Sardanapalus: And good ones make  
Good out of evil. Happier than the bee,  
Which hives not but from wholesome flowers.

Zarina: Then reap  
The honey, nor inquire whence 'tis derived.  
Be satisfied – you are not all abandoned.

Sardanapalus: My life insures me that. How long, bethink you,  
Were not I yet a king, should I be mortal;  
That is, where mortals are, not where they must be?

Zarina: I know not. But yet live for my – that is,  
Your children’s sake!

Sardanapalus: My gentle, wronged Zarina!  
I am the very slave of Circumstance  
And Impulse – borne away with every breath!98  
Misplaced upon the throne – misplaced in life.  
I know not what I could have been, but feel  
I am not what I should be – let it end.  
But take this with thee: if I was not formed  
To prize a love like thine, a mind like thine,  
Nor doat even on thy beauty – as I’ve doated  
On lesser charms, for no cause save that such  
Devotion was a duty, and I hated  
All that looked like a chain for me or others  
(This even Rebellion must avouch); yet hear  
These words, perhaps among my last – that none  
E’er valued more thy virtues, though he knew not

To profit by them – as the miner lights
Upon a vein of virgin ore, discovering
That which avails him nothing: he hath found it,
But ’tis not his – but some superior’s, who
Placed him to dig, but not divide the wealth
Which sparkles at his feet; nor dare he lift
Nor poise it, but must grovel on, upturning
The sullen earth.

Zarina: Oh! if thou hast at length
Discovered that my love is worth esteem,
I ask no more – but let us hence together,
And I – let me say we – shall yet be happy.
Assyria is not all the earth – we’ll find
A world out of our own – and be more blessed
Than I have ever been, or thou, with all
An empire to indulge thee.

Enter SALEMENES.

SALEMENES: I must part ye –
The moments, which must not be lost, are passing.

ZARINA: Inhuman brother! wilt thou thus weigh out
Instants so brief and blest?

SALEMENES: Blest!

ZARINA: He hath been
So gentle with me, that I cannot think
Of quitting.

SALEMENES: So – this feminine farewell
Ends as such partings end, in no departure.
I thought as much, and yielded against all
My better bodings. But it must not be.

ZARINA: Not be?

SALEMENES: Remain, and perish –

ZARINA: With my husband –

SALEMENES: And children.

ZARINA: Alas!

SALEMENES: Hear me, sister, like
My sister: – all’s prepared to make your safety
Certain, and of the boys too, our last hopes;
’Tis not a single question of mere feeling,
Though that were much – but ’tis a point of state:
The rebels would do more to seize upon
The offspring of their sovereign, and so crush –

ZARINA: Ah! do not name it.

SALEMENES: Well, then, mark me: when
They are safe beyond the Median’s grasp, the rebels
Have missed their chief aim – the extinction of
The line of Nimrod. Though the present King
Fall, his sons live – for victory and vengeance.

ZARINA: But could not I remain, alone?

SALEMENES: What! Leave

ZARINA: Your children, with two parents and yet orphans –
In a strange land – so young, so distant?

ZARINA: No –

SALEMENES: My heart will break.
Salemenes: Now you know all – decide.

Sardanapalus: Zarina, he hath spoken well, and we
Must yield awhile to this necessity.
Remaining here, you may lose all; departing,
You save the better part of what is left,
To both of us, and to such loyal hearts
As yet beat in these kingdoms.

Salemenes: The time presses.

Sardanapalus: Go, then. If e’er we meet again, perhaps
I may be worthier of you – and, if not,
Remember that my faults, though not atoned for,
Are ended. Yet, I dread thy nature will
Grieve more above the blighted name and ashes
Which once were mightiest in Assyria – than –
But I grow womanish again, and must not;
I must learn sternness now. My sins have all
Been of the softer order – hide thy tears –
I do not bid thee not to shed them – ’twere
Easier to stop Euphrates at its source
Than one tear of a true and tender heart –
But let me not behold them; they unman me
Here when I had remanned myself. My brother,
Lead her away.

Zarina: Oh, God! I never shall
Behold him more!

Salemenes (striving to conduct her): Nay, sister, I must be obeyed.

Zarina: I must remain – away! you shall not hold me.
What, shall he die alone? – I live alone?

Salemenes: He shall not die alone; but lonely you
Have lived for years.

Zarina: That’s false! I knew he lived,
And lived upon his image – let me go!

Salemenes (conducting her off the stage): Nay, then, I must use some fraternal force,
Which you will pardon.

Zarina: Never. Help me! Oh!

Sardanapalus, wilt thou thus behold me
Torn from thee?

Salemenes: Nay – then all is lost again,
If that this moment is not gained.

Zarina: My brain turns –
My eyes fail – where is he?

She faints.

Sardanapalus (advancing): No – set her down;
She’s dead – and you have slain her.

Salemenes: ’Tis the mere
Faintness of o’erwrought passion: in the air
She will recover. Pray, keep back. (Aside) I must
Avail myself of this sole moment to
Bear her to where her children are embarked,
I’the royal galley on the river.

SALEMENES bears her off.
Sardanapalus (solus):

This, too –
And this too must I suffer – I, who never
Inflicted purposely on human hearts
A voluntary pang! But that is false –
She loved me, and I loved her. – Fatal passion!
Why dost thou not expire at once in hearts
Which thou hast lighted up at once? but leavest
One to grieve o’er the other’s change – Zarina!
I must pay dearly for the desolation
Now brought upon thee. Had I never loved
But thee, I should have been an unopposed
Monarch of honouring nations. To what gulfs
A single deviation from the track
Of human duties leads even those who claim
The homage of mankind as their born due,
And find it, till they forfeit it themselves!

