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Paradise Untapped

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Abstract

Paradise Untapped

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Paradise Untapped, a one-act play rooted in critical fabulation, tells the story of Deborah Milton and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The two entered our world a lifetime apart in England to different world-renown intellectuals, tethered across time by a shared fiery intellect and creative compulsion. Both yearn to make a name for themselves and do right by their gifts, tell stories that will be remembered, but doing so proves diametrically opposed to their respective circumstances. Deborah, forced to transcribe *Paradise Lost*—her blind father’s magnum-opus-to-be—finds herself secretly rewriting his work to make it her own upon learning that John will marry her off once she outlives her use to him. Hers is a story of subterfuge, isolation, and heart-wrenching erasure.

A century away, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wants to tell a story of her own as well, but finds herself drowning in death and, accordingly, stories it seems no one but she can tell. Stories posed to die untold pile up one after the other as incessant deaths leave Mary in unfathomable isolation. A childless parent, a parentless child, and a bestower of life surrounded by the lifeless, Mary Shelley pours her own story and those that she carries into that of the Creature in her developing novel, *Frankenstein*, including—via the otherwise-silenced legacy embedded in *Paradise Lost*—Deborah’s.

The injustice of Deborah helping write *Paradise Lost* but dying uncredited in history may land tragically, as it rightfully should. However, intertwined with that tragedy comes the Shelley side of the story, which, in detailing how another woman drew on Deborah’s otherwise-erased legacy a full century later to become one of the most widely read authors in literature itself, opens the door to a more hopeful message of generational interconnectedness despite marginalization. This play may thus become less of a story about Deborah and Mary and more one of stories untold, writers never written, and a “paradise untapped,” simultaneously acknowledging the stories left to die nameless outside history’s gates while asserting that namelessness does not necessarily equate to powerlessness.

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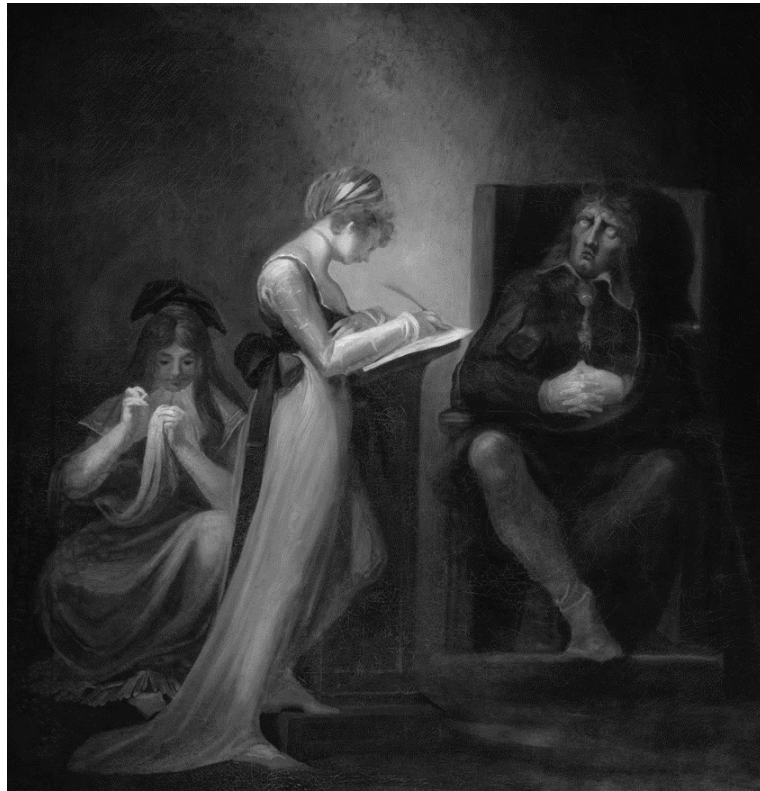
With tremendous thanks and credit to Molly, John, Vince, Bridget, and Rosie Wolfram; Professors Nicholas Fesette and Sarah Higinbotham of Oxford College of Emory University; Professors Patricia Henritze, Laura Otis, Kimberly Belflower, and Jim Grimsley of Emory College; the Emory Creative Writing Department; Theater Emory; and the near-countless friends and mentors who helped shape this piece in workshop, reading, and conversation.

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PARADISE UNTAPPED

A Play by Jack Hyland Wolfram



Milton Dictating to His Daughter (Henry Fuseli, 1794)

Setting:

Teetering on one of countless narrative fault lines in history.
Late seventeenth-century London, in Deborah's case,
and the same just over a century later in Mary's.

Characters:

DEBORAH MILTON, writer. Daughter to John + the late Mary Powell
Milton. Older girl, younger woman.
MARY SHELLEY, writer. Daughter to Will + the late Mary Wollstonecraft
Godwin. Older girl, younger woman.
THE CREATURE, a la *Frankenstein*—as depicted in Mary's novel.

And in ensemble,

JOHN MILTON, small old widower. World-renowned politician/poet/writer.
WILL GODWIN, small old widower. Forefather of anarchist movement.
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, flirty young man. Famed poet + Mary's husband.
SIR TIMOTHY BYSSHE SHELLEY, old British man. Mary's father-in-law.
MESSENGER, the CREATURE.

Notes:

This play and its aims align with Dr. Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation," a writing methodology and narrative tool by which one molds archival research, popularized historical assertions, critical theory, and fiction writing into a quasi-nonfictional mosaic that can account for the gaps and silenced voices lingering in marginalization's wake.

All real materials referenced and reimagined throughout this play exist in public domain. These texts include John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Sonnet 19," "Sonnet 22," and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (intro to 1831 edition, selections from 1991 edition and 2008 edition), *History of a Six Weeks' Tour, Rambles in Italy and Germany*, "Letter to Thomas Hoag, 6 March 1815," "Letter to Maria Gisborne, 15 August 1815," and "Journal" (selected entries).

Text and staging function in crucial tandem here, as do the stories they intertwine.

"But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions [...] I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own."

— THE CREATURE, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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SCENE 1

A stage divided in two by a wall segment on wheels with a door. Presently divided such that 2/3rd is stage right, 1/3rd is stage left. Right, MARY SHELLEY scribbles at her desk, facing the audience. Curtains frame her window and a storm patters beyond it. Left, obscurities. Within them lumbers THE CREATURE, hulking but handsome in trousers, something of a shirt, and a crossbody satchel. Smoke billows subtly.

MARY

“His pale skin hardly covered”—no, “scarcely.” Yes, much better. “Scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath it.”

(THE CREATURE flexes triumphantly.)

MARY (cont'd)

His hair was of... of a lustrous black, and flowing!

(He dons a wig thrown from offstage, beaming.)

His teeth of a pearly whiteness! But these only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, his shriveled complexion, and his straight black lips!

(He flaunts himself—winking, blowing kisses, pursing lips.)

