

# SARDANAPALUS<sup>1</sup>

edited by Peter Cochran



The illustration to Byron's *Sardanapalus* shows the entrance of Pania at III i 68.

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 Σαρδανάπλλος (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.

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<sup>1</sup>: 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 Belesys, 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 took 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 Belesys 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.



*Delacroix's famous painting is inspired by Diodorus Siculus, not by Byron's play.*

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 noised 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 ...<sup>2</sup>

### ***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

<sup>2</sup>: Diodorus of Sicily, Book II, 23-29. Tr. T.R.Oldfather, Heinemann/Harvard 1968, I, pp. 425-45.

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*:

Midnight.

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

### 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?

3: William Mitford (1744–1827), whose anti-democratic *History of Greece* (5 vols., 1784–1818) B. "dipped into" in January 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 ii 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”,<sup>5</sup> the “Man-Queen”,<sup>6</sup> Semiramis, (who's linked in our minds already with Bacchus / Dinoyosos),<sup>7</sup> we realise that her name, Myrrha, is embedded within that of her lover's grandmother, (“Mira” – “Se-Mira-mis”).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

8: Pointed out by Malcolm Kelsall, *The Slave Woman in the Harem*, in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 31 No 3 Fall 1992, p.326.

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.<sup>10</sup>

Myrrha's sublime love was conceived on that very night.<sup>11</sup>

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".<sup>12</sup> 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 choking 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*.<sup>13</sup>

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".<sup>14</sup>

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

10: BLJ VIII, 26; letter of January 13, 1821.

11: Teresa Guiccioli, *Lord Byron's Life in Italy*, tr. Rees ed. Cochran (Delaware 2005), pp.261-4.

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),<sup>15</sup> 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 *Foscari*: as *Faliero* is almost devoid of incident, and *Foscari* 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<sup>16</sup> 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*

<sup>15</sup>: *Quarterly Review*, XXVII (July 1822), pp.476-524. RRB, pp.2057-81.

<sup>16</sup>: CPW VI 614.



*Foscari*, on December 19th. Byron was paid 2,5000 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 GOETHE<sup>17</sup> 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.*<sup>18</sup>

ARBACES, *the Mede who aspired to the Throne.*

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

PANIA.

ZAMES.

BELESES, *a Chaldean and Soothsayer*

ALTADA, *an Assyrian Officer of the Palace.*

SFERO.

BALEA.

**WOMEN:** ZARINA, *the Queen.*<sup>19</sup>

MYRRHA,<sup>20</sup> *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.

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**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;<sup>21</sup>  
 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 5  
 The blood of Nimrod<sup>22</sup> and Semiramis<sup>23</sup>  
 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 10  
 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:<sup>24</sup> to an empire born, 15  
 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 20  
 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 25  
 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 30  
 Of lulling instruments, the softening voices  
 Of women, and of beings less than women,<sup>25</sup>  
 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 35  
 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 40  
 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, 45  
 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 Euphrates<sup>26</sup>

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 5  
 A cooling breeze which crisps the broad clear river:  
 We will embark anon. Fair Nymphs, who deign  
 To share the soft hours of Sardanapalus,<sup>27</sup>  
 We'll meet again in that the sweetest hour,  
 When we shall gather like the stars above us, 10  
 And you will form a heaven as bright as theirs.  
 Till then, let each be mistress of her time,<sup>28</sup>  
 And thou, my own Ionian Myrrha, choose;<sup>29</sup>  
 Wilt thou along with them or me?

Myrrha: My Lord –

Sardanapalus: My Lord! – my Life! why answerest thou so coldly? 15  
 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: The King's choice is mine.

Sardanapalus: I pray thee say not so: my chiefest joy 20  
 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 25  
 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 Bœotians, who, together with those to whom it was afterwards confined, would make nearly the whole of the Greek nation; and among the Orientals it was always the general name for the Greeks.” – *Mitford’s Greece*, 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. 30

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.<sup>30</sup> 35

*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! 40  
 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, 45  
 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. 50

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 55  
 That we must forthwith meet: I had rather lose  
 An empire than thy presence.<sup>31</sup>

*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 60  
 Beyond my easy nature.

**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!<sup>32</sup>  
 The man would make me tyrant.

Salemenes: So thou art. 65  
 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, 70  
 Whose delegated cruelty surpasses  
 The worst acts of one energetic master,  
 However harsh and hard in his own bearing.  
 The false and fond examples of thy lusts  
 Corrupt no less than they oppress, and sap 75  
 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; 80  
 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, 85  
 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 – 90  
 Worse than the rabble's shout, or splitting trumpet:  
 I've heard thy sister talk of nothing else.<sup>33</sup>

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. 95

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. 100

Sardanapalus: 'Gainst *me!* What would the slaves?

Salemenes: A king.

