

# Mary Shelley


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**Mary W. Shelley**




Mary Shelley, portrait by Richard Rothwell (1840)

**Born:** 30 August 1797

 London, England

**Died:** 1 February 1851

 Bournemouth, England

**Occupation:** Novelist

**Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley** (30 August 1797 – 1 February 1851) was an English romantic/gothic novelist and the author of *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. She was married to the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

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## Biography

**Mary Shelley** was born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin in Somers Town, in London, in 1797. She was the second daughter of famed feminist, educator and writer Mary Wollstonecraft. Her

father was the equally famous anarchist philosopher, novelist, journalist, and atheist dissenter, William Godwin. Her mother died ten days after Mary was born as a result of puerperal fever.<sup>[1]</sup>

Her father was left with the responsibility of safeguarding Mary and her older half-sister, Fanny Imlay. He hired a housekeeper and governess, Louisa Jones, to look after the house and care for the children. Louisa's letters reveal that she was devoted to the girls, and that Mary's early years were extremely happy ones. Unfortunately for Mary, Louisa fell in love with one of Godwin's more wild and irresponsible disciples, and Godwin did not approve of the relationship, cutting off all contact between her and his daughters. Mary was three years old when Louisa left.

Godwin, however, had long realized that he could not raise his daughters by himself, and had been actively looking for a second wife. After courting a number of women, he met Mary Jane Clairmont, a widow with two young children. He soon fell in love with her and married her, although his friends did not approve of the match. Mary Jane Clairmont was a difficult woman with a quick temper and a sharp tongue, and she quarrelled frequently with

her husband. She did not get on well with her step-daughters, especially Mary whose attachment to Godwin she resented. She also disliked the amount of attention that Mary, as the daughter of the two most famous radicals of the time, received from visitors to the Godwin household. Although she took care of Mary's physical needs, ensuring that she was fed and clothed, and nursing her when she was ill, she neglected her spiritual and mental ones. She made Mary do many of the household chores, invaded her privacy, and restricted her access to her father. She also ensured that her own daughter, Jane Clairmont (better known as Claire Clairmont), received more education than Mary Godwin, as she contrived to send her to boarding school.

Nonetheless, despite her stepmother's efforts, Mary received an excellent education, which was unusual for girls at the time. She never went to school, but she was taught to read and write by Louisa Jones, and then educated in a broad range of subjects by her father who gave her free access to his extensive library. In particular, she was encouraged to write stories, and one of these early works "Mounseer Nongtongpaw" was published by the Godwin Company's Juvenile Library when she was only eleven. "Mounseer Nongtongpaw" was a thirty-nine stanza expansion of Charles

Dibdin's five-stanza song of the same name. Written in iambic tetrameter it tells of John Bull's trip to Paris where all of his questions about the ownership of everything he sees meet with the same response: *Je vous n'entends pas* ("I don't understand you"). He takes this phrase as referring to a Monsieur Nongtongpaw, whose wealth and possessions he greatly envies. At the same time, Godwin allowed her to listen to the conversations he had with many of the leading intellectuals and poets of the day.

By 1812, the animosity between Mary and her step-mother had grown to such an extent that William Godwin sent her to board with an acquaintance, William Baxter, who lived in Dundee, Scotland. Mary's stay with the Baxter family had a profound effect on her: they provided her with a model of the type of closely-knit, loving family to which she would aspire for the rest of her life. Moreover, in the 1831 Preface to *Frankenstein*, she claims that this period of life led to her development as a writer: "I lived principally in the country as a girl, and passed a considerable time in Scotland. I made occasional visits to the more picturesque parts; but my habitual residence was on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee. Blank and dreary on

retrospection I call them; they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom, and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy. I wrote then – but in a most common-place style. It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered. I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age, than my own sensations." [2]

## **Shelley**

On a visit home in 1812, she met Percy Bysshe Shelley, a political radical and free-thinker like her father, when Percy and his first wife Harriet visited Godwin's home and bookshop in London. By 1814, Percy Shelley was paying frequent visits to Godwin, and had struck up a friendship with his daughter, Mary. He sought in her the commonality

of interests and the intellectual companionship that was missing in his marriage to Harriet. Initially, Percy's relationship with his wife was a happy one, as she made an effort to share in his studies and his intellectual pursuits. After their daughter Eliza Ianthe Shelley was born, however, Harriet gave up on their intellectual life completely, and did not pay as much attention to Percy's interests. Shelley was not pleased with this change; as the eldest son of a wealthy baronet with a mother and four younger sisters who adored him, he was accustomed to being the centre of attention for the women in his life. Consequently, Percy looked for that companionship and sympathy elsewhere, and found it in Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. As the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, she was a revolutionary, a poet, an intellectual; all qualities that Percy felt were lacking in his wife.