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human- [nature]

*(PERCY SHELLEY emerges from behind the curtain.
THE CREATURE exits.)*

PERCY

Love, what keeps you so late?

MARY

OH MY GOD!

MARY

(Laughing)

Percy, you handsome devil, don't DO that! My heart nearly stopped! Tonight's been a long one. Can't sleep, I guess.

PERCY

My most sincere apologies, Mary. Hath our latest ghost story talks with Lord Bryon and Claire much haunted you, perhaps? I must admit, I found your musings that a corpse might be re-animated particularly possessing.

(PERCY moves to massage MARY'S shoulders, but—reluctantly?—stops before his hands actually touch her.)

MARY

Yeah, yeah, it has. There've just been all these terrible visions swirling around my head, and I- I needed to write them out.

PERCY

Ooh, visions? Any of me?

(He poaches her notebook, speed-reading.)

MARY

I saw this... this creative architect, this scientist of things unhealthy for human inference, kneeling beside something. It was a monstrous patchwork of a man, stretched out, once half-decayed but somehow stirring. It was as if he'd been brought to life—as if someone had figured out how to bring the dead to-

(THE CREATURE re-emerges left, looking at her curiously. MARY notices him for the first time and is taken aback.)

PERCY

You're brilliant, Mary! This writing is absolutely inspired.

MARY

No way.

(THE CREATURE moves into rightstage with a smile, scanning MARY's bookshelf until he finds Paradise Lost—a massive volume. He puts it into his satchel. PERCY cannot perceive him.)

PERCY

I protest! Truly, you bear quite a gift for weaving such tales.

MARY

That can't be. It's just a story, I- I made you up. You aren't...

PERCY

—aren't kidding, Mary!

THE CREATURE

—aren't real? Nice to meet you, too, I guess. Sheesh.

PERCY

Mary, you *must* finish this. I'm dying to read what comes next.

(He steps between her and THE CREATURE, who exits once more.)

PERCY (cont'd)

I've never seen anything like this!

MARY

(Scanning the room, bewildered)

Me neither.

PERCY

Indubitably! Let's get on with it—how might I best help you?

MARY

Tonight? Maybe just head back to bed, Percy. I promise I'll be there soon.

PERCY

Very well. I will see myself gone. Do make haste. Visions need not be the *only* otherworldly experience you have tonight - !

MARY

Percy!

(PERCY gives a playful shrug and begins to leave. MARY looks around once more, makes to write, then pauses.)

MARY

Ah, what the hell. Ran off with a Romanticist, might as well romance!

(MARY runs to PERCY, extending her arms towards him. As they're about to touch, PERCY collapses.)

MARY

Percy!

(She reaches for him but is caught off guard as the scene shatters. Sounds of thrashing intersperse with projections of rocks and waves—tsunami-sized and angry. Children wail. Men scream. Thunder explodes. Pushed from right, the dividing wall starts to redistribute stage space to the darkness—1/3rd left, 2/3rds right. A three-beat knocking drums with growing intensity. MARY drops to her knees.)

(The sounds diminish. Now, it is not PERCY but THE CREATURE who stands before MARY. PERCY lies limp in his arms, unconscious and water-logged.)

MARY

Oh my god, no, no, no—

*Together, she and THE CREATURE set PERCY down.
MARY cradles him.)*

MARY

Wake up! Percy, please, no, wake up!

MARY
WAKE UP!

THE CREATURE (to MARY)
WAKE UP!

DEBORAH (offstage)
WAKE UP!

(MARY stares at THE CREATURE. Lightning crackles—house and stage lights surge to full, then blackout. Thunder booms.)

TRANSITION – SCENE 2

Dim lights rise both left and right.

Right, a 1660s-era study. Dusty curios everywhere—a sword atop the fireplace. Mirroring MARY's initial staging at a desk, reading a mimed manuscript, is DEBORAH MILTON.

Left, MARY jolts awake on the floor. PERCY and the desk are gone. A bed in the corner with blankets strewn. THE CREATURE steps into view, startling MARY.)

THE CREATURE
Awake! Arise!

DEBORAH
Awake! Arise! Or be forever fallen!

(Three wooden knocks ring. MARY turns to the door and freezes. THE CREATURE opens it and crosses to DEBORAH. As he leaves left, blackout left. Right lights brighten. The door stays open.)

SCENE 2

DEBORAH turns the page of a mimed book. Taking Paradise Lost from his satchel, THE CREATURE seamlessly slides the book between her hands as she reads.

DEBORAH

“And up they sprung, as when men went to watch on duty, sleeping found by whom they dread, rouse and—”

(THE CREATURE makes to exit but steps aside as JOHN enters— an older man with a blindfold, wearing the 17th-century equivalent of, like, dinosaur PJs. He paces with a cane, probing, and gives the floor three knocks each time he turns.)

JOHN

O, foul descent!

THE CREATURE

Huh, would you look at the time.

(THE CREATURE exits.)

DEBORAH

‘Morning, Dad.

JOHN

“That who erst contended with gods to sit the highest, am now constrained into a beast, and mixed with bestial slime, this essence to incarnate and imbr-”

DEBORAH

Holdup. Is this you telling me what to write next, you yelling at me, or you just venting about your eyes again?

(JOHN turns to face her general... well, general-ish direction.)

JOHN

Deborah, you impudent child! Have you no brains? You ignore my dictation and appall me in your disrespect!

DEBORAH

“All of the above,” I guess.

JOHN

Unfathomable!

DEBORAH

(turning pages)

Hey! Hey! I’m writing! I was just, uh, trying to find where we stopped last time.

JOHN

Oh, that I should have a son in thy stead!

DEBORAH

“Oh,” but-cha didn’t! And like I’ve said, I’d be so much better at transcribing all this for you if you’d let me write my own-

JOHN

I shan’t allow it!

DEBORAH

C’mon, Dad, why can’t I read and write like you?

JOHN

Absolutely not! Why should a woman-

DEBORAH

(pacing as well)

Riiiiight, riiiiiiight. “O, anyone with a penis, for whom and from whom I was form’d of thy flesh... O!”*(She hops, flouncing)* Eve got an apple, so I get... nothing! Except servitude! And puberty! And—

JOHN

(total tone switch—genuinely,)

Nay, nay, you misremember the line. Or perhaps I do. Pray tell, Deborah, is that what we have written there?

DEBORAH

Oh. Um, no, that’s not the actual line. I was being sarcastic.

JOHN

Oh. *(Chuckles)* Not bad. In thy fine memory methinks I see myself, were seeing still within my capacity.

DEBORAH

Wow. Really?

JOHN.

(putting a hand on her shoulder)

Indeed. Anyhow, what were we getting on about earlier?

DEBORAH

Like I was trying to say, Dad, writing your *Paradise Lost* would be a Hell of a lot easier if you’d let me write for myself! I could publish some of my own stuff, save up some money, maybe buy a Swiffer so we could get some of the dust off this-

JOHN

Ho, ho! “Hell of a lot.” Quite the turn of phrase! Did I pen it?