Sardanapalus: And what

**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 I Kings 18.

**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.	105
Sardanapalus:	Whose then is the crime, But the false satraps, <sup>34</sup> 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 shimest 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.	110 115 120
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.	125
Sardanapalus:	'Tis most true. And <i>how</i> returned?	
Salemenes:	Why, like a <i>man</i> – a hero; baffled, but Not vanquished. With but twenty guards, she made Good her retreat to Bactria. <sup>35</sup>	130
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 <i>this</i> Glory? Then let me live in ignominy ever.	135
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 <i>mightst</i> sway.	140
Sardanapalus:	<i>I sway them –</i> She but subdued them.	
Salemenes:	It may be ere long	145

**34:** Satraps were governors of Persian provinces.

**35:** Bactria, famous for camels, was in modern Afghanistan and southern Tajikistan.

Sardanapalus: That they will need her sword more than your sceptre.  
 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, 150  
 Who conquered this same golden realm of Ind  
 Thou prat'st of, where Semiramis was vanquished.<sup>36</sup>

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 – 155  
 Not much as man. What, ho! my cupbearer!

Salemenes: What means the King?

Sardanapalus: 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, 160  
 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 165  
 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.<sup>37</sup>  
 Which may be his, and might be mine, if I  
 Thought them worth purchase and conveyance, are 170  
 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 175  
 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, 180  
 A sort of semi-glorious human monster.<sup>38</sup>  
 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	190
	When this, the present, palls. Well, then <i>I</i> pledge thee And <i>him</i> as a true man, who did his utmost In good or evil to surprise mankind. ( <i>Drinks.</i> )	
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. ( <i>To the Cupbearer</i> ) Boy, retire.	
<i>Exit Cupbearer.</i>		
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:	<i>Think!</i> Thou hast wronged her!	
Sardanapalus:	Patience, Prince, and hear me.	
	She has all power and splendour of her station, Respect, the tutelage of Assyria's heirs, The homage and the appanage of sovereignty. I married her as monarchs wed – for state, And loved her as most husbands love their wives. If she or thou supposedst I could link me Like a Chaldean peasant to his mate, Ye knew nor me – nor monarchs – nor mankind.	210 215
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.	220
Sardanapalus:	And why not her brother?	
Salemenes:	I only echo thee the voice of empires, Which he who long neglects not long will govern.	225
Sardanapalus:	The ungrateful and ungracious slaves! they murmur Because I have not shed their blood, nor led them To dry into the desert's dust by myriads, Or whiten with their bones the banks of Ganges; Nor decimated them with savage laws, Nor sweated them to build up Pyramids,	230

	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.	240
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.” <sup>39</sup>	245
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.	255
Salemenes:	Thy Sires have been revered as Gods –	260
		265

**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; <sup>40</sup> At least they banqueted upon your Gods,	270
	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.	275
Salemenes:	Alas!	
	The doom of Nineveh is sealed. – Woe – woe To the unrivalled city!	
Sardanapalus:	What dost dread?	280
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 <i>is</i> shall be the past of Belus' race. <sup>41</sup>	
Sardanapalus:	What must we dread?	
Salemenes:	Ambitious treachery,	285
	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	290
	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.	295
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.	300
Sardanapalus:	Thou knowest I have done so ever; Take thou the signet. ( <i>Gives the signet</i> )	
Salemenes:	I've one more request.	305
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;	310

**40:** Compare *Hamlet*, IV iii, 21-3: *Your worm is your only emperor for diet ...*

**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?	315     320
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.	325
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: <sup>42</sup> thou seest The populace of all the nations seize Each calumny they can to sink their sovereigns.	330
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.	335
	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?	340
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.	345       350  355
	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	360
	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.	365
Salemenes:	There is one Mede, at least, who seeks to be so.	
Sardanapalus:	What mean'st thou! – 'tis thy secret; thou desirest	
	Few questions, and I'm not of curious nature.	
	Take the fit steps; and, since necessity	
	Requires, I sanction and support thee. Ne'er	370
	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,	
	"The mighty hunter." I will turn those realms	
	To one wide desert chase of brutes, who <i>were</i> ,	375
	But <i>would</i> no more, by their own choice, be inhuman.	
	<i>What</i> they have found me, they belie; <i>that which</i>	
	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	380
	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!	
<i>Exit SALEMENES.</i>		
Sardanapalus ( <i>solus</i> ):	Farewell!	385
	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.	390
	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,	395
	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; <sup>43</sup>	400
	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	405

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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 410  
 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 415  
 Is rank abundance, and a rotten harvest  
 Of discontents infecting the fair soil,  
 Making a desart of fertility. –  
 I'll think no more. – Within there, ho!

*Enter an Attendant.*

Slave, tell  
 The Ionian Myrrha we could crave her presence. 420  
 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, 425  
 In absence, and attracts us to each other.  
 Myrrha: There doth.  
 Sardanapalus: 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; 430  
 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 435  
 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 440  
 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; 445  
 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 450  
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.  
Myrrha: Would that we could!