Enter MYRRHA.

Sardanapalus: You here! Who called you?
Myrrha: No one – but I heard
Far off a voice of wail and lamentation
And thought –

Sardanapalus: It forms no portion of your duties
To enter here till sought for.
Myrrha: Though I might,
Perhaps, recall some softer words of yours
(Although they too were chiding), which reproved me,
Because I ever dreaded to intrude;
Resisting my own wish and your injunction
To heed no time nor presence, but approach you
Uncalled for: I retire.

Sardanapalus: Yet stay – being here.
I pray you pardon me: events have soured me
Till I wax peevish – heed it not: I shall
Soon be myself again.
Myrrha: I wait with patience,
What I shall see with pleasure.

Sardanapalus: Scarce a moment
Before your entrance in this hall, Zarina,
Queen of Assyria, departed hence.
Myrrha: Ah!

Sardanapalus: Wherefore do you start?
Myrrha: Did I do so?
Sardanapalus: 'Twas well you entered by another portal,
Else you had met. That pang at least is spared her!
Myrrha: I know to feel for her.
Sardanapalus: That is too much,
And beyond nature – 'tis nor natural
Nor possible. You cannot pity her,
Nor she aught but –

Myrrha: Despise the favourite slave?
Not more than I have ever scorned myself.
Sardanapalus: Scorned! what, to be the envy of your sex,
And lord it o’er the heart of the World’s lord?
Myrrha: Were you the lord of twice ten thousand worlds
As you are like to lose the one you swayed –
I did abase myself as much in being
Your paramour, as though you were a peasant –
Nay, more, if that the peasant were a Greek.

Sardanapalus: You talk it well –
Myrrha: And truly.
Sardanapalus: In the hour
Of man’s adversity all things grow daring
Against the falling; but as I am not
Quite fall’n, nor now disposed to bear reproaches,
Perhaps because I merit them too often,
Let us then part while peace is still between us.

Myrrha: Part!
Sardanapalus: Have not all past human beings parted,
And must not all the present one day part?
Myrrha: Why?
Sardanapalus: For your safety, which I will have looked to,
With a strong escort to your native land;
And such gifts, as, if you had not been all
A Queen, shall make your dowry worth a kingdom.

Myrrha: I pray you talk not thus.
Sardanapalus: The Queen is gone:
You need not shame to follow. I would fall
Alone – I seek no partners but in pleasure.
Myrrha: And I no pleasure but in parting not.
You shall not force me from you.
Sardanapalus: Think well of it –
It soon may be too late.
Myrrha: So let it be;
For then you cannot separate me from you.
Sardanapalus: And will not; but I thought you wished it.

Myrrha: !
Sardanapalus: You spoke of your abasement.
Myrrha: And I feel it
Deeply – more deeply than all things but love.

Sardanapalus: Then fly from it.
Myrrha: ’Twill not recall the past –
’Twill not restore my honour, nor my heart.
No – here I stand or fall. If that you conquer,
I live to joy in your great triumph; should
Your lot be different, I’ll not weep, but share it.
You did not doubt me a few hours ago.

Sardanapalus: Your courage never – nor your love till now;
And none could make me doubt it save yourself.
Those words –

Myrrha: Were words. I pray you, let the proofs
Be in the past acts you were pleased to praise
This very night, and in my further bearing,
Beside, wherever you are borne by fate.

Sardanapalus: I am content: and, trusting in my cause,
Think we may yet be victors and return
To peace – the only victory I covet.
To me war is no glory – conquest no
Renown. To be forced thus to uphold my right
Sits heavier on my heart than all the wrongs
These men would bow me down with. Never, never
Can I forget this night, even should I live
To add it to the memory of others.
I thought to have made mine inoffensive rule
An era of sweet peace ’midst bloody annals,
A green spot amidst desert centuries,
On which the Future would turn back and smile,
And cultivate, or sigh when it could not
Recall Sardanapalus’ golden reign.
I thought to have made my realm a paradise,
And every moon an epoch of new pleasures.
I took the rabble’s shouts for love – the breath
Of friends for truth – the lips of woman, for
My only guerdon – so they are, my Myrrha:

He kisses her.

Kiss me. Now let them take my realm and life!
They shall have both, but never thee!

Myrrha: No, never!

Man may despoil his brother man of all
That’s great or glittering – kingdoms fall – hosts yield –
Friends fail – slaves fly – and all betray – and, more
Than all, the most indebted – but a heart
That loves without self-love! ’Tis here – now prove it.

Enter SALEMENES.

Salemenes: I sought you – How! she here again?
Sardanapalus: Return not

Now to reproof: methinks your aspect speaks
Of higher matter than a woman’s presence.
Salemenes: The only woman whom it much imports me
At such a moment now is safe in absence –
The Queen’s embarked.
Sardanapalus: And well? say that much.
Salemenes: Yes.

Her transient weakness has passed o’er; at least,
It settled into tearless silence: her
Pale face and glittering eye, after a glance
Upon her sleeping children, were still fixed
Upon the palace towers as the swift galley
Stole down the hurrying stream beneath the starlight;
But she said nothing.
Sardanapalus: Would I felt no more
Than she has said!
Salemenes: ’Tis now too late to feel.

Your feelings cannot cancel a sole pang:
To change them, my advices bring sure tidings
That the rebellious Medes and Chaldees, marshalled
By their two leaders, are already up
In arms again; and, serrying their ranks,
Prepare to attack: they have apparently
Been joined by other Satraps.
Sardanapalus: What! more rebels?  
Let us be first, then.