DEBORAH

No, Dad, that wasn't yours. I don't think you're seeing my-

JOHN

O, cruel child!

DEBORAH

(aside, grimacing)

Poor choice of words.

JOHN

O, why must you torture me! Why must I rise each day finding that one talent which is death to hide lodged with me useless, though my soul-

DEBORAH

Dad! I'm not torturing anyone. You're projecting-

JOHN

Deborah, the only project-thing I find myself undertaking is a timeless lapsarian epic that you continually prove yourself incapable of transcribing!

DEBORAH

Hmm, let's think! "How could the daughter I NEVER LET WRITE ANYTHING possibly encounter even the tiniest problem when I force her to SINGLE-HANDEDLY WRITE DOWN MY TEN-BAJILLION-PAGE POEM FOR ME?"

(THE CREATURE pokes his head in the doorway.)

JOHN

Thy ineptitude proves greater than heredity should allow!

DEBORAH

Thy wit proves shorter than your first two marriages!

JOHN

The first of which your very birth brought to its untimely end! What right have you to speak of your mother?

DEBORAH

What right have I to speak at all, "SaYeTh yOu?"

JOHN

Enough! Once my masterpiece is complete, I want nothing to do with you and your absurd whining any longer. I shall see to it that you're married off to some poor statesman and never see pen nor paper ever again!

(THE CREATURE fully enters the room, emotions somewhere between aghast and furious. DEBORAH slams Paradise Lost shut.)

DEBORAH

What?

JOHN

You have my permission to return here for my funeral, but 'tis the most I'll allow. If you bear me a grandchild or two, I have no intention of meeting them. A den of hollow-brained daughters has only sullied my productivity, never mind the eventual well-being of their husbands or children. I already pity them.

DEBORAH

You—WHAT? You can't do that!

(THE CREATURE mirror's DEBORAH's frustration, but to a far greater intensity. The two of them advance on an unaware JOHN.)

JOHN

Ho, ho, you forget your place!

DEBORAH

Say "ho, ho" one more time and I swear, I-

THE CREATURE

I will stuff your jolly ass up the chimney like it's December 24th after dark.

(DEBORAH notices THE CREATURE and reels.)

DEBORAH

Oh my god!

JOHN

You dare use the Lord's name in vain?!

DEBORAH

What are you? What are you doing here?

THE CREATURE

Um, I am a "who," not a "what," thanks.

JOHN

The memory I once called fine so quickly fails you? What giveths, daughter of mine?

DEBORAH

(to the audience)

I'm not just seeing things, right?

JOHN

WHY MUST YOU INCESSANTLY REMIND ME OF MY SIGHTLESS AFFLICTION!?

DEBORAH

(tuning back in)

Dad, someone's—

JOHN

Silence, child, the muse speaks! I must pen a letter to my good fellow Cyriack. Hear me now, hear me well! I shall relate my thoughts in a sonnet, as the muse / doth command.

DEBORAH

/ Sure, Dad, a sonnet! Forget that vomit-inducing father-daughter conversation about suppressing my authorship. Forget you threatening to whisk me away to a prison of domesticity. Forget the massive, home invading creature lurking behind you who can apparently read my mind.

THE CREATURE

(to JOHN, as if speaking for DEBORAH)

Let's write a poem to your buddy!

DEBORAH

Show 'em a bit of the ole' J-M razzle-dazzle!

DEBORAH

YOU'RE RIDICU—

THE CREATURE

YOU'RE RIDICU—

TRANSITION – SCENE 3

Right, lights begin fading to black; dividing wall is pushed to give left 2/3^{ds} of stage.

JOHN

(vocally overpowering)

“CYRIACK! For many years' day these eyes, though clear / to outward view of blemish or of spot, bereft of light, their seeing have forgot...”

(THE CREATURE throws his hands up and storms out the door, slamming it behind him. Left, he exits the stage.)

YOU SON OF A-
DEBORAH

SCENE 3

Darkness. Right, A pregnant MARY sits, still looking at the closed door. A storm thunders. Three sharp knocks, again.

MARY
BYSSHE?

(A beat. MARY lights a candle in the darkness.)

MARY (cont'd)
Percy Bysshe Shelley, is it really you? My god, I had this dream and I knew you were gone but then you were here and I thought it was too good to be true, Percy, because I couldn't bear to lose you, too...

(Right, projections and sounds of rain. A dim light shines on SIR TIMOTHY SHELLEY, standing outside the door of the dividing wall under an umbrella. He knocks again.)

SIR TIMOTHY
A different Shelley, ma'am, and a living one at that. Now, please, open up!

MARY
(utterly deflated)
Oh.

(Blowing out the candle, MARY opens the door and steps outside in her nightclothes.)

MARY
Hello, Tim! I wasn't expecting company tonight, but it's certainly welcome. I just woke up from this terrible-

SIR TIMOTHY
"Sir Shelley" or "Sir Timothy" suit me more to my liking, Miss Godwin.

MARY
As "Mrs. Shelley" suits me to mine, Sir Timothy, but I'd hardly demand such formality from my father-in-law. "Mary," as I thought we established, would be wonderful.

SIR TIMOTHY
Well, "Mary," good evening to you.

MARY

Good evening...? Would you care to come-

(SIR TIMOTHY steps past her, inside.)

SCENE 4

Lights up left on the log cabin. MARY follows behind him, shutting the door. Rain sounds muffle. Blackout right. He hangs up his coat, busying himself.

SIR TIMOTHY

Awful weather tonight. I despise nights like these. Dark, stormy. Inhospitable.

MARY

Funny, Percy says—said—it was his favorite kind of weather. The kind that makes you want to stay inside. Think. Write.

SIR TIMOTHY

Did he? If only my son thought to “stay inside and write a little” here at the villa this summer instead of sailing around on a whim like some sort of pirate.

MARY

Why are you in my house?

SIR TIMOTHY

My son’s house.

MARY

Which my husband and I (...) shared.

SIR TIMOTHY

As dower, you hold claim to any property you brought into your... entanglement... and nothing more. My coinage raised these walls. What do you raise within them?

MARY

Your coming grandchild, Tim-

SIR TIMOTHY

Ahem, “Sir” Ti-

MARY

-and the legacy of the man we both love.

SIR TIMOTHY

How many children must you bring into this world, only for them to leave it so soon? Have you not learned from the circumstances of your own birth the dangers of life so wantonly bestowed?

(A thunderclap from the once-muffled storm. THE CREATURE sends the door swinging open, enters, and slams it shut. He looms menacingly behind SIR TIMOTHY. No one reacts.)

MARY

For your sake more than mine, “Sir,” do not speak of my mother nor my children.

SIR TIMOTHY

Very well. On the subject of my son’s legacy...

MARY

Yes?

SIR TIMOTHY

I forbid you from penning any sort of biography, or anything involving the Shelley name, for that matter. For your sake more than mine, girl, do not write of my son.