Sardanapalus: And dost *thou* feel this? – Why?  
Myrrha: Then thou wouldst know what thou canst never know. 455  
Sardanapalus: And that is –  
Myrrha: The true value of a heart;  
At least, a woman's.

Sardanapalus: I have proved a thousand –  
A thousand, and a thousand.

Myrrha: Hearts?  
Sardanapalus: I think so.  
Myrrha: Not one! the time may come thou may'st.  
Sardanapalus: It will. 460

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 465  
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 470  
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 – 475  
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? 480  
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 lovest nor thyself nor me; 485  
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?	490
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 monarchs <sup>44</sup> – 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?	495
Sardanapalus:	<i>Save</i> me, my beauty! Thou art very fair, And what I seek of thee is love – not safety.	500
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.	505
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 Of thy far father-land. Nay, weep not – calm thee.	515
Myrrha:	I weep not. But I pray thee, do not speak About my fathers or their land.	520
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 <i>save</i> me, as thou saidst?	525
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?	530
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. <sup>45</sup>	
Sardanapalus:	And I have never sought but for the last.	535

**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: Dost *thou* 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, 540  
 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.  
 Sardanapalus: Glory! what's that?  
 Myrrha: Ask of the Gods thy fathers.  
 Sardanapalus: They cannot answer; when the priests speak for them, 545  
 'Tis for some small addition to the temple.  
 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, 555  
 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 –  
 Myrrha: Victims.  
 Sardanapalus: No, like sovereigns,  
 The Shepherd Kings of patriarchal times,<sup>46</sup> 560  
 Who knew no brighter gems than summer wreaths,  
 And none but tearless triumphs. Let us on.
- 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, 565  
 Flattering dust with eternity. Well, Pania!  
 Be brief.  
 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, 570  
 He will adduce such reasons as will warrant  
 His daring, and perhaps obtain the pardon  
 Of his presumption.  
 Sardanapalus: What! am I then cooped?  
 Already captive? can I not even breathe  
 The breath of heaven? Tell prince Salemenes, 575  
 Were all Assyria raging round the walls

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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,<sup>47</sup> 580  
 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! 585  
 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! 590  
 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 595  
 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. 600  
 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 605  
 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 610  
 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.*

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<sup>47</sup>: *silken dalliance*: compare *Henry V*, II, Prologue, line 2.



Sardanapalus:	I marvel at thee.	
Myrrha:	What is thy motive, Myrrha, thus to urge me? Thy safety; and the certainty that nought Could urge the Prince thy kinsman to require Thus much from thee, but some impending danger.	615
Sardanapalus:	And if I do not dread it, why shouldst thou?	
Myrrha:	Because <i>thou</i> dost not fear, I fear for <i>thee</i> .	620
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.	625
Myrrha:	Hadst thou felt	
Sardanapalus:	Thus always, none would ever dare degrade thee.	630
Myrrha:	And who will do so now?	
Sardanapalus:	Dost thou suspect none? 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 beauteous border, Here we are still unmenaced. Ho! within there!	635
		640
<i>Exit SARDANAPALUS.</i>		
Myrrha:	( <i>solus</i> ). 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 <i>him</i> 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 Phrygians <sup>48</sup> felt when battling long	645
		650
		655

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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:<sup>49</sup> 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, 5  
 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.<sup>50</sup> And yet how calm!  
 An earthquake should announce so great a fall – 10  
 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, 15  
 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 20  
 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, 25  
 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 – 30  
 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 35  
 The Gods but in decay.

*Enter ARBACES by an inner door.*<sup>51</sup>

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 40  
 Gone.<sup>52</sup>

**49:** Compare *Manfred*, his speech to the setting sun at III i 3-30.

**50:** Beleses, the Chaldean astrologer, connects with CHP III, 14: *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!  
 Arbaces: Does the prophet doubt,  
 To whom the very stars shine Victory?  
 Beleses: I do not doubt of Victory – but the Victor.  
 Arbaces: Well, let thy science settle that. Meantime, 45  
 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 50  
 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 – 55  
 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 60  
 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. 65  
 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, 70  
 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 75  
 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?<sup>53</sup>  
 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;	80
	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,	85
	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.	90
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?	95
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.	100
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.	
<i>Enter BALEA.</i>		
Balea:	Satraps! The king commands your presence at The feast to-night.	105
Beleses:	To hear is to obey. In the pavilion?	
Balea:	No; here in the palace.	
Arbaces:	How! in the palace? it was not thus ordered.	
Balea:	It is so ordered now.	
Arbaces:	And why?	
Balea:	I know not. May I retire?	
Arbaces:	Stay.	
Beleses ( <i>to Arbaces, aside</i> ):	Hush! let him go his way. ( <i>Alternately to Balea</i> ): 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?	110
Balea:	It was: the place, the hall of Nimrod. Lords, I humble me before you, and depart.	115

*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 <sup>54</sup> in its intents Than generals in their marches, when they seek To leave their foe at fault. Why dost thou muse?	120
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.	125
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 –	130
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?	135
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.	140
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?	
<i>Enter SALEMENES.</i>		
Salemenes:	Satrap!	
Beleses:	My Prince!	
Salemenes:	Well met – I sought ye both, But elsewhere than the palace.	145
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?	150
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.