Salemenes: That were hardly prudent
Now, though it was our first intention. If
By noon to-morrow we are joined by those
I've sent for by sure messengers, we shall be
In strength enough to venture an attack,
Aye, and pursuit too; but, till then, my voice
Is to await the onset.

Sardanapalus: I detest
That waiting; though it seems so safe to fight
Behind high walls, and hurl down foes into
Deep fosses, or behold them sprawl on spikes
Strewed to receive them, still I like it not –
My soul seems lukewarm; but when I set on them,
Though they were piled on mountains, I would have
A pluck at them, or perish in hot blood! –
Let me then charge.

Salemenes: You talk like a young soldier.
Sardanapalus: I am no soldier, but a man: speak not
Of soldiership, I loathe the word, and those
Who pride themselves upon it; but direct me
Where I may pour upon them.

Salemenes: You must spare
To expose your life too hastily; 'tis not
Like mine or any other subject's breath:
The whole war turns upon it – with it; this
Alone creates it, kindles, and may quench it –
Prolong it – end it.

Sardanapalus: Then let us end both!
'Twere better thus, perhaps, than prolong either;
I'm sick of one, perchance of both.

A trumpet sounds without.

Salemenes: Hark!
Sardanapalus: Let us
Reply, not listen.

Salemenes: And your wound!
Sardanapalus: 'Tis bound –
'Tis healed – I had forgotten it. Away!
A leech's lancet would have scratched me deeper;
The slave that gave it might be well ashamed
To have struck so weakly.

Salemenes: Strike with a better aim!
Sardanapalus: Aye, if we conquer;
But if not, they will only leave to me

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99 **BYRON'S NOTE:** “Satibarzanes meanwhile had collected such a force as to venture to meet them in battle, and maintain sharp contest. With that impatience, distinguishing Asiatic from European minds, he seems to have resolved to conquer or die. Instead then of attending, with the just coolness of a general, to the conduct of those under him, who were yet maintaining an action of doubtful issue, he sought personal conflict with the opposing commander: attacking Erigyius, he was killed by his hand. The Arians then universally fled, and no farther resistance appears to have been made throughout their country” – *Mitford's Greece*, X, p.58 (not printed in first edition of *Sardanapalus*).
A task they might have spared their king. Upon them!

_Trumpet sounds again._

Salemnes: I am with you.

Sardanapalus: Ho, my arms! again, my arms!

_Exeunt._
ACT V.

SCENE I. – The same Hall in the Palace.

MYRRHA and BALEA.

Myrrha (at a window): The day at last has broken. What a night hath ushered it! How beautiful in heaven! Though varied with a transitory storm, More beautiful in that variety! How hideous upon earth! where Peace and Hope, And Love and Revel, in an hour were trampled By human passions to a human chaos, Not yet resolved to separate elements – 'Tis warring still! And can the sun so rise, So bright, so rolling back the clouds into Vapours more lovely than the unclouded sky, With golden pinnacles, and snowy mountains, And billows purpler than the Ocean’s, making In heaven a glorious mockery of the earth, So like we almost deem it permanent; So fleeting, we can scarcely call it aught Beyond a vision, 'tis so transiently Scattered along the eternal vault: and yet It dwells upon the soul, and soothes the soul, And blends itself into the soul, until Sunrise and sunset form the haunted epoch Of Sorrow and of Love; which they who mark not, Know not the realms where those twin genii (Who chasten and who purify our hearts, So that we would not change their sweet rebukes For all the boisterous joys that ever shook The air with clamour) build the palaces Where their fond votaries repose and breathe Briefly; but in that brief cool calm inhale Enough of heaven to enable them to bear The rest of common, heavy, human hours, And dream them through in placid sufferance, Though seemingly employed like all the rest Of toiling breathers in allotted tasks Of pain or pleasure, two names for one feeling, Which our internal, restless agony Would vary in the sound, although the sense Escapes our highest efforts to be happy.

Balea: You muse right calmly: and can you so watch The sunrise which may be our last?

Myrrha: It is Therefore that I so watch it, and reproach Those eyes, which never may behold it more, For having looked upon it oft, too oft, Without the reverence and the rapture due To that which keeps all earth from being as fragile

100: Myrrha’s apostrophe to the sunrise may be compared with the famous waking vision of the Solitary in the Second Book of the Excursion – E.H.Coleridge (adapted). Contrast Manfred’s apostrophe to the sunset (III i).
As I am in this form. Come, look upon it,
The Chaldee’s God, which, when I gaze upon,
I grow almost a convert to your Baal,
Balea: As now he reigns in heaven, so once on earth
He swayed.
Myrrha: He sways it now far more, then; never
Had earthly monarch half the power and glory
Which centres in a single ray of his,
Balea: Surely he is a God!
Myrrha: So we Greeks deem too;
And yet I sometimes think that gorgeous orb
Must rather be the abode of Gods than one
Of the immortal sovereigns. Now he breaks
Through all the clouds, and fills my eyes with light
That shuts the world out. I can look no more.
Balea: Hark! heard you not a sound?
Myrrha: No, ’twas mere fancy;
They battle it beyond the wall, and not
As in late midnight conflict in the very
Chambers: the palace has become a fortress
Since that insidious hour; and here, within
The very centre, girded by vast courts
And regal balls of pyramid proportions,
Which must be carried one by one before
They penetrate to where they then arrived,
We are as much shut in even from the sound
Of peril as from glory,
Balea: But they reached
Thus far before.
Myrrha: Yes, by surprise, and were
Beat back by valour: now at once we have
Courage and vigilance to guard us.
Balea: May they
Prosper!
Myrrha: That is the prayer of many, and
The dread of more: it is an anxious hour;
I strive to keep it from my thoughts. Alas!
How vainly!
Balea: It is said the King’s demeanour
In the late action scarcely more appalled
The rebels than astonished his true subjects.
Myrrha: ’Tis easy to astonish or appal
The vulgar mass which moulds a horde of slaves;
But he did bravely.
Balea: Slew he not Beleses?
Myrrha: The wretch was overthrown, but rescued to
Triumph, perhaps, o’er one who vanquished him
In fight, as he had spared him in his peril;
And by that heedless pity risked a crown.
Balea: Hark!
Myrrha: You’re right; some steps approach, but slowly.