(Another thunderclap.)

MARY

I was raised on memoirs, Tim—I mean, everything I know about my own mother came from my father’s writing about her, from history! How will our child know their father?

SIR TIMOTHY

One perspective alone cannot tell the full story of a man’s life and character. I refuse to let the girl for whom my talented but philandering son left a perfectly fine first wife to assume command in safeguarding his legacy.

MARY

Percy loved me. Percy married me. Percy and I had three children together, with one more to be born soon. Anyone who knows us would tell you I’ve done more for Percy Shelley’s legacy than the handsome fool himself did! Who are you to say that I’m incapable of giving him life beyond the grave? How else can one keep another from that dying if not in stories?

SIR TIMOTHY

Much like those three children, Miss Godwin—and may God preserve them, truly—living in your memory must suffice. I suggest you leave the storytelling and life-giving alike to those who’ve demonstrated more of a bent for it.

(MARY stiffens. THE CREATURE clamps his hands around SIR TIMOTHY's neck and skull. He doesn't seem to notice.)

THE CREATURE

(Overly cheery)

I could demonstrate a “bent” for you right now, if you’d like. Or you could leave.

SIR TIMOTHY

(croaking)

I feel I should leave.

MARY

Mh-hm.

(SIR TIMOTHY opens the door. Storm sounds unmuffle. THE CREATURE trips SIR TIMOTHY as he exits.)

SIR TIMOTHY

Oi!

SCENE 5

SIR TIMOTHY falls out of view. A large puddle splash in rightstage darkness. THE CREATURE, pleased, slams the door. MARY sits on her bed. A thunderclap. Leftstage lights surge at full strength, then blackout. MARY re-lights her candle, setting it down.)

(In the dark, a spliced voiceover.)

MARY

Everything I know about my mother came from [...] beyond the grave. Three children

MARY *(Lights alternate between washes and blackouts.)*

born

SIR TIMOTHY

into this world, [...] already

(PERCY passes, briefly dances with MARY, then is washed away offstage.)

PERCY

gone.

(Intermingled projections, of waves violently crashing, MARY sobbing. Different snippets of burial footage, and sharp graveyard imagery.)

SIR TIMOTHY

Living [...] in [...] memory,

PERCY
dying

*(Unseen clocks wind,
sensory sea storms thrash,
and far-away infants wail.)*

SIR TIMOTHY
unwritten.

PERCY
Love.

MARY
lost

SIR TIMOTHY
now

*(A graveyard now stands
in place of the cabin;
MARY its lone visitor.)*

MARY
too.

*(It all stops. THE CREATURE emerges from behind a grave,
coffins stacked in his arms. Three of them are small. Some read,
"SHELLEY." One reads, "WOLLSTONECRAFT.")*

THE CREATURE

A childless parent. A parentless child. A bestower of life, surrounded by death.

(THE CREATURE lets the coffins hit the floor. Blackout.)

SIR TIMOTHY *(offstage)*

Here's your legacy, Mary Shelley.

SIR TIMOTHY *(unseen)*
Stories untold.

DEBORAH *(unseen)*
Stories untold.

SCENE 6

*Lights up on an early morning in the Milton
hall and kitchen—2/3rds of the stage to the
divider's right. To the left, darkness.
DEBORAH sits at her desk, using a red pen
on Paradise Lost and writing out loud.*

DEBORAH *(cont'd)*

"Stories untold yet in prose or rhyme. And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer before
all temples the upright heart, instruct me, for thou knowest—"

(JOHN enters his nightclothes. He feels his way around with his cane. A sleep mask covers his eyes.)

JOHN

Good morrow, daughter.

DEBORAH

‘Morning.
Here, Dad, let me help you.

JOHN

Oh. Thank you.

(DEBORAH dons an apron and begins preparing food—like, porridge or something. She makes use of the entire space as JOHN slowly crosses to the desk/table.)

JOHN (cont’d)

Methinks I overheard you earlier. Were you saying something?

DEBORAH

Yeah, yeah, just, um, re-reading yesterday’s pages.

(She takes a detour to pocket the quill and ink from the table into her apron as JOHN nears them.)

JOHN

Ah. Thought the verse sounded familiar.

DEBORAH

(smiling)

Oh, did you?

JOHN

Indeed.

*(JOHN fumbles at the table.
DEBORAH approaches with some Porridge Or Something.)*

DEBORAH

Deborah, could— I seem to have misplaced my chair. Would you be so kind as to—

(She pulls around a chair and carefully helps him into it. She places a meal in front of him, then makes a plate for herself. She guides his hands to the utensils and plate. It’s gentle. Routine.)

JOHN (cont'd)

Thank you.

DEBORAH

So... what're we writing today?

JOHN

Today, I intend to bring our hero out of Hell!

DEBORAH

Our hero?

JOHN

The Rebel... the Light-Bringer... the Serpent...

DEBORAH

Satan?

(JOHN grunts affirmatively and eats his Porridge Or Something.)

Satan is our hero?

JOHN

Well, when you say like that...! What sort of father tells his child, "Satan is our hero?"

DEBORAH

(aside)

I mean, you saw Scene Two. That more or less tracks.

JOHN

What?

DEBORAH

I said, "Oh, yeah, so true. Yes, totally. Facts."

JOHN

Precisely! *Paradise Lost* is a story of rebellion, of angelic downfall and humanity's first Sin against the Father. My epic tracks the rebels' misdeeds, yes, but in its heart justifies the ways of God to man.

DEBORAH

So you're justifying Heaven's punishment of your heroes.

JOHN

Not my heroes, Deborah, merely those of the epic. There is heroism in rebellion—to this I hold more firm than most. But against Heaven itself?

DEBORAH

I think there's heroism in that, too.

JOHN

Come, now, surely you've read the very text you transcribe for me. Heroes win! Heroes have their stories told from nation to nation, generation to generation.

DEBORAH

Isn't that what we're doing with Satan, the rebels, Eve, Adam, that whole crowd?

JOHN

No, Deborah, they're disgraced! The Father's right hand smites them!

DEBORAH

It just doesn't seem like it, seeing as they're all still around today—humankind, rebellion, Heaven and Hell alike. What's so wrong about wanting something more for oneself? Where's the crime in seeking knowledge withheld by another?

JOHN

(rising from his chair)

They earned due punishment for conceiving themselves equal to the Father!

DEBORAH

(cautiously)

Oh. Okay. Understood.

(JOHN sits back down. Silence booms.)

DEBORAH (cont'd)

Dad?

JOHN

Yes, child?

DEBORAH

What exactly is their due punishment?

JOHN

“Them?”

DEBORAH

The fallen angels, the rebels, all the ones I'm—you're—writing about. What's going to happen to them in the story?

JOHN

“They the Almighty Power hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky, with hideous ruin and combustion, down to bottomless damnation, there to dwell in fire, who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms. Nine times the space that measures day and night to mortal men, he with his horrid crew lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf.”