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 – 180  
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!  
Who dares assail Arbaces?

Salemenes: I.

Sardanapalus: Indeed!  
Prince, you forget yourself. Upon what warrant? 185

Salemenes (*showing the signet*): Thine.

Arbaces (*confused*): The King's!

Salemenes: Yes! and let the King confirm it.

Sardanapalus: 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 190  
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, 195  
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 200  
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 – 205  
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 210  
Let him deliver up his weapon, and  
Proclaim himself your subject by that duty,





- I love to see their rays redoubled in 255  
 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, 260  
 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 265  
 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. 270  
 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! 275  
 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, 280  
 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 285  
 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, 290  
 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 295  
 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, 300  
 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. 305

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 310  
 On earth, or should you read of it in heaven  
 In some mysterious twinkle of the stars,  
 Which are your chronicles, I pray you note,  
 That there are worse things betwixt earth and heaven<sup>56</sup>  
 Than him who ruleth many and slays none;<sup>57</sup> 315  
 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 320  
 I have no call for either. Salemenes!  
 Follow me.

*Exeunt SARDANAPALUS, SALEMENES, and the Train, etc.,  
 leaving ARDACES and BELESES.*

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,<sup>58</sup> and that still wavering, 325  
 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 330  
 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 335  
 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, 340

**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 Prisoner 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!	345
Beleses:	Thou may'st resolve whate'er thou wilt – the stars Have written otherwise.	
Arbaces:	Though they came down, And marshalled me <sup>59</sup> 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.	350
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.	355
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:	So – Wouldst thou be sacrificed thus readily?	360
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.	365
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.	370
Beleses:	No – the Queen liked no sharers of the kingdom, Not even a husband. <sup>60</sup>	
Arbaces:	I must serve him truly –	375
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.	380

**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, 385  
 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. 390  
 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 395  
 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 – 400  
 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 she Sardanapalus!

*Enter PANIA.*

Pania: My Lords, I bear an order from the king. 405  
 Arbaces: It is obeyed ere spoken.  
 Beleses: Notwithstanding,  
 Let's hear it.<sup>61</sup>  
 Pania: Forthwith, on this very night,  
 Repair to your respective satrapies  
 Of Babylon and Media.<sup>62</sup>  
 Beleses: With our troops?  
 Pania: My order is unto the Satraps and 410  
 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 415  
 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! 420  
 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 augurst; 425  
 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 – 430  
 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 –  
 But *will* not – *can* not be so now.

Beleses: But *will* not – *can* not be so now.  
 Arbaces: I doubt it. 435  
 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 440  
 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, 445  
 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 450  
 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!	455
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.	460
	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.	464
<i>Exit with ARBACES, who follows reluctantly.</i>		
<i>Enter SARDANAPALUS and SALEMENES.</i>		
Sardanapalus:	Well, all is remedied, and without bloodshed, That worst of mockeries of a remedy; We're now secure by these men's exile.	
Salemenes:	Yes, As he who treads on flowers is from the adder Twined round their roots. <sup>63</sup>	
Sardanapalus:	Why, what wouldst have me do?	470
Salemenes:	Undo what you have done.	
Sardanapalus:	Revoke my pardon?	
Salemenes:	Replace the crown now tottering on your temples.	
Sardanapalus:	That were tyrannical.	
Salemenes:	But sure.	
Sardanapalus:	We are so. What danger can they work upon the frontier?	
Salemenes:	They are not there yet – never should they be so, Were I well listened to.	475
Sardanapalus:	Nay, I <i>have</i> listened Impartially to thee – why not to them?	
Salemenes:	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?	
Salemenes:	Sire, Dispense with me – I am no wassailer: Command me in all service save the Bacchant's.	480
Sardanapalus:	Nay, but 'tis fit to revel now and then.	
Salemenes:	And fit that some should watch for those who revel Too oft. Am I permitted to depart?	485
Sardanapalus:	Yes – Stay a moment, my good Salemenes, 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	490

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63: Compare Lady Macbeth at I iv 61-2: *Look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't.*





*Enter MYRRHA.*

Myrrha: King! the sky  
Is overcast, and musters muttering thunder,  
In clouds that seem approaching fast, and show 539  
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 545  
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, 550  
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 555  
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, 560  
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 565  
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, 570  
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 575  
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. 589  
I thought you were exempt from this, as from  
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 1.** – *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: <sup>64</sup> 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?	5
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	10
Sardanapalus:	Has placed his joy in peace – the sole true glory. 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.	15
Zames:	No; All hearts are happy, and all voices bless The King of peace <sup>65</sup> – 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?	20
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!	25
 <i>ZAMES and the Guests kneel, and exclaim:</i>  		
Mightier than His father Baal, the God Sardanapalus!		
 <i>It thunders as they kneel; some start up in confusion.</i>  		
Zames:	Why do you rise, my friends? in that strong peal His father gods consented.	
Myrrha:	Menaced, rather.	30
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 Sardanapalus with Jesus.