Enter Soldiers, bearing in SALEMENES wounded,
with a broken javelin in his side:
they seat him upon one of the couches which furnish the Apartment.

Myrrha: Oh, Jove!
Balea: Then all is over.
Salemenes: That is false. Hew down the slave who says so, if a soldier.

Myrrha: Spare him – he’s none: a mere court butterfly, That flutter in the pageant of a monarch.
Salemenes: Let him live on, then.
Myrrha: So wilt thou, I trust.

Salemenes: I fain would live this hour out, and the event, But doubt it. Wherefore did ye bear me here?

Soldier: By the King’s order. When the javelin\textsuperscript{101} struck you, You fell and fainted: ’twas his strict command To bear you to this hall.

Salemenes: ’Twas not ill done: For seeming slain in that cold dizzy trance, The sight might shake our soldiers – but – ’tis vain, I feel it ebbing!

Myrrha: Let me see the wound; I am not quite skilless: in my native land ’Tis part of our instruction. War being constant, We’re nerved to look on such things.

Soldier: Best extract The javelin.

Myrrha: Hold! no, no, it cannot be.
Salemenes: I’m sped, then!

Myrrha: With the blood that fast must follow The extracted weapon, I do fear thy life.
Salemenes: And I not death. Where was the King when you Conveyed me from the spot where I was stricken?

Soldier: Upon the same ground, and encouraging With voice and gesture the dispirited troops Who’d seen you fall, and faltered back.

Salemenes: Whom heard ye Named next to the command?

Soldier: I did not hear.

Salemenes: Fly, then, and tell him, ’twas my last request That Zames take my post until the junction, So hoped for, yet delayed, of Ofratanes, Satrap of Susa. Leave me here: our troops Are not so numerous as to spare your absence.

Soldier: But Prince –
Salemenes: Hence, I say! Here’s a courtier and A woman, the best chamber company.

Myrrha: Gallant and glorious Spirit! must the earth So soon resign thee?

\textsuperscript{101}: “Javelin” is bisyllabic.
Salemenes:        Gentle Myrrha, 'tis
The end I would have chosen, had I saved
The monarch or the monarchy by this;
As 'tis, I have not outlived them.

Myrrha:               You wax paler.
Salemenes: Your hand; this broken weapon but prolongs
My pangs, without sustaining life enough
To make me useful: I would draw it forth
And my life with it, could I but hear how
The fight goes.

Enter SARDANAPALUS and Soldiers.

Sardanapalus:            My best brother!
Salemenes:           And the battle
Is lost?
Sardanapalus (despondingly): You see me here.
Salemenes: I’d rather see you thus!

He draws out the weapon from the wound, and dies.

Sardanapalus: And thus I will be seen; unless the succour,
The last frail reed of our beleagured hopes,
Arrive with Ofratanes.

Myrrha: Did you not
Receive a token from your dying brother,
Appointing Zames chief?

Sardanapalus: I did.
Myrrha: Where’s Zames?
Sardanapalus: Dead.
Myrrha: And Altada?
Sardanapalus: Dying.
Myrrha: Pania? Sfero?
Sardanapalus: Pania yet lives; but Sfero’s fled or captive.
I’m alone.

Myrrha: And is all lost?
Sardanapalus: Our walls,
Though thinly manned, may still hold out against
Their present force, or aught save treachery:
But i’the field –

Myrrha: I thought ’twas the intent
Of Salemenes not to risk a sally
Till ye were strengthened by the expected succours.

Sardanapalus: I over-ruled him.
Myrrha: Well, the fault’s a brave one.
Sardanapalus: But fatal. Oh, my brother! I would give
These realms, of which thou wert the ornament,
The sword and shield, the sole-redeeming honour,
To call back – but I will not weep for thee;
Thou shalt be mourned for as thou wouldst be mourned.
It grieves me most that thou couldst quit this life
Believing that I could survive what thou
Hast died for – our long royalty of race.
If I redeem it, I will give thee blood
Of thousands, tears of millions, for atonement,
(The tears of all the good are thine already).
If not, we meet again soon – if the spirit
Within us lives beyond: thou readest mine,
And dost me justice now. Let me once clasp
That yet warm hand, and fold that throbbless heart

Embraces the body.

To this which beats so bitterly. Now, bear
The body hence.

Soldier: Where?
Sardanapalus: To my proper chamber.
Place it beneath my canopy, as though
The King lay there: when this is done, we will
Speak further of the rites due to such ashes.

Exeunt Soldiers with the body of SALEMENES.

Enter PANIA.

Sardanapalus: Well, Pania! have you placed the guards, and issued
The orders fixed on?
Pania: Sire, I have obeyed.
Sardanapalus: And do the soldiers keep their hearts up?
Pania: Sire? Sardanapalus: I am answered! When a king asks twice, and has
A question as an answer to his question,
It is a portent. What! they are disheartened?
Pania: The death of Salemenes, and the shouts
Of the exulting rebels on his fall,
Have made them – Rage – not droop – it should have been.
Pania: We’ll find the means to rouse them.
Pania: Such a loss
Sardanapalus: Might sadden even a victory.
Sardanapalus: Alas!
Who can so feel it as I feel? but yet,
Though cooped within these walls, they are strong, and we
Have those without will break their way through hosts,
To make their sovereign’s dwelling what it was –
A palace, not a prison – nor a fortress.