Mary also had her reasons for being attracted to Percy. By that time, Percy had become a central figure in the Godwin household. William Godwin was dependent upon him not only for intellectual stimulation and emotional sympathy, but also for financial support as Percy was giving him massive amounts of money in order to alleviate his poverty. As a result, the Godwin family had developed an

obsession with him; when Mary came home in 1814, her father and sisters spoke about little else apart from Percy, and her stepmother repeatedly wrote about how beautifully dressed but proud and unsociable Harriet was. So, when Mary met Percy two years after their brief encounter in 1812, it is little wonder that she would have been fascinated by and attracted to him. She also saw in him her ideal man: a young, passionate, deeply-committed poet who shared her love for her father.



St Pancras Old Church in 1815. The River Fleet has since been covered over.

Inevitably, Mary and Percy began a romantic and sexual relationship with each other. Mary had the



habit of visiting St Pancras Churchyard where her mother was buried and reading Wollstonecraft's works, and Percy started accompanying her on these walks. Although Jane chaperoned them, they would have her walk some distance away from them, claiming that they wished to speak about philosophical matters. On 26 June, they officially declared their love for each other.

Unfortunately for them, William Godwin discovered their relationship, and forbade them from seeing each other again. His principled opposition to marriage and support of free love did not extend to his own daughter. Mary initially tried to do as her father wished, but, after Percy threatened to commit suicide if he could not be with her, she realised that she needed to pursue their relationship.

As a result, on 18 July 1814 at 5:00 in the morning, Mary and Percy eloped to France, with Mary's stepsister, Jane Clairmont, in tow. The young couple could not get married, however, because Percy was still legally wed to Harriet. This was Percy's second elopement, as he had also eloped with Harriet three years before. Upon their return several weeks later, the young couple were dismayed to find that Godwin refused to see them.

He did not talk to Mary for three and a half years.

Mary consoled herself with her studies and with Percy, who set himself up in the roles of tutor and mentor as well as lover to the young woman. He drew up a programme of study in literature and languages that Mary followed diligently throughout their first few years together. Percy, too, was more than satisfied with his new partner during this period. He exulted that Mary was "one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy," and he enjoyed discussing literary and political issues with her.

Nonetheless, the couple's life together was not idyllic. Percy's father, Sir Timothy Shelley, disapproved of his son's abandonment of his pregnant wife and his relationship with Mary Shelley, and cut off his son's allowance as a result. By that time, Percy was deeply in debt as a result of his own profligate spending habits and the generous loans that he had made to William Godwin among other individuals. He spent several months on the run from his creditors and apart from Mary.

At the same time, Mary was beginning to realise that Percy's all-consuming focus on the intellectual

and abstract meant that he tended to be narcissistic and self-centred, and that he was frequently unaware of or indifferent to the impact of his actions and demands on the people around him.

For instance, as part of his commitment to free love, Percy Shelley attempted to set up a radical community of friends who would share everything in common, including sexual partners. Around the central relationship between himself and Mary, he tried to set up secondary sexual relationships between himself and Claire Clairmont, and Mary and his best friend Thomas Hogg. Mary was distressed by this turn of events, as she had hoped that Percy would provide her with the stable family and sense of belonging that she had always desired. Moreover, although Mary was fond of Thomas Hogg as a friend and companion and reciprocated his attentions, she was not sexually attracted to him, and refused to sleep with him. Her pregnancy with her first child may have influenced her decision not to engage in a sexual relationship with another man as well. Her relationship with her step-sister Claire had also deteriorated by that point, and she wanted Percy to send her away from their household, but he refused to compromise his vision of how his community should be organised.

Even more devastating for Mary, however, were the events surrounding the birth and death of their first child, Clara, in February 1815. Born two months prematurely, Clara was a sickly child and was not expected to live. Nonetheless, Percy left Mary to nurse the child on her own and to entertain Thomas Hogg, while he went on walks and errands with Claire, and consulted the doctor for his own weak heart. When the child died early in March, Mary fell into a deep depression, yet Percy was again indifferent to her and spent more time with Claire than his primary partner.

Mary bore the couple's second child on 24 January 1816, a boy whom the couple called William after her father. This time, the pregnancy went smoothly, and William grew to become a favourite of the household, earning the nickname "Lovewill" for his beauty and his charm. His father took a greater interest in him than he had in Clara, although scholars like Anne K. Mellor have argued that it was largely a narcissistic one as Percy hoped to raise the child in his own image.