DEBORAH

Oh.

(Another silence.)

DEBORAH

Are they free there?

JOHN

Come again?

DEBORAH

The angels-

JOHN

Fallen angels.

DEBORAH

The fallen angels, aren't they free to do as they wish in those fiery gulfs?

JOHN

By my measure, Hell hardly seems a place of “freedom,” Deborah.

DEBORAH

But the mind is its own place—it can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. Don't you think it'd be better to reign free in Hell than to serve forever in Heaven?

(JOHN turns to her.)

JOHN

Word for word, letter for letter, I struggle to recall any comparable instance in all my years during which I came across a notion so profoundly ridiculous. Satan does not reign free, he is damned. Imprisoned.

DEBORAH

But doesn't he escape? Doesn't he take a new form?

JOHN

Indeed, he does, but, well... yes. But that's besides the—hmm.

(He shakes his head.)

JOHN (cont'd)

Cease your wonderings, girl. I am ready to be milked.

DEBORAH

EW. You have *got* to stop saying that.

JOHN

AHEM. "At once as far as angels ken he views the dismal situation waste and wild, a dungeon horrible, on [all sides...]"

*(DEBORAH begins to write.
JOHN's voice fades alongside the lights.)*

TRANSITION – SCENE 7

A projection breaks the darkness: the Paradise Lost manuscript, open and from an aerial view. Red ink flourishes between, over, and across verses; rearranging and embellishing lines; and adding whole paragraphs in the margins. As DEBORAH's hand writes it in, the following can be heard aloud.

DEBORAH

(voiceover)

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. What matter where, if I be still the same, and what should I be, all but less than he whom thunder hath made greater? Here least we shall be free. Here we may reign secure, and in my choice to reign in worth ambition—"

MARY

NO!

SCENE 7

*The Shelley cabin, with a desk to the side.
MARY stands center.*

MARY

It just can't! It can't be for nothing. Creation cannot be for nothing. These memories, these horrors, these visions, it all can't be for *nothing*.

(THE CREATURE enters as PERCY did in Scene 1.)

THE CREATURE

(in PERCY's voice)

Love, what keeps you so late?

*(MARY looks to him, shakes him off in her head, and sighs.
He's still there.)*

MARY

How strange is memory! It clings to me like lichen to a rock.

(to audience)

Nothing is more painful to the human mind than, after feelings have been worked up by a quick succession of events, the lifeless calmness of inaction and certainty which follows. My family died. They rest. And I am alive. The blood flows freely through my veins, but death clenches down on my heart in a way I don't yet know how to remove.

MARY

I am alone. Even Satan had companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him.

THE CREATURE

I am alone. Even Satan had companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him.

MARY

Me? Solitary.

THE CREATURE

(to MARY)

Rude.

MARY

Wha— Can I help you?

THE CREATURE

I'd like to think so. And vice versa, seeing as I am not dead, and you are not alone.

(MARY and THE CREATURE size one another up.)

THE CREATURE

Mine, too, is a story none other can tell but you. To put matters plainly, I am apparently united by no remaining link to any other being in existence.

MARY

That seems a little—

THE CREATURE

Isolating?

MARY

Relatable.
What—who are you?

THE CREATURE

Who am I? Of my creation and creator I am woefully ignorant, but I know I possess no money, no friends, no kind of property.

(A beat. MARY grabs the desk, swings it front and center, sits down, and pulls a manuscript from her person. She begins to write and read aloud as the lights fade.)

MARY

“It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time. I remember light pressed upon my nerves, so I shut my eyes. Darkness then came over me and troubled me, but by opening my eyes, light poured in again.”

SCENE 8

As MARY reads, now unseen, THE CREATURE enters ahead of both halves of the stage. He proudly displays a clock, like a gameshow host showing off two tickets for an all-expenses-paid trip to anywhere but here; circles its hands back with a finger, then embodies MARY’s offstage speech, discovering himself and his various senses.

Lights up left on an Old English apartment. THE CREATURE hangs the clock on its wall, whistling. WILLIAM’s seated, rocking a baby and opening a newspaper. He notices THE CREATURE.

WILLIAM

Hello there.... have we met?

(THE CREATURE freezes. A beat. He makes eye contact, acknowledges him with a wave, pats the baby’s head, then flees.)

WILLIAM

Huh. Clocksmiths. Different breed, that lot.

(He stands, gently bouncing the baby and reading aloud.)

WILLIAM (cont'd)

“Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, found eternal relief on this 10th of September, year of our Lord 1797, a mere eleven days following the birth of her family’s first child. The high-profile rabble-rouser” – oh, she’d like that – “leaves behind her husband, fellow radical William Godwin, and the newborn Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin in passing.”

That’s you, Mary. Eleven days old and already making headlines.

(WILLIAM gazes at baby MARY, expression bittersweet. He eventually rises and exits out the door into rightstage darkness. Left lights slowly begin to fade in his absence, but THE CREATURE sticks a hand through the doorframe and snaps his fingers; the fade halts. THE CREATURE and MARY—adult MARY—enter the space.)

MARY

I never knew my mother.

DEBORAH (offstage)

I never knew my mother.

THE CREATURE

You contradict yourself.

VOICEOVER (MARY)

I was raised on memoirs, Tim—I mean, everything I know about my own mother came from my father’s writing about her, from history!

MARY

I mean that I never met her. I have no memory of her beyond accounts from the papers, my father’s books, her friends and her foes.

MARY

She gave her life to meet *me*.
No, not even that—I took it.
An unchosen sacrifice.

DEBORAH

She gave her life to meet *me*.
No, not even that—I took it.
An unchosen sacrifice.

THE CREATURE

You write her story for yourself, Mary. Just as you do those of Percy and your children, and of me. You conceive the narrative, the events, the characters.

MARY

Perhaps that’s what haunts me.

THE CREATURE

Writing the story?

MARY

Conceiving it. Tim was right—what could I raise within the walls I once called my home? A childless parent and a parentless child. You said so yourself.

THE CREATURE

Okay, it was your nightmare, so technically, *you* said-

MARY

(with mounting intensity)

All of this is my nightmare, Creature.

I am a Wollstonecraft who's yet to meet another.

I am a Shelley cast away by the father of the groom his bride now outlives.

I am a widow, one whose love first wed another at that.

I find myself made a birther and a burier in the same occasion—three times over, as if any being were equipped to bear even one such travesty.

I possess no home, no walls erected with domestic intention, nowhere to raise a child, should the one I grow inside me even live to demand more years of breath, sleep, and sustenance than my own eighteen-odd years of life have reluctantly yielded me.

I am haunted by you, this contorted figment of my broken imagination, and

I am so UTTERLY, PEERLESSLY, INDESCRIBABLY

MARY (cont'd)
-ALONE!

THE CREATURE
ALONE!

DEBORAH (offstage)
ALONE!

(A beat.)