Enter an Officer, hastily.

Sardanapalus: Thy face seems ominous. Speak!
Officer: I dare not.
Salmenes: Dare not?
While millions dare revolt with sword in hand!
That’s strange. I pray thee break that loyal silence
Which loathes to shock its sovereign; we can hear
Worse than thou hast to tell.
Pania: Proceed – thou hearest.
Officer: The wall which skirted near the river’s brink
Is thrown down by the sudden inundation
Of the Euphrates, which now rolling, swoln
From the enormous mountains where it rises,
By the late rains of that tempestuous region,
O’erfloods its banks, and hath destroyed the bulwark.

Pania: That’s a black augury! it has been said
For ages, “That the City ne’er should yield
To man, until the River grew its foe.”
Sardanapalus: I can forgive the omen, not the ravage.
How much is swept down of the wall?
Officer: About
Sardanapalus: And all this is left
Pervious to the assailants?
Officer: For the present
The River’s fury must impede the assault;
But when he shrinks into his wonted channel,
And may be crossed by the accustomed barks,
The palace is their own.
Sardanapalus: That shall be never.
Though men, and gods, and elements, and omens,
Have risen up ’gainst one who ne’er provoked them,
My father’s house shall never be a cave
For wolves to horde and howl in.

Pania: With your sanction,
I will proceed to the spot, and take such measures.
For the assurance of the vacant space
As time and means permit.
Sardanapalus: About it straight,
And bring me back, as speedily as full
And fair investigation may permit,
Report of the true state of this irruption
Of waters.

Exeunt PANIA and the Officer.

Myrrha: Thus the very waves rise up
Against you.
Sardanapalus: They are not my subjects, girl,
And may be pardoned, since they can’t be punished.
Myrrha: I joy to see this portent shakes you not.
Sardanapalus: I am past the fear of portents: they can tell me
Nothing I have not told myself since midnight:
Despair anticipates such things.
Myrrha: Despair!
Sardanapalus: No; not despair precisely. When we know
All that can come, and how to meet it, our
Resolves, if firm, may merit a more noble
Word than this is to give it utterance.
But what are words to us? we have well nigh done
With them and all things.
Myrrha: Save one deed – the last
And greatest to all mortals; crowning act
Of all that was, or is, or is to be –
The only thing common to all mankind,
So different in their births, tongues, sexes, natures,

102: About two miles and a half.
Hues, features, climes, times, feelings, intellects,
Without one point of union save in this –
To which we tend, for which we’re born, and thread
The labyrinth of mystery, called life.

Sardanapalus: Our clue being well nigh wound out, let’s be cheerful.
They who have nothing more to fear may well
Indulge a smile at that which once appalled;
As children at discovered bugbears.

Re-enter PANIA.

Pania: ’Tis
As was reported: I have ordered there
A double guard, withdrawing from the wall,
Where it was strongest, the required addition
To watch the breach occasioned by the waters.

Sardanapalus: You have done your duty faithfully, and as
My worthy Pania! further ties between us
Draw near a close – I pray you take this key:

Gives a key.

It opens to a secret chamber, placed
Behind the couch in my own chamber – (Now
Pressed by a nobler weight than e’er it bore –
Though a long line of sovereigns have lain down
Along its golden frame – as bearing for
A time what late was Salemenes.) Search
The secret covert to which this will lead you;
’Tis full of treasure; take it for yourself
And your companions, there’s enough to load ye,
Though ye be many. Let the slaves be freed, too;
And all the inmates of the palace, of
Whatever sex, now quit it in an hour.
Thence launch the regal barks, once formed for pleasure,
And now to serve for safety, and embark.104
The river’s broad and swoln, and uncommanded,
(More potent than a king) by these besiegers.
Fly! and be happy!

Pania: Under your protection!

Sardanapalus: No, Pania! that must not be; get thee hence,
And leave me to my fate.

Pania: ’Tis the first time
I ever disobeyed: but now –

Sardanapalus: So all men
Dare bear me now, and Insolence within
Apes Treason from without. Question no further;
’Tis my command, my last command. Wilt thou
Oppose it? thou!

Pania: But yet – not yet.

103: Athenaeus represents the treasures which Sardanapalus placed in the chamber erected an his funeral pile as amounting to a thousand myriads of talents of gold, and times as many talents of silver.

104: In his famous painting La Mort de Sardanapale (see above), Delacroix reverses this magnanimity on the King’s part, and has all his horses and concubines killed with him.
Sardanapalus: Well, then, 
Swear that you will obey when I shall give 
The signal.

Pania: With a heavy but true heart, 
I promise.

Sardanapalus: 'Tis enough. Now order here
Faggots, pine-nuts, and withered leaves, and such 
Things as catch fire and blaze with one sole spark; 
Bring cedar, too, and precious drugs, and spices, 
And mighty planks, to nourish a tall pile; 
Bring frankincense and myrrh, too, for it is
For a great sacrifice I build the pyre! 
And heap them round yon throne.

Pania: My lord!
Sardanapalus: I have said it, 
And you have sworn.

Pania: And could keep my faith 
Without a vow.

Exit PANIA.

Myrrha: What mean you?
Sardanapalus: You shall know
Anon – what the whole earth shall ne’er forget.

PANIA, returning with a Herald.