	<p>Their lineage. But arise, my pious friends;          Hoard your devotion for the Thunderer there:          I seek but to be loved, not worshipped.</p>	35
Altada:	<p>Both –          Both you must ever be by all true subjects.</p>	
Sardanapalus:	<p>Methinks the thunders still increase: it is          An awful night.<sup>66</sup></p>	
Myrrha:	<p>Oh yes, for those who have          No palace to protect their worshippers.</p>	40
Sardanapalus:	<p>That's true, my Myrrha; and could I convert          My realm to one wide shelter for the wretched,          I'd do it.</p>	
Myrrha:	<p>Thou'rt no God, then – not to be          Able to work a will so good and general,          As thy wish would imply.</p>	
Sardanapalus:	<p>And your Gods, then,          Who can, and do not?</p>	45
Myrrha:	<p>Do not speak of that,          Lest we provoke them.</p>	
Sardanapalus:	<p>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.</p>	50
Myrrha:	<p>The Persian prays          Upon his mountain.</p>	
Sardanapalus:	<p>Yes, when the Sun shines.</p>	
Myrrha:	<p>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?</p>	55
Altada:	<p>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.</p>	
Sardanapalus:	<p>Nay, pardon, guests,          The fair Greek's readiness of speech.</p>	
Altada:	<p><i>Pardon!</i> sire:          We honour her of all things next to thee.          Hark! what was that?</p>	60
Zames:	<p>That! nothing but the jar          Of distant portals shaken by the wind.</p>	
Altada:	<p>It sounded like the clash of – hark again!</p>	
Zames:	<p>The big rain pattering on the roof.</p>	
Sardanapalus:	<p>No more.          Myrrha, my love, hast thou thy shell in order?          Sing me a song of Sappho,<sup>67</sup> her, thou know'st,          Who in thy country threw –<sup>68</sup></p>	65

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

<sup>66</sup>: Compare Macbeth at II iii 59: *'Twas a rough night.*

<sup>67</sup>: Myrrha could not have known Sappho; the reference is anachronistic. B. recalls Grillparzer's *Sappho*.

<sup>68</sup>: "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: ( <i>to the Guards</i> ):	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.	70
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.	75
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.	80
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. ( <i>He hesitates.</i> ) I am charged to –	85
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.	95
Sardanapalus:	What, ho! My armour there.	
Myrrha:	And wilt thou?	
Sardanapalus:	Will I not? Ho, there! – but seek not for the buckler: 'tis Too heavy: <sup>69</sup> a light cuirass and my sword. Where are the rebels?	100
Pania:	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.	105

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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, 110  
 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. 115  
 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. 120  
 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; 125  
 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<sup>70</sup> – so: my baldric;<sup>71</sup> now.  
 My sword: I had forgot the helm<sup>72</sup> – where is it?  
 That's well – no, 'tis too heavy; you mistake, too –  
 It was not this I meant, but that which bears 130  
 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! 135  
 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. 140

**70:** The cuirass is the breast-and-backplate in armour, buckled together.

**71:** The baldric is the belt worn across the shoulder, supporting the scabbard for the sword.

**72:** A helm is a helmet.

Sardanapalus: All men will recognise you – for the storm  
Has ceased, and the moon breaks forth in her brightness.  
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: Sfero – I had forgotten – bring the mirror.<sup>73</sup> 145  
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 – 150  
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, 155  
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 160  
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*):<sup>74</sup> 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. 165  
Altada! Where's Altada?  
Sfero: Waiting, Sire,

**73:** B. writes to Murray, "In the third act – when Sardanapalus calls for a *mirror* to look at himself in his armour – recollect to quote the Latin passage from *Juvenal* upon *Otho* – (a similar character, who did the same thing) Gifford will help you to it. – The trait is perhaps too familiar – but it is historical – (of Otho at least) & natural in an effeminate character." – May 31st, 1821, (BLJ VIII 128). The Juvenal quotation was not printed in any edition till 1832. It is from *Juv. Sat. ii*, 199-203. B. is anxious to draw attention from the much more obvious lift from *Richard II*: see next note.

**74:** Sardanapalus looking at himself in the mirror shows a theatricality like that of Richard II (see IV i), but where Richard wants to inspire awe at his play-acting and pity for his fall, Sardanapalus simply wants to see how good he looks in his armour. Compare Byron's purchase of a "Grecian helmet" before leaving for Cefalonia in 1823 (he never wore it).

