

## Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley

An essay by  
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Fireballs fractured the summer sky; bolts of lightning streaked and terrified from the heavens. Suddenly a comet ascended over London. It would reign over a tranquil earth for 11 nights. An expectant mother viewed it with wonder. She called it her child's star.

Mary Wollstonecraft, a radical feminist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, died 11 days after Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was born on August 30, 1797. Daughter of the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and philosopher William Godwin, young Mary would be nurtured with stories of "her" star. Her superior parentage and her ascending star bestowed the certainty of a glorious fate. After all, she was the prodigy of the "most extraordinary pair in existence."

While other young girls were forced to drink vinegar to acquire a feminine pallor, while they spent hours strapped to a backboard via an iron collar in order to cultivate an "elegant" figure, while they practiced the art of fainting so as to appear sufficiently delicate, young Mary ran free outdoors. She dined with inventors, painters, parachute jumpers, actors, and authors including the likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Reading for hours under the weeping willows by her mother's tomb at St. Pancras, Mary was certain that her mother's spirit watched over her. She read and reread her mother's revolutionary feminist philosophy, a philosophy which advised her to defy the world and claim the freedoms denied to her sex, freedoms such as the right to an education and the right to acknowledgement of her sexuality. It was common knowledge that while men were slaves to their sexual desires, all good women were passionless creatures.

"Nursed and fed with a love of glory," Mary would always aspire to greatness. A published author at the age of 10, she would continue a daily habit of study and writing throughout her life, often reading as much as 16 hours a day. Liberal though he was, Godwin did not quite agree with Wollstonecraft, that "the mind has no sex." Mary was denied the male privilege of an early study of Latin and Greek. No university would admit this scholar. She would forever regard the male sex with self-denigrating awe and respect for their superior knowledge.

Yet, she was prepared for a life of intellectual and physical freedom—in a world which would repeatedly rebuke and punish her for taking such liberties. The intellectual greats of her day proclaimed that women must: "Seek to be good, but aim not to be great." A woman's life must be confined to "the duties of a daughter, sister, a wife, and a mother."

Clearly young Mary was destined to become an aberration. At the graveside of Wollstonecraft, Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley paused in their fervent metaphysical discussions to declare their undying, passionate love. Shelley was unhappily married; the love-struck poet feverishly proclaimed his desperation for a "partner" who was his intellectual equal. As the law did not permit divorce, the couple defied the world and eloped.

Since Mary was an unwed mother at 16, her "liberal" father, whom Mary worshiped, renounced and repulsed her. Family and friends who had cherished her coldly disowned her. She was an outcast.

The summer of 1816 found Mary, with the poet and her stepsister, at Lake Geneva, in the company of the infamous Lord Byron. A local innkeeper rented telescopes to patrons, so they might glimpse the scandalous party; tablecloths on Byron's balcony were perceived as petticoats. The rumor spread that the poet shared the daughters of Godwin in a "League of Incest."

Inside the famous residence, oblivious to the world, the parties engaged in all-night metaphysical discussions. Gathered around the fire, as lightning streaked and thunder screamed across the heavens, the lofty Byron made his famous suggestion that each write a ghost story.

As Mary wrote, her sisters in ignominy—Fanny Imlay, the illegitimate daughter of Wollstonecraft, and Harriet, the pregnant wife of Shelley—committed the ultimate act of social protest: they drowned themselves in the river.

The anonymous publication of *Frankenstein* was heralded both as the work of genius, and as the “disgusting” ravings of a “madman.” That it was the work of a 19-year-old female was to astound and confound. She was acknowledged to have a “masculine understanding.”

Mary Shelley’s tragedies did not stop with the publication of *Frankenstein*, which would leap to the status of classic and make its author a living legend. By the time Mary was 26, Shelley, Byron, and all but one of her babies had gone to an early grave. Like the hero of her futuristic novel, *The Last Man*, Mary was the “last relic of a beloved race.” Critics scathingly implored her to write *The Last Woman* or better still *The Last Pigtail*.

At 24, Mary Shelley was widowed and left with a child to support. Poverty and stigma did their utmost to rob her of her dangerous and “unnatural” ambition for greatness. Yet for most of her life, she clung to her faith in her star. Scrupulously editing Shelley’s unpublished, barely decipherable works, she elevated him to the status of demigod.

As Shelley ascended to the lofty sphere of tragic, Romantic poet, the legend of the author of *Frankenstein* receded into his shadow. Until the emergence of Women’s Studies as an academic discipline in the 1970s, studies of *Frankenstein* focused not on the life, art, and thoughts of the author—but on those of her husband. The woman whose entire life was a challenge to conventionality was defamed as a “slave to conventionality.” Accusations which would have evoked unrestrained convulsions of laughter in her day have since been accepted. Labeled as devoid of education and genius, her “unwomanly” romance, *Frankenstein*, has been explained as a product of her association with the genius of Shelley. Her reverent family would respond by withholding her letters and journals from the public until the mid-1900s.

The author of *Frankenstein* was buried, bereft of ceremony, in a common grave placed between the graves of her parents. The inscription fixed upon her tombstone is, like *Frankenstein*, a poignant social commentary. Her parents’ inscriptions proudly proclaim them to be the immortal authors of their famous works. Mary’s tomb reads simply:

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley  
Daughter of William and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin  
and Widow of the late Percy Bysshe Shelley