

Shelley's Political Poetry

“Men of England”

1.
Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear?
2.
Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save,
From the cradle to the grave,
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat—nay, drink your blood?
3.
Wherefore, Bees of England, forge
Many a weapon, chain, and scourge,
That these stingless drones may spoil
The forced produce of your toil?
4.
Have ye leisure, comfort, calm,
Shelter, food, love's gentle balm?
Or what is it ye buy so dear
With your pain and with your fear?
5.
The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge; another bears.
[...]
8.
With plough and spade, and hoe and loom,
Trace your grave, and build your tomb,
And weave your winding-sheet, till fair
England be your sepulchre.

“Castlereagh Administration”

1.
Corpses are cold in the tomb;
Stones on the pavement are dumb;
Abortions are dead in the womb,
And their mothers look pale—like the death-white
shore
Of Albion, free no more.
2.
Her sons are as stones in the way—
They are masses of senseless clay—
They are trodden, and move not away,—
The abortion with which SHE travaileth
Is Liberty, smitten to death.
3.
Then trample and dance, thou Oppressor!
For thy victim is no redresser;
Thou art sole lord and possessor
Of her corpses, and clods, and abortions—they pave
Thy path to the grave.
4.
Hearest thou the festival din
Of Death, and Destruction, and Sin,
And Wealth crying “Havoc!” within?
'Tis the bacchanal triumph that makes Truth dumb,
Thine Epithalamium.
5.
Ay, marry thy ghastly wife!
Let Fear and Disquiet and Strife
Spread thy couch in the chamber of Life!
Marry Ruin, thou Tyrant! and Hell be thy guide
To the bed of the bride!

—*Poetical Works*, ed. Mary Shelley (1837)

Shelley's radical opinions got him into hot water at school (Eton) and university (Oxford). At the latter place he wrote a pamphlet on the *Necessity for Atheism* which got him 'sent down'. Soon he was in touch with William Godwin, with Tom Paine the chief conduit for French Revolutionary ideas in England at the time. His wife Mary Wollestonecroft Godwin was the author of a celebrated work called *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) which has come to be regarded as a foundation-stone of modern Feminism. Shelley's friendship with their daughter Mary Godwin blossomed into love and resulted in an elopement, travel on the continent, a child lost in still-birth, and a racy existence involving ardent friendships with English poets and radicals and Italian literati including the British-Italian physician who traveled with Lord Byron and kept a diary of their journey commissioned by the canny Scottish publisher John Murray for £500. It was Polidori who inspired the Vampire story competition that resulted in the production of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).