### **Trip to Switzerland and *Frankenstein***

In May 1816, the couple and their son travelled to

Lake Geneva in the company of Claire Clairmont. Their plan was to spend the summer near the famous and scandalous poet Lord Byron, whose recent affair with Claire had left her pregnant.

From a literary perspective, it was a productive and successful summer. Percy began work on "Hymn To Intellectual Beauty" and "Mont Blanc"; Mary, in the meantime, was inspired to write an enduring masterpiece of her own.

Forced to stay indoors one evening because of cold and rainy weather (see "Year Without a Summer"), the group of young writers and intellectuals, enthralled by the ghost stories from the book *Fantasmagoriana*, decided to have a ghost-story writing contest. Byron and Percy Shelley abandoned the project relatively soon, with Byron publishing his fragment at the end of *Mazeppa*. Byron's physician Dr. John Polidori's contribution remains uncertain; he identifies *The Modern Oedipus* as the work in question in the introduction to the novel, but, in her preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary claims that he had a terrible idea about a skull-headed lady who was punished for peeping through keyholes. Mary herself had no inspiration for a story, which was a matter of great concern to her. However, Luigi Galvani's report of

his 1783 investigations in animating frog legs with electricity were mentioned specifically by her as part of the reading list that summer in Switzerland. One night, perhaps attributable to Galvani's report, Mary had a *waking dream*; she recounted the episode in this way: "My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie... I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together—I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion... What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow."<sup>[3]</sup> This nightmare served as the basis for the novel that she entitled *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818).<sup>[4]</sup>

## **Return to England**

Returning to England in September 1816, Mary and Percy were stunned by two family suicides in quick succession. On 9 October 1816, Mary's older half-sister, Fanny Imlay, left the Godwin home and took her own life at a distant inn. On 10 December,

Percy's first wife, Harriet, drowned herself in London's Hyde Park. Discarded and pregnant, Claire had not welcomed Percy's invitation to join Mary and himself in their new household.

On 30 December 1816, shortly after Harriet's death, Percy and Mary were married at St Mildred's Church in London, now with Godwin's blessing. Their attempts to gain custody of Percy's two children by Harriet failed, but their writing careers enjoyed more success when, in the spring of 1817, Mary finished *Frankenstein*.

Over the following years, Mary's household grew to include her own children by Percy, occasional friends, and Claire's daughter, Allegra Byron, by Byron. Shelley moved his menage from place to place first in England and then in Italy. Mary suffered the death of her infant daughter Clara outside Venice, after which her young son Will died too, in Rome, as Percy moved the household yet again. By now Mary had resigned herself to her husband's self-centred restlessness and his romantic enthusiasms for other women. The birth of her only surviving child, Percy Florence Shelley, consoled her somewhat for her losses.

Eventually the group settled in Pisa. For the

summer of 1822, they moved to Lerici, a fishing village close to La Spezia in Italy, but it was an ill-fated choice. It was here that Claire learned of her daughter's death at the Italian convent to which Byron had sent her, and that Mary almost died of a miscarriage, being saved only by Percy's quick thinking. And it was from there, in July 1822, that Percy sailed away up the coast to Livorno, to meet Leigh Hunt, who had just arrived from England. Caught in a storm on his return, Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned at sea on 8 July 1822, aged 29, along with his friend Edward Williams and a young boat attendant. Percy left his last long poem, a shadowy work called *The Triumph Of Life*, unfinished. Mary also had another source for her story writing because of the time she spent in Switzerland. She had the idea of Frankenstein living there and there is a very famous scene in *Frankenstein* set on Mount Chamonix where Frankenstein meets the creature and talks to him for the first time; the time Shelley spent in Geneva must have inspired her.

## **Later life**

Mary was tireless in promoting her late husband's works, including editing and annotating



unpublished material. Despite their troubled later life together, she revered her late husband's memory and helped build his reputation as one of the major poets of the English Romantic period. But she also found occasions to write a few more novels, including *Valperga*; *The Life and Adventures of Castruccio*, *Prince of Lucca*, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, *Lodore*, and *Falkner*. Twentieth-century critics have said these works do not begin to approach the power and fame of *Frankenstein*; *The Last Man*, a pioneering science-fiction novel of the human apocalypse in the distant future, is, however, sometimes considered her best work, as is *Mathilda*, a novella published posthumously, in the 1950s. It is perhaps her most controversial work since it involves the taboo subject of incest. Godwin, Shelley's father, refused to publish the work, probably because of its subject matter and its obvious autobiographical undertones.

On 1 February 1851, Mary Shelley died at the age of 53 from a brain tumour. She is buried in St. Peter's Church, Bournemouth, Dorset, England.