MARY

And would you please stop repeating me?! I'm trying to bring life to stories that will die without me. It's hard enough without someone turning my Hell into a two-part harmony!

THE CREATURE

Three-part.

MARY

What?

THE CREATURE

I am not a product of your imagination, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, nor are you as peerless as you may feel. Many stories fail to find life beyond those who live them. Mine and those you infuse within me may very well join those untold ranks, should you put down your pen. But there is one who may help you wield it, as she did hers before you.

MARY

Who's this third part of that harmony? Who echoes with me if not you?

(THE CREATURE pulls the clock from the wall and crosses to the door, opening it and entering rightstage. He motions for MARY to stay.)

SCENE 9

Lights up right to match those left. Milton's study, clean and lively. A younger JOHN, now sans-cane and -blindfold, jaws and paces. The ensemble populates the space as active creatives. THE CREATURE winds back the clock, mounts it, dons an apron and cap, and vocally/physically becomes MESSENGER.

JOHN

SOMEONE FETCH ME MY DISSERTATIONS ON DIVORCE! A new friend of mine, Cyriak, wishes to see one! I'm sure he'll quite enjoy it.

(Enter MESSENGER.)

MESSENGER

Sir, it pains me to bear such bad news, but your wife-

JOHN

Yes, where is she? She must transcribe a letter for me, my damned sight waning so nowadays I can scarcely see, and-

MESSENGER

In St. Bartholomew's, sir?!? Having just born your child???

JOHN

Yes, right, of course. Merely testing you! How is the boy?

MESSENGER

Well, sir, as I said, I come bearing bad news.

JOHN

(genuine anguish)

It's a girl?

MESSENGER

No - well, yes, sir, she is, you have a fine new daughter named Deborah - but I must despair that Lady Powell hath died delivering her!

(All action stops. Ensemble stares at JOHN and MESSENGER.)

JOHN

(voice breaking)

I beg- I beg your pardon?

MESSENGER

Your wife, Mister Milton, has passed.

JOHN

I-

(JOHN notices everyone staring and swallows hard, summoning some bravado.)

JOHN

That's simply outrageous. I've composed four REVOLUTIONARY political treatises in defense of an Englishman's right to divorce, just for her to outright die?

(All action resumes.)

JOHN

Sir, do you believe in divine intervention?

(MESSENGER's jaw drops.)

JOHN (cont'd)

No matter. Alert the family, find John Junior and convey upon him all responsibilities for my late wife's entombment. This tragedy I will attend to in due time. My present work demands me.

MESSENGER

In due time, sir?!?

JOHN

Out, knave!

(MESSENGER head through the door and drops character into THE CREATURE once more, discarding his costume and rejoining MARY leftstage.)

JOHN (cont'd)

With this next literary undertaking, poetic immortality shall finally be within John Milton's reach. *(Adjusts blindfold/glasses)* Although I suppose my vision doth require an intelligent surrogate to transcribe it. Oh, poor, poor Mary. Damn that child.

(DEBORAH steps into the scene as its inhabitants disperse.)

DEBORAH

I never knew my mother. I never met her. She gave her life to meet me. No, not even that—I took it. An unchosen sacrifice.

MARY

Who is she?

THE CREATURE

You've already met. Acquainted in the same manner as you and your mother are, in word and legacy. "Eleven days out and you're already making headlines"... how strange is memory indeed.

SCENE 10

*Lighting similar to the prior memory scene.
MARY's folding laundry on the couch;
PERCY's in the doorway with a newspaper.*

PERCY

That's you, Mary! Eleven days out and you're already making headlines!

MARY

Where?

(Beat. PERCY's confused.)

MARY (cont'd)

This review hardly mentions "History of a Six Weeks' Tour" at all, Perce, just that poem of yours I tacked to the end.

PERCY

No, no, look, right here, in the second-to-last line! "The writer of this little volume, too, is a Lady, and writes like one accordingly with much feminine gracefulness."

MARY

Perce, hon, let's think. Does a footnote about my "feminine gracefulness" really constitute a headline? Is that all the consideration I'm allotted in a world like ours?

PERCY

Well, I'm certain it wasn't intended to be-

MARY

I wrote a deeply intellectual travel tale chock-full of daring self-determination and philosophical tie-ins, an endorsement of revolution, and a subtle tribute to throne-topplers, but "she writes like a lady" is all they could choke out? Is "feminine"-freaking-"gracefulness" really the most they could surrender?

PERCY

Well, Mary, perhaps you're not quite their idea of a-

MARY

What? Of a what? A writer? A historian? A scholar? A-

PERCY

(Throwing up his hands)

Which is not to say they're RIGHT! Which is not to say you AREN'T! The woman I adore was born a Wollstonecraft and a Godwin before she ever took my Shelley. In a more enlightened world, any one of those three names alone would invite respect, but it seems dim England has yet to take kindly to any of them, ours included.

MARY

It's not the names, Perce.

PERCY

Whatever do you mean, then? Why do they see that I don't?

(MARY balls up two handfuls of laundry and stuffs them up PERCY's shirt, then wraps a blanket around him like a dress.)

PERCY

Wha- hey- what're you-

(MARY marches him forward, the fourth wall a mimed mirror. They size up his reflection.)

PERCY (cont'd)

Point taken.

MARY

You know, you've got a fabulous figure.

PERCY

Just you wait. By the time Edward and I sail back from Lerici, there shan't be a limb on my body that's neither tan nor toned.

MARY

God, you're so full of yourself.

PERCY

I protest! But only the "God" bit. Rubbish. Speaking of, I sought out a little something to keep you company while I'm away—and one of its original manuscripts, at that.

(He pulls a book from beneath his blanket-dress.)

MARY

Paradise Lost—that’s Milton, isn’t it?

(Stage lights flare. The memory ends. Blackout.)

SCENE 11

DEBORAH paces and nervously checks the door while THE CREATURE reads at her desk.

THE CREATURE

“And when creators reject creations, it seems others see fit to follow suit.”

(THE CREATURE closes the book, awed.)

DEBORAH

So, what do you think?

THE CREATURE

And your father, he doesn’t know about any of this?

DEBORAH

That’s correct, yeah.

THE CREATURE

Incredible. But isn’t he, how do you say... smart?

DEBORAH

I mean, he certainly likes to think so! As does a good portion of the continent. He’s a talented writer — although I’m technically not supposed to be able to tell, I guess – and he’s achieved a lot of notable things, made a nonconformist name for himself, all that. Just, like, not the greatest... well... not a great dad. To put things mildly.

THE CREATURE

If nothing else, then, you’ve certainly inherited his gifts. These verses are incredible.

DEBORAH

Wait – really??

THE CREATURE

Young lady, do I seem to you the “joking” type?

(Their eyes meet. He does not.)

DEBORAH

Point taken. Well, I so appreciate all your help, sir. I wish we didn't have to be so secretive with this, but my father wouldn't hear of it.