Pania: My King, in going forth upon my duty, 
This herald has been brought before me, craving 
An audience.

Sardanapalus: Let him speak.
Herald: The King Arbaces –
Herald: Beleses,
The anointed High-priest –
Sardanapalus: Of what god or demon? 
With new kings rise new altars. But, proceed; 
You are sent to prate your master’s will, and not 
Reply to mine.

Herald: And Satrap Ofratanes –
Sardanapalus: Why, he is ours.
Herald (showing a ring): Be sure that he is now
In the camp of the conquerors; behold
His signet ring.
Sardanapalus: 'Tis his. A worthy triad!
Poor Salemenes! thou hast died in time 
To see one treachery the less: this man 
Was thy true friend and my most trusted subject. 
Proceed.

Herald: They offer thee thy life, and freedom 
Of choice to single out a residence 
In any of the further provinces,

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105: Compare Dido’s erection of her own funeral pyre at *Aeneid*, IV 504-21.
106: Sardanapalus briefly apes the self-dramatisation and self-pity of the deposed Richard II in IV i.
Guarded and watched, but not confined in person,
Where thou shalt pass thy days in peace; but on
Condition that the three young princes are
Given up as hostages.

Sardanapalus (ironically): The generous Victors!
Herald: I wait the answer.
Sardanapalus: Answer, slave! How long
Have slaves decided on the doom of kings?
Herald: Since they were free.
Sardanapalus: Mouthpiece of mutiny!
Thou at the least shalt learn the penalty
Of treason, though its proxy only. Pania!
Let his head be thrown from our walls within
The rebels’ lines, his carcass down the river.
Away with him!

Pania and the Guards seizing him.

Pania: I never yet obeyed
Your orders with more pleasure than the present.
Hence with him, soldiers! do not soil this hall
Of royalty with treasonable gore;
Put him to rest without.
Herald: A single word:
My office, King, is sacred.
Sardanapalus: And what’s mine?
That thou shouldst come and dare to ask of me
To lay it down?
Herald: I but obeyed my orders,
At the same peril if refused, as now
Incurred by my obedience.
Sardanapalus: So there are
New monarchs of an hour’s growth as despotic
As sovereigns swathed in purple, and enthroned
From birth to manhood!
Herald: My life waits your breath.
Yours (I speak humbly) – but it may be – yours
May also be in danger scarce less imminent:
Would it then suit the last hours of a line
Such as is that of Nimrod, to destroy
A peaceful herald, unarmed, in his office;
And violate not only all that man
Holds sacred between man and man – but that
More holy tie which links us with the Gods?
Sardanapalus: He’s right. Let him go free. My life’s last act
Shall not be one of wrath. Here, fellow, take

Gives him a golden cup from a table near.

This golden goblet, let it hold your wine,
And think of me; or melt it into ingots,
And think of nothing but their weight and value.

107: The condition reverses Antony’s request to Caesar at Antony and Cleopatra, III xii 15, to live “a private man at Athens.”
Here the conqueror puts the condition to the conquered.
108: Compare Cleopatra’s words to the Messenger at Antony and Cleopatra II iv.
Herald: I thank you doubly for my life, and this
Most gorgeous gift, which renders it more precious.
But must I bear no answer?

Sardanapalus: Yes – I ask
An hour’s truce to consider.

Herald: But an hour’s?
Sardanapalus: An hour’s: if at the expiration of
That time your masters hear no further from me,
They are to deem that I reject their terms,
And act befittingly.

Herald: I shall not fail
To be a faithful legate of your pleasure.

Sardanapalus: And hark! a word more.
Herald: I shall not forget it,
Whate’er it be.

Sardanapalus: Commend me to Beleses;
And tell him, ere a year expire, I summon
Him hence to meet me.

Herald: Where?
Sardanapalus: At Babylon.
Herald: At least from thence he will depart to meet me.
Herald: I shall obey you to the letter.

Exit Herald.

Sardanapalus: Pania! –
Now, my good Pania! – quick – with what I ordered.

Pania: My Lord, – the soldiers are already charged.
And see! they enter.

Soldiers enter, and form a Pile about the Throne, etc.¹⁰⁹

Sardanapalus: Higher, my good soldiers,
And thicker yet; and see that the foundation
Be such as will not speedily exhaust
Its own too subtle flame; nor yet be quenched
With aught officious aid would bring to quell it.
Let the throne form the core of it; I would not
Leave that, save fraught with fire unquenchable,
To the new comers. Frame the whole as if
'Twre to enkindle the strong tower of our
Inveterate enemies. Now it bears an aspect!
How say you, Pania, will this pile suffice
For a King’s obsequies?

Pania: Aye, for a kingdom’s.

Sardanapalus: I understand you, now.

Pania: And blame me?