Sardanapalus: Without: he has your shield in readiness.  
 True – I forgot – he is my shield-bearer  
 By right of blood, derived from age to age.  
 Myrrha, embrace me<sup>75</sup> – yet once more – once more – 170  
 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:<sup>76</sup>  
 All are gone forth, and of that all how few  
 Perhaps return! Let him but vanquish, and 175  
 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 180  
 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! 185  
 Methinks it nears me. If it should be so,

*She draws forth a small vial.*

This cunning Colchian<sup>77</sup> poison, which my father  
 Learned to compound on Euxine shores,<sup>78</sup> and taught me  
 How to preserve, shall free me! It had freed me 190  
 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 195  
 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, 200  
 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,

**75:** The punning potential of Myrrha's name seems to have been overlooked by most commentators. Is Sardanapalus speaking to his mistress, Myrrha, or to his reflection in the mirror?

**76:** Compare Hamlet, at III iii: though he is relieved to be alone.

**77:** Colchis was the homeland of the sorceress Medea: in modern Georgia.

**78:** The shores of the Black Sea. See *Don Juan* V, 5, 8.







*As the King is going to join the pursuit, BELESES crosses him.*

Beleses: Ho! tyrant – I will end this war.  
 Sardanapalus: E'en so, 270  
 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, 275  
 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 280  
 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? 285  
 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, 290  
 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 295  
 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 300  
 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. 305
- 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. 310
- 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. 315
- 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. 320

*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? 325

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

- Sardanapalus: Here, brother.
- Salemenes: Unhurt, I hope.
- Sardanapalus: Not quite; but let it pass.  
We've cleared the palace – 330
- Salemenes: And I trust the city.  
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. 335
- 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.  
 Salemenes: There stands the throne, Sire.  
 Sardanapalus: 'Tis no place to rest on,  
 For mind nor body: let me have a couch, 340

*They place a seat.*

A peasant's stool, I care not what: so – now  
 I breathe more freely.  
 Salemenes: 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.  
 Salemenes (*smiling*): 'Tis the first time he 345  
 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: 350  
 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?<sup>82</sup>

One of the Guards: Slain, Sire!  
 An arrow pierced his brain, while, scattering 355  
 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 360  
 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.

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

Sardanapalus: A scratch from brave Beleses. 365

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, 370  
 Save an incumbrance.

**82:** E.H.Coleridge compares *The Deformed Transformed*, II ii 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<sup>83</sup> 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? 375  
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 meaneth furiously, 380  
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,<sup>84</sup> the soldiers,  
In the pursuit.
- Salemenes: Indeed!
- Sardanapalus: You see, this night 385  
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 390  
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 395  
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. 400  
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 405  
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 410  
I have no time: thou lovest the King?
- Myrrha: I love  
Sardanapalus.

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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*, 415  
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 420  
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 425  
With my stern brother?<sup>85</sup> 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 430  
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.*

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**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*):<sup>86</sup> I have stolen upon his rest, if rest it be,  
 Which thus convulses slumber:<sup>87</sup> 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, 5  
 Look like thy brother, Death,<sup>88</sup> – 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 unawakening Twin.  
 Again he moves – again the play of pain 10  
 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. 15  
 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 20  
 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 25  
 From you and with you! I would not so purchase  
 The empire of Eternity. Hence – hence –  
 Old Hunter of the earliest brutes!<sup>89</sup> and ye,  
 Who hunted fellow-creatures as if brutes!  
 Once bloody mortals – and now bloodier idols, 30  
 If your priests lie not! And thou, ghastly Beldame!<sup>90</sup>  
 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 should know it 'midst 35  
 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, 40  
 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*, I 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*, I 1,-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.	45
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 are <sup>91</sup> – but I did not deem it so; I thought 'twas nothing.	
Myrrha:	So it is; except	50
	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	55
	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,	60
	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.	65
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	70
	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,	75
	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;	80
	But, on my right hand and my left, instead Of thee and Zames, and our custom'd meeting, Was ranged on my left hand a haughty, dark, And deadly face; I could not recognise it,	85
	Yet I had seen it, though I knew not where:	

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91: Compare Hamlet at IV iii 20 (app.): *Your worm is your only emperor for diet ...*

	The features were a Giant's, <sup>92</sup> 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 – ( <i>He pauses.</i> )	90
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, <sup>93</sup> 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! <sup>94</sup>	105
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. And felt you not this a mere vision?	110
Myrrha:	No:	115
Sardanapalus:	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!	120
Myrrha:	And the end?	125
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	130

**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 135  
 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, 140  
 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 145  
 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; 150  
 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 155  
 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.<sup>95</sup>  
 Then – then – a chaos of all loathsome things  
 Thronged thick and shapeless: I was dead, yet feeling – 160  
 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, 165  
 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 – 170  
 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 175  
 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, 180

<sup>95</sup>: In some legends Semiramis wedded and bedded her own son, Ninus (as in “This is old Ninny’s tomb”).

