

Mary Shelley (1797-1851)
by Helen Doyle

Famous for both her parentage and her marriage, Mary Shelley was also a significant creative artist, writing five novels, including the enduring classic *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), and a substantial amount of non-fiction. The rising interest over the last half a century in women's writing has led to a continuing re-evaluation of Mary Shelley, not just as the daughter of famous radicals and wife of one of the most famous Romantic poets, but as a complex and significant figure in her own right, whose life and writings illustrate the complexities and difficulties for women of combining domestic with creative work; intellectual and social independence with the practical demands of survival; and radical ideals with the increasingly conservative cultural and publishing climate of the first half of the nineteenth century.

Mary was born in London in August 1797, the daughter of [Mary Wollstonecraft biography](#) > **Mary Wollstonecraft** and William Godwin. Both of her parents were radical thinkers, novelists and polemicists of enduring significance. Mary's early life was marked by tragedy, poverty and uncertainty. Her mother died when she was ten days old, leaving Mary and her half-sister Fanny Imlay in the care of Godwin and a circle of family friends. When Mary was four her father remarried a widow, Mary Jane Clairmont, who had two children of her own, Charles and Jane (later Claire). The couple's son William was born in 1803. The domestic atmosphere in the Godwin household was often strained. Mary Jane displayed a marked favouritism towards her own children and the family's life was generally precarious, with money in perennially short supply. Nevertheless, even as a child Mary was comforted and sustained by books - her father had an extensive library and Mary Jane later opened a children's bookshop and publishing firm. Mary was to re-read and draw on both Godwin's and in particular her mother's writings for the rest of her life. As Mary explains in her Introduction to *Frankenstein*:

It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in my life have thought of writing. As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime, during the hours given me for recreation, was to 'write stories'.

In 1814, aged sixteen, Mary met the twenty-one-year-old poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was initially an admirer and disciple of her father. After a few weeks' courtship, Mary and Shelley eloped to France, accompanied - as they were to be throughout their relationship - by her stepsister Claire Clairmont. By the time they eloped, Mary was already pregnant by Shelley, a situation rendered even more scandalous by Shelley's desertion of his first wife, Harriet, who was also pregnant. Godwin refused to communicate with his daughter for a period of over two years.

The eight years of the Shelleys' life together were spent on the move, with spells in England, France, Italy and elsewhere, often moving home several times a year. In addition to their complex personal and family arrangements, the Shelleys both worked hard, reading widely and writing assiduously. They mixed with a number of the most significant cultural figures of the times, in particular Lord Byron.

For all the cherished Romantic myths around the Byron/Shelley group, the practical reality of life for Mary and the children was one of poverty, exacerbated by the constant disruptions of Shelley's desire for a peripatetic lifestyle. Of her five children with Shelley, only her last, Percy Florence, was to survive into adulthood. Her first child, Clara, born in February 1815, was premature and died aged two weeks. Her second child, William, died in Italy aged three, her third child, also called Clara, died in 1818 at just over a year old. The couple's early years together were also marred by their severe debts, the demands of zealous creditors and the emotional pressures of Shelley's unconventional attitudes to marital fidelity. Shelley had affairs with several women while married to Mary, including Claire Clairmont, and encouraged his unwilling wife to have affairs with various men and women.

However, their life together brought certain intellectual and creative compensations. As Mary wrote (with customary modesty and deference to her husband's talents) in her introduction to the revised edition of *Frankenstein*, her life with Shelley was a lesson in 'study, in the way of reading' which allowed her to 'improve her ideas in communication with his far more cultivated mind.'

It was during this period, and at only eighteen years of age, that Mary's first and most famous work, *Frankenstein*, was famously composed as a result of a ghost story competition during a long, wet summer in Geneva. (This celebrated event, a central plank of the Shelley/Byron myth was one carefully cultivated and publicised by Mary herself). The central fable depicts the tragedy of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, dangerously obsessed with the possibility of creating artificial life and the grotesque 'monster' or creature he puts together from discarded human body-parts and then rejects for its ugliness and inhumanity. The creature, unwanted, untutored in normal human behaviour and finally driven by rejection to a murderous revenge on Frankenstein and his family, is a far more poignant and nuanced creation than the violent, mindless monster of the public imagination. The climax to the story has an appropriately dramatic and Gothic/Romantic backdrop as Frankenstein and his creature, interchangeably the pursuer and the pursued, move across the ice-fields of the North Pole to a climax of murder and suicide. In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley succeeded not only in creating an enduring myth but also in expressing the dangers of driving scientific activity to its limits without considering the possible human consequences. Indeed, it is in this context that the use of the term 'Frankenstein' to describe controversial scientific endeavours, such as genetic modification and cloning, is in continual use to this day.