THE CREATURE

Ah, well, I appreciate the conversation, Miss Milton, and best of luck with your poetry. Fine, fine writing. And a nasty piece of work, your father. I pity you.

DEBORAH

I'd like to imagine he's not a terrible person overall. He just has his faults... for which I happen to be on the receiving end, like, 99% of the time. Maybe more, actually.

THE CREATURE

(gesturing at a sword on the mantle)

Between you and me, I probably would've dropped him if our lots were reversed.

DEBORAH

Dropped him?

(THE CREATURE draws a finger across his throat.)

DEBORAH

Kill him?? I couldn't kill my own father! Geez!

THE CREATURE

But if he weren't here, wouldn't you be better off? The old man's health deteriorates nearly every day, and the crown hardly bears warm feelings towards former Cromwell cronies anyways. I'm personally still surprised your father wasn't hanged with the others.

DEBORAH

My stepmother's even worse - she'd probably see ME hanged if she had her way. Besides, I wouldn't get to write at all if my father didn't think I was transcribing for him.

THE CREATURE

Well, aren't you? Transcribing for him, that is?

DEBORAH

I mean, kinda? More or less.

THE CREATURE

More or-

DEBORAH

Okay, but his original female characters were SO one-dimensional. His Eve? The woman was, like, a literal Barbie doll. The mother of all mankind HAS to be more than Adam's brainless plaything. I was not about to let that fly.

THE CREATURE

Do you mean to tell me that YOU wrote-

DEBORAH

For legal reasons, no. And if I were you, I wouldn't exactly rush to snitch on me to the very same man you just openly suggested murdering.

THE CREATURE

(incredulous)

Wait, is— So his book— Are all of those verses yours?

DEBORAH

Okay, not hardly. Just a little here and there, everywhere.

THE CREATURE

How many pages?

DEBORAH

Well.... mostofthem.

THE CREATURE

Miss Milton!

DEBORAH

Shhhh! If he hears us, I'm dead! He can't know about any of this.

THE CREATURE

How is it that he's not yet discovered you? Even blind, he's bound to know what you write isn't entirely his word.

DEBORAH

I'm not entirely sure! He heard me reading some of my edits this morning and thought they were his own, which I guess is a good sign. Maybe he does know. And if he really doesn't like something, whether it's his writing or mine, we just revise it. I'm hardly cheating him out of his story or anything. What's changing a line or two for myself in his story when he's suppressed every word I never wrote?

SCENE 12

Storm sounds resume. Lights up on DEBORAH and MARY, each sitting on a stool in her respective study. They face the audience and hold envelopes, opening one in unison.

DEBORAH

Dear
Miss Milton,

We regret to inform you
that

we cannot in good faith
accept the writing of a
lady for publication at Bartleby's
presses, especially
without the consent of
her husband or father.
Such an acceptance would
set a disreputable precedent.

Again, our condolences.

(Lights flicker. Storm intensifies.)

DEBORAH

"Dear
Mr. Cyriak,

We are honored that you
would consider publishing
such a fine collection of
poetry with Bartleby's!

Our vice editor was immensely
pleased to hear of his former
classmate penning such wonderful
verses.

MARY

Dear
Mrs. Shelley,

We regret to inform you
that

the whereabouts of the *Don Juan* and
your husband aboard it remain
indeterminate.

The ship did not arrive at port as
planned last week and is believed to
have been lost at sea.

Again, our condolences.

MARY

"Dear
Mrs. Shelley,

It pains us to share that Percy Bysshe
Shelley has been found dead off the
coast of Viareggio.

DEBORAH (cont'd)

He and the rest of our staff request and eagerly await your presence at our London office to finalize the chapbook's publication. We look forward to meeting you!

MARY (cont'd)

While the late poet's corpse hath fallen into decay, Sir Timothy identified the body via its clothing and a hard-bound manuscript in its knapsack bearing your name. Please send word of further instructions regarding his remains."

(Lights flicker. DEBORAH hurls all but one letter in frustration. MARY has tears in her eyes. Sounds of rain and thunder hammer. DEBORAH opens it.)

DEBORAH

"Dear 'Mr. Cyriak,' or, rather, Miss Milton,"

(Aside)

Shit.

"Do not attempt to contact Bartleby Press again. Were you not a lady, such imposturing would warrant your arrest. As it were, we feel it suitable punishment to inform your father of your wrongdoings and leave the matter at that. Good day."

(The storm is now near-deafening.)

JOHN

(Offstage)

DEBORAAAAAHHHH!

(Thunderclap. Blackout.)

SCENE 13

Lights up. Milton's study. The desk's replaced the stool. JOHN bursts through the door, sending DEBORAH reeling. She evades him.

JOHN

WHAT SAY YOU OF THIS?

(He flings a letter towards her.)

DEBORAH

Well, I-

JOHN

Deceitful demon, lying locust, secretive swine, speak!

DEBORAH

I mean, you've obviously heard-

JOHN

Thy stepmother relayed it – impersonating my friend? Attempting to publish? Writing works of your own? What say you of these accusations?

(THE CREATURE re-enters, freezing upon seeing the scene. DEBORAH frantically waves him off. He exits.)

Have thou no challenges to present?

DEBORAH

Absolutely not! I'll wear them with pride. Yes, I know how to read and yes, that's how I can do your long-ass transcriptions and no, I haven't the SLIGHTEST clue how you didn't manage to already connect the dots there, and-

JOHN

They said your writing's phenomenal, you know.

DEBORAH

Wha- They did? Did you read it? What'd you think?

JOHN

I mean...

(He indicates his blindfolded eyes)

And I'd imagine your stepmother couldn't read it, either, but your would-be publishers wrote that it's altogether quite commendable poetry for a lady.

DEBORAH

Wow. Well... WOW. Thank-

JOHN (cont'd)

Such a pity that your talent lie locked in a woman's mind. Thou shall remain here so long as I need of thy services, but upon *Paradise Lost's* completion I will make good on my word and shall deliver thee to thy new possessor.

DEBORAH

Bruh.

JOHN

I beg your pardon?

DEBORAH

What about the writing? You said it was good!

JOHN

Yes, and what a shame that my talent should live on in genetics and blood embedded beyond fruitfulness within such an incapable vessel as you!

DEBORAH

YOUR talents?

JOHN

MY talents! My work will never die, yours will never live! I was born to be famed, you were born to be footnoted! What shall you ever be but less than he whom Fate hath made greater?

Blackout.

SCENE 14

MARY writes at her desk.

THE CREATURE enters.

He gestures and gazes at the audience.

THE CREATURE

Like Milton's Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other living being in existence. But his state was far different than mine in any other respect.

(Produces a skull, outstretching it Hamlet-like.)

He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect, superior creature, guarded by his Creator's care. He was allowed to converse with and gather knowledge from others. Many times I considered Satan a fitter emblem of my condition, cast aside by all. Yet Satan had his companions – fellow devils, to admire and encourage him. I am solitary and abhorred.