	Whom you call glorious.	
Salemenes:	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.	185
Sardanapalus:	How wears the night?	
Salemenes:	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.	190
Sardanapalus:	Let us then hold council; To-morrow we set forth.	
Salemenes:	But ere that time, I had a grace to seek.	
Sardanapalus:	'Tis granted.	
Salemenes:	Hear it Ere you reply too readily; and 'tis For your ear only.	
Myrrha:	Prince, I take my leave.	195
<i>Exit MYRRHA.</i>		
Salemenes:	That slave deserves her freedom.	
Sardanapalus:	Freedom only! That slave deserves to share a throne.	
Salemenes:	Your patience – 'Tis not yet vacant, and 'tis of its partner I come to speak with you.	
Sardanapalus:	How! of the Queen?	
Salemenes:	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 <sup>96</sup> 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 –	200
Sardanapalus:	I perish – as is probable: well thought – Let them set forth with a sure escort.	205
Salemenes:	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.	210
Salemenes:	But you can feel! At least, I trust so: in a word, the Queen Requests to see you ere you part – for ever.	215

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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, 220  
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 225  
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, 230  
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,<sup>97</sup> 235  
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, 240  
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 245  
To think of these past dreams. Let's not reproach –  
That is, reproach me not – for the last time –  
And first. I ne'er reproached you.
- Zarina: And that reproof comes keener on my heart  
Than – but our hearts are not in our own power. 250
- 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.

<sup>97</sup>: 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.





- To profit by them – as the miner lights  
 Upon a vein of virgin ore, discovering 345  
 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 350  
 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 355  
 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 360  
 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 365  
 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; 370  
 '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 375  
 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 380  
 Your children, with two parents and yet orphans –  
 In a strange land – so young, so distant?
- Zarina: No –  
 My heart will break.



- Salemenes: Now you know all – decide.
- Sardanapalus: Zarina, he hath spoken well, and we  
Must yield awhile to this necessity. 385  
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 390  
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 395  
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 400  
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. 405
- 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! 410
- 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 – 415  
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 420  
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.*



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.	465
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.	470
Myrrha:	Part!	
Sardanapalus:	Have not all past human beings parted, And must not all the present one day part?	475
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.	480
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.	485
Myrrha:	So let it be; For then you cannot separate me from you.	
Sardanapalus:	And will not; but I thought you wished it.	
Myrrha:	I!	
Sardanapalus:	You spoke of your abasement.	
Myrrha:	And I feel it Deeply – more deeply than all things but love.	490
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.	495
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.	500
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	505

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 510  
 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, 515  
 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 520  
 Of friends for truth – the lips of woman, for  
 My only guerdon – so they are, my Myrrha:

*He kisses her.*

Myrrha: Kiss me. Now let them take my realm and life!  
 They shall have both, but never *thee!*  
 No, never!  
 Man may despoil his brother man of all 525  
 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 530  
 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. 535  
 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 540  
 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 545  
 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?	550
	Let us be first, then. <sup>99</sup>	
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.	555
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.	560
Salemenes:	You talk like a young soldier.	565
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.	570
Sardanapalus:	Then let us end both! 'Twere better thus, perhaps, than prolong either; I'm sick of one, perchance of both.	575
<i>A trumpet sounds without.</i>		
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.	580
Salemenes:	Now, may none this hour 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 Erigyus, 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.*

Salemenes: I am with you.

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

585

*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<sup>100</sup>  
 Hath ushered it! How beautiful in heaven!  
 Though varied with a transitory storm,  
 More beautiful in that variety! 5  
 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, 10  
 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; 15  
 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 20  
 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 25  
 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 30  
 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, 35  
 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 40  
 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 45

**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 50  
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 55  
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 60  
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, 65  
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 70  
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! 75  
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 80  
The vulgar mass which moulds a horde of slaves;  
But he did bravely.
- Balea: Slew he not Beleses?  
I heard the soldiers say he struck him down.
- 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; 85  
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.	90
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 <sup>101</sup> struck you, You fell and fainted: ’twas his strict command To bear you to this hall.	95
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 skillless: in my native land ’Tis part of our instruction. War being constant, We’re nerved to look on such things.	100
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.	105
Salemenes:	And I <i>not</i> 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.	110
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.	115
Soldier:	But Prince –	
Salemenes:	Hence, I say! Here’s a courtier and A woman, the best chamber company. As you would not permit me to expire Upon the field, I’ll have no idle soldiers About my sick couch. Hence! and do my bidding!	120

*Exeunt the Soldiers.*

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

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101: “Javelin” is bisyllabic.