Another novel, *Matilda*, was written during this period, although it remained unpublished until the late 1950s. The novel explores a troubled father-daughter relationship that draws on Mary's difficult relationship with Godwin. Her third began, *Valperga*, is a historical romance set in fourteenth-century Florence.

After Shelley's death by drowning aged twenty-nine in 1822, the twenty-four-year-old Mary returned to England with her remaining child, Percy Florence. For the rest of her life, her focus appears to have been her son. Despite Shelley's having been the heir to a rich baronetcy, with Percy Florence in turn becoming heir in 1826 following the death of

his Percy Bysshe's elder half-brother Charles, money continued to be a constant problem. Mary was by now earning her living as an early Victorian woman of letters. Although she was an industrious and conscientious worker and a generous supporter of friends and acquaintances in need, her financial circumstances were always precarious, to the extent that she occasionally hovered on the brink of destitution.

Mary's financial problems were in large part due to the awkward and ungracious behaviour of Shelley's father, Sir Timothy Shelley, who banned Mary - on pain of losing the income he provided for Percy Florence - from publishing any of Shelley's poetry or accompanying accounts of his life during Sir Timothy's own lifetime. Mary managed to circumvent these strictures in the 1830s by appending extensive biographical notes to an independent edition of Shelley's collected poems. This achievement, according to her own early biographer, Muriel Spark, ensured Mary's status as a pioneer of literary biography.[1]

Mary was to write four more novels between 1826 and 1837 and produce two major sets of biographical studies of European scientists for the *Cabinet Cyclopaedia*. The most significant of her later novels, *The Last Man* (1826), is set in the year 2073 and concerns the impact of a killer plague which wipes out the human race. Brian Aldiss champions both this later novel and *Frankenstein* as substantial milestones in the creation and definition of the genre of science fiction,[2] while others have read the novel as an exploration of the male bias of Romantic ideology.[3] *Perkin Warbeck* (1830), a historical novel about a claimant to the throne, is an anti-monarchical work, of which Godwin much approved, while her third novel from this period, *Lodore* (1835), features a Byronic hero who flees to America with his daughter after a duel and finally dies in another duel which facilitates the reunion of the daughter and her abandoned mother. The eponymous hero of Mary's final novel, *Falkner* (1837) leaves his wife when he goes to India for a number of years. Upon his return, he finds that his wife has married another man, but forces her to return to him. After her death, the hero is redeemed from guilt by adopting an orphaned girl.[4]

As Miranda Seymour's meticulous and sympathetic reconstruction of Mary's life after Shelley's death reveals, despite her quiet lifestyle and the anxious bourgeois conformity of the manner in which she raised her son, Mary's scandalous past meant that she never became entirely assimilated into the middle-class mainstream.[5] She also bravely maintained some radical friendships with the revolutionary Frances Wright and Caroline Norton. However, her depressive tendencies meant that slights and social rejections registered more keenly with her than the friendships of the many who were happy to accept this courageous and gifted woman on her own terms. Indeed, in the 1840s, she was subjected to two particularly cruel blackmail attempts. In 1845 an itinerant Italian political rebel, whom Mary had initially supported both emotionally and financially, attempted to extort money from her on the basis of some typically - but ill-advisedly - affectionate letters she had written to him. A year later, Thomas Medwin, an old friend of Shelleys, threatened her with the publication of a life of Shelley that would expose some of the obfuscations and distortions Shelley's friends and admirers had considered

necessary to win public recognition for the poet in an increasingly pious and judgemental culture.

Mary's later years were increasingly marked by depression, exacerbated in the last few years of her life by the effects of an undiagnosed brain tumour. She died in 1852 at the home of her son and his wife.

Mary's dramatic and often difficult life illustrates the practical realities behind the mythical careers and lifestyles of the radical political thinkers of the tumultuous 1790s and their cultural successors, the Romantic poets. Mary's was a life of bereavement, constant moves, ill health and financial difficulty. As a survivor into the Victorian age, it fell to Mary to negotiate the complicated course between her desire to protect and disseminate Shelley's creative legacy and the pragmatic need to protect and educate her only surviving child. Now, however, Mary Shelley has been re-instated and re-evaluated as a creative artist, thinker and intellectual in her own right, the begetter, in *Frankenstein*, of one of the most famous and enduring creations in world fiction.

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1 Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley, Child of Light* (London: Constable, 1988).

2 Brian Aldiss, *Introduction to The Last Man* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985).

3 See, for example, Julie K. Schuetz, 'Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*: Monstrous Worlds, Domestic Communities, and Masculine Romantic Ideology', *Prometheus Unplugged: Graduate Student Conference on Romanticism*, Emory University (Atlanta, GA), April 1996.

4 The Orlando Project *Electronic History of Women's Writing in the British Isles*

5 Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (London: John Murray, 2000).