¹⁰⁹: “Then the king caused a huge pile of wood to be made in the palace court, and heaped together upon it all his gold, silver, and royal apparel, and enclosing his eunuchs and concubines in an apartment within the pile, caused it to he set on fire, and burned himself and them together.” – Diodorus Siculi Bibliothecæ Historiæ II 81A. “And he also erected on the funeral pile a chamber 100 feet long, made of wood, and in it he bad couches spread, and there he himself lay down with his wife, and his concubines lay on other couches around … And he made the roof of the apartment of large stout beams, and there all the walls of it he made of numerous thick planks, so that it was impossible to escape out of it … And … he bade the slaves set fire to the pile; and it was fifteen days burning. And those who saw the smoke wondered, and thought that he was celebrating a great sacrifice, but the eunuchs alone knew what was really being done. And in this way Sardanapalus, who had spent his life in extraordinary luxury, died with as much magnanimity as possible.” – Athenaeus. (E.H.Coleridge, adapted).
Pania: Let me but fire the pile, and share it with you.
Myrrha: That duty’s mine.
Pania: A woman’s!
Myrrha: ’Tis the soldier’s part to die for his sovereign, and why not
The woman’s with her lover?
Pania: ’Tis most strange!
Myrrha: But not so rare, my Pania, as thou thinkest it.
In the mean time, live thou — Farewell! the pile is ready.
Pania: I should shame to leave my sovereign
With but a single female to partake
His death.
Sardanapalus: Too many far have heralded
Me to the dust already. Get thee hence;
Enrich thee.
Pania: And live wretched!
Sardanapalus: Think upon
Thy vow — ’tis sacred and irrevocable.
Pania: Since it is so, farewell.
Sardanapalus: Search well my chamber,110
Feel no remorse at bearing off the gold;
Remember, what you leave you leave the slaves
Who slew me and when you have borne away
All safe off to your boats, blow one long blast
Upon the trumpet as you quit the palace,
The river’s brink is too remote, its stream
Too loud at present to permit the echo
To reach distinctly from its banks. Then fly —
And as you sail, turn back; but still keep on
Your way along the Euphrates: if you reach
The land of Paphlagonia, where the Queen
Is safe with my three sons in Cotta’s court,
Say what you saw at parting, and request
That she remember what I said at one
Parting more mournful still.
Pania: That royal hand!
Let me then once more press it to my lips;
And these poor soldiers who throng round you, and
Would fain die with you!

The Soldiers and PANIA throng round him,
kissing his hand and the hem of his robe.

Sardanapalus: My best! my last friends!
Let’s not unman each other; part at once:
All farewells should be sudden, when for ever,
Else they make an eternity of moments,
And clog the last sad sands of life with tears.
Hence, and be happy: trust me, I am not
Now to be pitied; or far more for what

110: Compare Antony and Cleopatra IV i and vi, in which Antony plays on his servants’ emotions by bidding them farewell and distributing him wealth amongst them.
Is past than present – for the future, ’tis
In the hands of the deities, if such
There be: I shall know soon. Farewell – Farewell.

Exeunt PANIA and Soldiers.

Myrrha: These men were honest: it is comfort still
That our last looks should be on loving faces.

Sardanapalus: And lovely ones, my beautiful! but hear me!
If at this moment – for we now are on
The brink, – thou feel’st an inward shrinking from
This leap through flame into the future, say it:
I shall not love thee less; nay, perhaps more,
For yielding to thy nature: and there’s time
Yet for thee to escape hence.

Myrrha: Shall I light
One of the torches which lie heaped beneath
The ever-burning lamp that burns without,
Before Baal’s shrine, in the adjoining hall?

Sardanapalus: Do so. Is that thy answer?

Myrrha: Thou shalt see.

Exit MYRRHA.

Sardanapalus (solus): She’s firm. My fathers! whom I will rejoin,
   It may be, purified by death from some
   Of the gross stains of too material being,
   I would not leave your ancient first abode
   To the defilement of usurping bondmen;
   If I have not kept your inheritance
   As ye bequeathed it, this bright part of it,
   Your treasure – your abode – your sacred relics
   Of arms, and records – monuments, and spoils,\(^\text{111}\)
   In which they would have revelled, I bear with me
   To you in that absorbing element,
   Which most personifies the soul as leaving
   The least of matter unconsumed before
   Its fiery workings: and the light of this
   Most royal of funereal pyres shall be
   Not a mere pillar formed of cloud and flame,
   A beacon in the horizon for a day
   And then a mount of ashes – but a light
   To lesson ages, rebel nations, and
   Voluptuous princes. Time shall quench full many
   A people’s records, and a hero’s acts;
   Sweep empire after empire, like this first
   Of empires, into nothing; but even then
   Shall spare this deed of mine, and hold it up
   A problem few dare imitate, and none
   Despise – but, it may be, avoid the life
   Which led to such a consummation.

MYRRHA returns with a lighted Torch in one Hand,

\(^{111}\) Compare Julius Caesar, III i 150-1: Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils, shrunk to this little measure?
Myrrha: Lord!

Myrrha: I’ve lit the lamp which lights us to the stars.

Sardanapalus: And the cup?

Myrrha: ’Tis my country’s custom to

Make a libation to the Gods.

Sardanapalus: And mine

To make libations amongst men. I’ve not

Forgot the custom; and although alone,

Will drain one draught in memory of many

A joyous banquet past.

SARDANAPALUS takes the cup, and after drinking

and tinking the reversed cup, as a drop falls, exclaims –

And this libation

Is for the excellent Beleses.

Myrrha: Why

Dwells thy mind rather upon that man’s name

Than on his mate’s in villany?

Sardanapalus: The other

Is a mere soldier, a mere tool, a kind

Of human sword in a fiend’s hand; the other

Is master-mover of his warlike puppet;

But I dismiss them from my mind. Yet pause,

My Myrrha! Dare’st thou truly follow me,

Freely and fearlessly?

Myrrha: And dost thou think

A Greek girl dare not do for love, that which

An Indian widow braves for custom? 112

Sardanapalus: Then

We but await the signal.

Myrrha: It is long

In sounding.

Sardanapalus: Now, farewell; one last embrace.

Myrrha: Embrace, but not the last; there is one more.

Sardanapalus: True, the commingling fire will mix our ashes.

Myrrha: And pure as is my love to thee, shall they,

Purged from the dross of earth, and earthly passion,

Mix pale with thine. A single thought yet irks me.

Sardanapalus: Say it.