## Writings

- *Mounseer Nongtongpaw; or, The Discoveries of John Bull in a Trip to Paris*, Juvenile Library, 1808
- *History of Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland, with Letters Descriptive of a Sail round the Lake of Geneva, and of the Glaciers of Chamouni*, with contributions by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Hookham, **1817**
- *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (novel), three volumes, Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818, revised edition, one volume, Colburn & Bentley, 1831, two volumes, Carey, Lea, & Blanchard, 1833
- *Mathilda* (1819 novel), edited by Elizabeth Nitchie, University of North Carolina Press, 1959
- *Valperga; or The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (novel), three volumes, Whittaker, 1823.
- Editor of Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Hunt, 1824
- *The Last Man* (novel), three volumes, Colburn, 1826, two volumes, Carey, Lea, & Blanchard, 1833
- *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (novel), three volumes, Colburn & Bentley, 1830, two volumes, Carey, Lea, & Blanchard,

1834

- *Lodore* (novel), three volumes, Bentley, 1835, one volume, Wallis & Newell, 1835
- *Falkner* (novel) three volumes, Saunders & Otley, 1837, one volume, Harper & Brothers, 1837
- Editor of P. B. Shelley, *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, four volumes, Moxon, 1839
- *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, two volumes, Moxon, 1844
- *The Choice: A Poem on Shelley's Death*, edited by H. Buxton Forman, [London], 1876
- *The Mortal Immortal* (short story), Mossant, Vallon, 1910
- *Proserpine and Midas: Two Unpublished Mythological Dramas*, edited by A. Koszul, Milford, 1922
- Contributor to Volumes 86-88 and 102-103 in *The Cabinet of Biography*, Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopedia, 1835-1839
- Contributor of stories, reviews, and essays for *London Magazine*, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Examiner*, and *Westminster Review*
- Contributor of stories to an annual gift book, *The Keepsake*, 1828-1838
- Collections of Mary Shelley's works are

housed in *Lord Abinger's Shelley Collection* on deposit at the Bodleian Library, the New York Public Library, the Huntington Library, the British Library, and in the John Murray Collection

- Excluding many collections, such as Mary and Shelley's journals and letters
- *The Bride of Modern Italy* (?)
- *The Dream* (?)
- *Ferdinando Eboli* (?)
- *The Invisible Girl* (?)
- *Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman* (1826)
- *The Sisters of Albano* (?)
- *The Transformation* (?)

## Film

The genesis of the *Frankenstein* story in 1816 has been a popular subject for filmmakers and appears in at least four films:

- *Gothic* (Ken Russell, 1986); Natasha Richardson plays Mary Shelley
- *Haunted Summer* (Ivan Passer, 1988); Alice Krige plays Mary Shelley
- *Rowing With the Wind* (Gonzalo Suárez, 1988); Lizzy McInnerny plays Mary Shelley

- *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935); Elsa Lanchester plays Mary Shelley
- The Arthur (cartoon) series had one episode depicting a reenactment of the night the novel was created, titled "Ferkenstein's Monster."
- In *Frankenstein Unbound*, a 21st century time traveller encounters both Frankenstein and the Shelleys
- *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973) Made for TV Film
- *Mary Shelley's The Last Man* (2007) The first feature film adaptation of Mary Shelley's 21st century pandemic
- *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, which is Kenneth Branagh's direct adaptation of the story starring himself, Robert De Niro & Helena Bonham Carter.

In addition to the many film versions of *Frankenstein*, Ron Ford included a loose adaptation of Shelley's short story, "Transformation" in his low budget film, *Dead Time Tales*.

## References

1. ^ Is childbed fever history?.

2. ^ Frankenstein.
3. ^ Frankenstein.
4. ^ Frankenstein.

## Further reading

- *Lives of the Great Romantics 3. Mary Shelley*, vol.3, ed. Betty T. Bennett (Pickering and Chatto, London, 1999)
- Martin Garrett, *A Mary Shelley Chronology* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, and St Martin's Press, New York, 2002)
- Martin Garrett, *Mary Shelley* (British Library: London, 2002)
- William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: the Biography of a Family* (Faber and Faber, London, 1989)
- Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (John Murray, London, 2000)
- Emily W. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1989)

## External links

- Works by Mary Shelley at Project Gutenberg
- Free audiobook of *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* from LibriVox (without

- prefaces and edition information)
- Literary Encyclopedia biography
- Biography
- Chapter on Shelley from *Traits of Character: Being Twenty-five Years' Literary and Personal Recollections* by Eliza Rennie, a contemporary writer and friend
- Brandeis University article on Mary's life and work
- The first Full English translation of *Fantasmagoriana* (Tales of The Dead)
- 'Mary Shelley's lost children's story found' Article about *Maurice, or the Fisher's Cot*, a newly discovered story by Mary Shelley

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