(THE CREATURE suddenly football-kicks the skull back into the shadows and dismounts the stage, walking amidst the audience and directly interacting with them.)

THE CREATURE (cont'd)

Sometimes I allowed my thoughts to ramble, unchecked by reason, in the lovely fields of Paradise. I dared to fancy amiable and loving creatures who empathized with my feelings and cheered my gloom. But no Eve soothed my sorrows nor shared my thoughts; I was alone. I remembered Adam's supplication to his Creator. But where was mine? It seems my Creator abandoned me.

(MARY looks up, sees THE CREATURE.)

THE CREATURE (cont'd)

WHY DO I EXIST? Why, Creator, in the instance of my birth, did you not extinguish the spark of existence that you so wantonly bestowed? Why maintain me?

(MARY stares at him, still writing.)

THE CREATURE (cont'd)

Are you mad, friend? Or did your curiosity and keenness lead you to create me? You believe yourself destined for some illustrious enterprise, as we all do, and this sentiment of thy nature's worth must support you. You are not alone. You are not forgotten. It is deeply criminal to bury away that respect, that will that might prove a lighthouse for your fellow creatures, given the tales we come to know by such flames endure similarly inextinguishable.

(He pulls the clock from his cloak and bends it in half, bare-handed.)

THE CREATURE (cont'd)

Even when the faintest mentions of us seemingly vanish from our history's expanses, truth lives timeless.

(THE CREATURE and MARY look at one another.)

THE CREATURE

Here's your legacy, Miss Shelley.

Stories untold

MARY

Here's your legacy, Miss

Milton.

Stories untold.

(MARY closes the book, walks into the audience, and exits into the lobby. THE CREATURE changes the set.)

SCENE 15

Minimal trappings of the Milton study. Their desk and their fireplace mantle, the Milton coat of arms, and a sword upon it. JOHN's fumbling with a knapsack at the desk.

DEBORAH

Father, please tell me you aren't actually going through with this.

JOHN

Why would I not? Our conditions were quite clear.

DEBORAH

But what about my writing? You can't possibly send me away, who'll write for you?

JOHN

Daughter, I'm at peace with my pen finally run dry. If *Paradise Lost's* the last thing I write, I've done God's will sufficiently.

DEBORAH

What about me?

JOHN

What about you? You've helped write my magnum opus.

DEBORAH

But what about my own?

JOHN

Bah! I reject the premise of the question.

DEBORAH

I'm just as capable as you are! You know that, and it scares you.

JOHN

Come, now, just because you can read and write hardly elevates you to a plane of excellence anywhere near-

DEBORAH

Anywhere near yours? You, with your cute little sonnets and your treatises and your-

JOHN

Daughter, I am a literary titan-

DEBORAH

You are a MAN! A baby-faced, well-written, gifted but exasperatingly imperfect little man! And an ABYSMAL father! You see my worth and you deny it. You see my potential and you dismiss it. I don't need your pity, I don't need your approval, I just want credit where credit is due.

JOHN

Credit where credit is due?! ANYONE could have done what you've done!

DEBORAH

I wrote the whole freaking book myself!

JOHN

Every word in that book came from my own mouth!

DEBORAH

And thank Heaven and Hell alike I didn't keep it that way!

JOHN

WHAT?

(Aghast, he clutches at the manuscript on his desk.)

DEBORAH

You never noticed! Even sang my lines' praises when you thought they were yours. How's that for the same plane of excellence?

JOHN

I- I don't believe you.

DEBORAH

Why, because a woman couldn't have written it? "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay, to mold me Woman? Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me thus?"

(JOHN braces himself against the desk, breathing heavily. He turns back around, face set in stone.)

JOHN

(chewing each word)

I am taking *Paradise Lost* to the editorial house and purging every stain, every stroke, and every fingerprint of Deborah Milton from its contents. Then I'm publishing it. Upon my return, you're disowned.

(Chest heaving, DEBORAH draws the sword from their mantle. She shakily levels it at him. JOHN cannot tell.)

DEBORAH

You wouldn't dare-

JOHN

(packing his bag)

Every. Trace. Your very birth killed my wife, you've made a laughingstock of me at Bartleby's, and you've corrupted the holiest work I've striven my entire life to write.

(DEBORAH falters. The sword's tip dips to the floor.)

JOHN (cont'd)

You find yourself heroic? You fancy yourself a Light-Bringer? I'll deliver just as well. Let the gates of thy paradise be barred and thy name die unknown. Go to Hell, Deborah.

(JOHN hobbles away with the book. DEBORAH, panting, watches. Upon his exit, scene lights fade. Red lights rise slightly behind the set, basking its shapes in silhouette and shadow. DEBORAH reverses the sword and crumples.

A beat passes. Blackout.)

SCENE 16

JOHN (in the darkness)

It's done, child.

(The clack of his cane echoes.)

JOHN (cont'd)

I said, it's done. Come hither.

(Silence.)

Deborah?

(JOHN's cane eventually taps something solid. A thud. A cane clattering on the floor.)

SCENE 17

Lights up. All is frozen. DEBORAH rises. She grabs JOHN's bag from the floor, slings it over her shoulder, and strides downstage to face the audience. She stands slightly off of center. Lights down, save for around her.

DEBORAH

Let it be known that “Paradise Lost” did not flow from John Milton’s pen. For all you hear of my father, remember me, his daughter, his scribe. One of several, kept incapable of reading the very masterpiece we helped write. Were history honest with itself, you’d already know that Adam and Eve weren’t the only characters John Milton punished for seeking knowledge - merely the most fictional. A paradise lost is certainly worth mourning, but a paradise untapped? Stories untold? Writers unwritten? These are the losses that truly make a Hell of our Heav’n.

(Another light, opposite hers. MARY strides onstage, a stack of books and papers held against her hip. She plants herself in the light opposite DEBORAH.)

MARY

And yet somehow, despite the Devil’s best efforts, not all knowledge-seekers can be cast from the Garden. Sometimes-

DEBORAH

Sometimes-

MARY

Sometimes, one is fortunate enough to collect the instruments of life around them, that they might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at their feet.

(MARY and DEBORAH drop everything, loose pages and hardcovers plummeting to collect at their feet.)

DEBORAH

What lies in a legacy? What does it mean to cement one, even if no one knows it’s yours?

(DEBORAH reaches into the bag and draws out the manuscript. She opens it and withdraws a green apple. A hiss fills the theater.)

MARY

How do you know it’ll last? How do you know you’ll be remembered?

(MARY plunges both palms into her own pile, each hand clutching a large metal bolt upon its return. The sound of electricity sizzling, then a massive thunderclap.)

DEBORAH

How you do you know you’ll be remembered at all?

(THE CREATURE lumbers onstage, carrying MARY's copy of Paradise Lost. He situates himself right on the edge of the stage between the two women and begins to read it.

DEBORAH looks at the apple in her hand, smiles, and takes a big, loud crunch. Blackout.)

END OF PLAY.