Myrrha: It is that no kind hand will gather

The dust of both into one urn.

Sardanapalus: The better:

Rather let them be borne abroad upon

The winds of heaven, and scattered into air,

Than be polluted more by human hands

Of slaves and traitors. In this blazing palace,

And its enormous walls of reeking ruin,

We leave a nobler monument than Egypt

Hath piled in her brick mountains, o’er dead kings,

Or kine – for none know whether those proud piles

112: She alludes to the Hindu custom of suttee, where the widow immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre.
Be for their monarch, or their ox-god Apis: 485
So much for monuments that have forgotten
Their very record!

Myrrha: Then farewell, thou earth!
And loveliest spot of earth! farewell, Ionia!
Be thou still free and beautiful, and far
Aloof from desolation! My last prayer
Was for thee, my last thoughts, save one, were of thee!

Sardanapalus: And that?

Myrrha: Is yours.

*The trumpet of Pania sounds without.*

Sardanapalus: Hark!

Myrrha: Now!

Sardanapalus: Adieu, Assyria!

I loved thee well, my own, my fathers’ land,
And better as my country than my kingdom.
I sated thee with peace and joys; and this
Is my reward! and now I owe thee nothing,
Not even a grave.

*He mounts the pile.*

Myrrha: Now, Myrrha!

Art thou ready?

Sardanapalus: As the torch in thy grasp.

*MYRRHA fires the pile.*

’Tis fired! I come.

*As MYRRHA springs forward
to throw herself into the flames, the Curtain falls.*

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113: B.’s Ms. reads, at the end: “Ravenna. May 27th, 1821. / Mem. – I began the drama on the 13th of January, 1821, and continued the two first acts very slowly and at long intervals. The three last acts were written since the 13th of May, 1821 (this present month, that is to say in a fortnight).”
APPENDIX I: SEMIRAMIS.

The following, downloaded from the Internet and corrected, is the 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica article on Semiramis. It is much fuller than the corresponding article in the modern Britannica.

SEMIRAMIS (c. 800 B.C.), a famous Assyrian princess, round whose personality a mass of legend has accumulated. It was not until 1910 that the researches of Professor Lehmann-Haupt of Berlin restored her to her rightful place in Babylonian-Assyrian history. The legends derived by Diodorus Siculus, Justin and others from Ctesias of Cnidus were completely disproved, and Semiramis had come to be treated as a purely legendary figure. The legends ran as follows: Semiramis was the daughter of the fish-goddess Atargatis of Ascalon in Syria, and was miraculously preserved by doves, who fed her until she was found and brought up by Simmas, the royal shepherd. Afterwards she married Onnes, one of the generals of Ninus, who was so struck by her bravery at the capture of Bactra that he married her, after Onnes had committed suicide. Ninus died, and Semiramis, succeeding to his power, traversed all parts of the empire, erecting great cities (especially Babylon), and stupendous monuments, or opening roads through savage mountains. She was unsuccessful only in an attack on India. At length, after a reign of forty-two years, she delivered up the kingdom to her son Ninjas, and disappeared, or, according to what seems to be the original form of the story, was turned into a dove and was thenceforth worshipped as a deity. The name of Semiramis came to be applied to various monuments in Western Asia, the origin of which was forgotten or unknown (see Strabo xvi. i. 2). Ultimately every stupendous work of antiquity by the Euphrates or in Iran seems to have been ascribed to her, even the Behistun inscriptions of Darius (Diod. Sic. ii. 3). Of this we already have evidence in Herodotus, who ascribes to her the banks that confined the Euphrates (i. 184) and knows her name as borne by a gate of Babylon (iii. 155). Various places in Media bore the name of Semiramis, but slightly changed, even in the middle ages, and the old name of Van was Shamiramagerd, Armenian tradition regarding her as its founder. These facts are partly to be explained by observing that, according to the legends, in her birth as well as in her disappearance from earth, Semiramis appears as a goddess, the daughter of the fish-goddess Atargatis, and herself connected with the doves of Ishtar or Astarte. The same association of the fish and dove is found at Hierapolis (Bambyece, Mabbog), the great temple at which, according to one legend, was founded by Semiramis (Lucian, De de Syria, 14), where her statue was shown with a golden dove on her head (33, 39). The irresistible charms of Semiramis, her sexual excesses (which, however, belong only to the legends: there is no historical groundwork), and other features of the legend, all bear out the view that she is primarily a form of Astarte, and so fittingly conceived as the great queen of Assyria.

Professor Lehmann-Haupt, by putting together the results of archaeological discoveries, has arrived at the following conclusions. Semiramis is the Greek form of Sammuramat. She was probably a Babylonian (for it was she who imposed the Babylonian cult of Nebo or Nabu upon the Assyrian religion). A column discovered in 1909 describes her as a woman of the palace of Samsi-Adad, King of the World, King of Assyria, King of the Four Quarters of the World. Ninus was her son.

The dedication of this column shows that Semiramis occupied a position of unique influence, lasting probably for more than one reign. She waged war against the Indo-Germanic Medes and the Chaldaeans. The legends probably have a Median origin. A popular etymology, which connected the name with the Assyrian summat, dove, seems to have first started the identification of the historical Semiramis with the goddess Ishtar and her doves.

Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, the French freemason who designed the Statue of Liberty, is said to have been inspired by a vision he had upon entering New York harbour, of “a magnificent goddess (Nimrod’s Semiramis – Isis or Astarte), holding aloft a torch (of Illuminism) in one hand and welcoming all visitors to the land of freedom and opportunity” (Information from <<www.biblebelievers.org.au/mason7.htm>>)

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