Salemenes: Gentle Myrrha, 'tis  
The end I would have chosen, had I saved 125  
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 130  
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, 135  
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. 140  
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 145  
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, 150  
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. 155

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, 160  
 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. 165  
 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? 170  
 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, 175  
 Have made them –  
 Sardanapalus: *Rage – not droop – it should have been.*  
 We'll find the means to rouse them.  
 Pania: Such a loss  
 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 180  
 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.  
 Salemenes: Dare not? 185  
 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 190  
 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 195  
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  
Some twenty stadia.<sup>102</sup>
- Sardanapalus: And all this is left 200  
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. 205  
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. 210  
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 215  
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 220  
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 225  
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 – 230  
The only thing common to all mankind,  
So different in their births, tongues, sexes, natures,

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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 235  
 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 240  
 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 245  
 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 – 250  
 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:<sup>103</sup> there's enough to load ye, 255  
 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, 260  
 And now to serve for safety, and embark.<sup>104</sup>  
 The river's broad and swoln, and uncommanded,  
 (More potent than a king) by these besiegers.  
 Fly! and be happy!  
 Pania: Under your protection!  
 So you accompany your faithful guard. 265  
 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 beard me now, and Insolence within  
 Apes Treason from without. Question no further; 270  
 '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 <sup>105</sup> 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.	275
Pania:	My lord!	
Sardanapalus:	I have said it, And you have sworn.	
Pania:	And could keep my faith Without a vow.	
<i>Exit PANIA.</i>		
Myrrha:	What mean you?	
Sardanapalus:	You shall know Anon – what the whole earth shall ne'er forget.	285
<i>PANIA, returning with a Herald.</i>		
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 –	
Sardanapalus:	What, crowned already? But, proceed. <sup>106</sup>	
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.	290
Herald:	And Satrap Ofratanes –	
Sardanapalus:	Why, <i>he</i> is <i>ours</i> .	
Herald ( <i>showing a ring</i> ):	Be sure that he is now In the camp of the conquerors; behold His signet ring.	295
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,	300

**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;<sup>107</sup> but on  
Condition that the three young princes are  
Given up as hostages. 305
- 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 310  
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. 315  
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 320  
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 325  
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 330  
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 335  
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,<sup>108</sup>  
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 340  
 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 345  
 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; 350  
 And tell him, ere a year expire, I summon  
 Him hence to meet me.

Herald: Where?  
 Sardanapalus: At Babylon.  
 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. 355

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

*Soldiers enter, and form a Pile about the Throne, etc.*<sup>109</sup>

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 360  
 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  
 ’Twere to enkindle the strong tower of our 365  
 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.  
 I understand you, now.

Sardanapalus: 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 be set on fire, and burned himself and them together.” – Diodorus Siculi *Bibliothecæ Historicae* II 81A. “And he also erected on the funeral pile a chamber 100 feet long, made of wood, and in it he had 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:	No –	
	Let me but fire the pile, and share it with you.	370
Myrrha:	That duty's mine.	
Pania:	A woman's!	
Myrrha:	'Tis the soldier's Part to die <i>for</i> his sovereign, and why not The woman's with her lover?	
Pania:	'Tis most strange!	
Myrrha:	But not so rare, my Pania, as thou think'st it. In the mean time, live thou – Farewell! the pile Is ready.	375
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.	380
Pania:	Since it is so, farewell.	
Sardanapalus:	Search well my chamber, <sup>110</sup> 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.	385
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!	390
	<i>The Soldiers and PANIA throng round him, kissing his hand and the hem of his robe.</i>	
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	395
		400
		405

**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	410
	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:	415
	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,	420
	Before Baal's shrine, in the adjoining hall?	
Sardanapalus:	Do so. Is that thy answer?	
Myrrha:	Thou shalt see.	

*Exit MYRRHA.*

Sardanapalus ( <i>solus</i> ):	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,	425
	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	430
	Of arms, and records – monuments, and spoils, <sup>111</sup>	
	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	435
	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	440
	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	445
	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,*

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**111:** Compare *Julius Caesar*, III i 150-1: *Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils, shrunk to this little measure?*

*and a Cup in the other.*

Myrrha:	Lord!	
Sardanapalus:	I've lit the lamp which lights us to the stars.	450
Myrrha:	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.	455
<i>SARDANAPALUS takes the cup, and after drinking and tinkling the reversed cup, as a drop falls, exclaims –</i>		
	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?	460
Myrrha:	And dost thou think A Greek girl dare not do for love, that which An Indian widow braves for custom? <sup>112</sup>	465
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.	470
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.	475
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 <i>kine</i> – for none know whether those proud piles	480

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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 490  
 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 495  
 Is my reward! and now I owe thee nothing,  
 Not even a grave.

*He mounts the pile.*

Myrrha: Now, Myrrha!  
 Sardanapalus: Art thou ready?  
 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.*<sup>113</sup>

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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 Ninyas, 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 (Bambyce, Mabbog), the great temple at which, according to one legend, was founded by Semiramis (Lucian, *De dee 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](http://www.biblebelievers.org.au/mason7.htm)>>)

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