

SHELLEY'S WOMEN

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The circumstances in which the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley became involved in a sexual relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin were nothing if not complicated, not to say dramatic. Mary was the daughter of the pioneering feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, and the anarchist philosopher William Godwin, who had abandoned his lifelong virulent opposition to the institution of marriage having fallen in love with Wollstonecraft. Mary Wollstonecraft had died a few days after giving birth to her daughter, leaving the widower Godwin to find a new wife as quickly as possible to help him bring up his two children. In addition to Mary, Wollstonecraft left behind her other daughter Fanny by the American adventurer Gilbert Imlay, who had deserted Wollstonecraft by the time she met Godwin. The two girls thus shared a mother but had different fathers, and this situation was greatly complicated once Godwin had married for a second time to a Mrs Clairmont (not her real name), who herself brought into the household two children of her own, Claire and Charles, who themselves shared a mother but had different fathers. On top of that, Godwin had a son, William, by his second wife, meaning that the household consisted of five children, none of whom shared the same two parents.

Shelley and Mary fell violently in love; Shelley was especially attracted to Mary because of her parentage, which combined two of his established intellectual heroes, but the sexual and intellectual bond between the two young lovers was manifestly very powerful. The Godwin household, in spite of its supposed radical credentials, was deeply shocked when the sixteen-year-old Mary eloped to the continent with twenty-one-year-old Shelley in July 1814.

In our own age of fake news and the '#metoo' generation, the story of Shelley's relationships with women offers a challenging case, not the least because of the highly controversial nature of his views, which made him, outside a small circle of private friends, a vilified public presence for his contemporaries. Shelley was an atheist some of whose published poetry was condemned as explicitly blasphemous. In political terms he was by the standards of the age an extreme radical, believing not just in universal male suffrage, but in the equal political rights of women, including the vote. In his views on sexual relations he had nothing of Byron's libertinism and random promiscuity, but he vigorously espoused the notion of honesty in sexual and love relations: if you fell in love with someone you had a moral duty to declare that love, and conversely if you fell out of love, you

had a similar duty to inform your partner. Not to do so he regarded as an unacceptable dishonesty in respect both of oneself and towards the other. This was a commitment that would lead to terrible trouble in his personal life. It also drove him to champion incest, where that was a relationship born of love, and it had the further implication that the institution of marriage was rejected. All of these commitments were explicitly articulated and promoted through his published writings, and the earlier part of his creative career in particular was distinguished by a certain reckless fearlessness in saying what he believed.

During his own life, and for ever afterwards, Shelley's cultural image has distorted the complicated reality. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin first declared her love for Shelley by offering herself to him in a gesture which it is reasonable to assume involved a first consummation of their love on the stone memorial marking her mother's grave in Old St Pancras Churchyard. Two hundred and four years later, in 2018, there was across Europe and in America widespread celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the first publication of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. The celebrations justly marked that extraordinary cultural phenomenon of the Frankenstein myth, first conceived by Mary in Geneva in 1816 when she was just eighteen years old. They also, however,

served to add new layers to the equally durable cultural myths which have always obscured a clear view of what Shelley was actually like. For example, a film about Mary Shelley released in 2018 by the director Haifaa Al-Mansour depicted Shelley as a domineering bully, egomaniac and rake who had effectively raped Mary on the grave of her mother. Such behaviour is utterly at odds with the facts about Shelley's life and lifestyle, which in addition to his various notorieties deriving from his beliefs also included vegetarianism, a complete avoidance of alcohol and other stimulants, and an astonishingly intense intellectual life involving constant reading and study in literature, history, philosophy, science, and the classics, based on his complete fluency in Greek and Latin, French and Italian, and later also Spanish and German.

It has always been difficult, in Browning's famous phrase, to 'see Shelley plain'. There are no existing portraits which those who knew him considered passable likenesses. The statue now at University College Oxford (the College which expelled him for atheism after one term in 1811) by Onslow Ford depicts a physically perfect drowned Shelley which stands in ghastly contrast with the account by Edward Trelawny of Shelley's actual fish-eaten drowned corpse. He was sketched or painted only a couple of times while alive, always by amateurs and never convincingly, yet these images have passed down to the present day as the received visual presence of the poet. One influential Victorian edition even adapted Leonardo's Head of Christ in its frontispiece and passed it off as a lifelike image.

Let us return to the elopement of Shelley and Mary in 1814. This episode was so especially devastating for all involved because at the time, Shelley was already married. Indeed not only was he married, he had a one-year-old daughter, and his wife was four months pregnant with a second child. He had eloped just after his expulsion from Oxford in 1811 with Harriet Westbrook, a pretty sixteen-year-old with whom Shelley became involved in what seems to have been an utterly misguided and immature project to 'save' and 'cultivate' her. He was probably also driven 'on the rebound' from an earlier relationship with his cousin Harriet Grove, who had been forbidden to see Shelley because of his atheism. It has plausibly been argued that this marriage was already breaking down before the fateful meeting with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. Nevertheless it is difficult to see this behaviour as anything other than abominable, and that was most certainly how it was

seen by contemporaries. Shelley even proposed to Harriet in all seriousness that even though his love for her was over, she was still welcome to join him with Mary on their elopement, as a friend (Mary's half-sister Claire, who was herself to have strong and sometimes reciprocated feelings for Shelley, came along as well). Yet one has also to accept that Shelley was motivated by ideals, however impractical, and however blind to their dreadful human consequences. He was no rake, but his destructive idealism puts us in mind of Victor Frankenstein's reckless pursuit of intellectual goals without consideration of their consequences.

The elopement set in train a series of personal disasters which haunted Shelley for the rest of his short life. Shelley and Mary travelled to Geneva in the Summer of 1816 to effect a reconciliation between Claire and Lord Byron, by whom she had become pregnant in a deliberate attempt to emulate her half-sister's affair with a poet. On their return, they learned of two successive tragedies, both attributable to Shelley's behaviour. In October 1816 Fanny Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft's first daughter by Gilbert Imlay, committed suicide in Swansea. She had been prone to depression, and felt unwanted and unloved in the Godwin household, but she also probably had an unrequited love for Shelley which drove her to despair. Then in December, came the news that the body of Shelley's first wife Harriet had been found drowned in the Serpentine in London. It seems she had fallen on very hard times after Shelley's desertion of her, and may even have descended to prostitution, or rather to life as a kept woman.

Other tragedies dogged the last five years of Shelley's life, before he drowned in Italy at the age of twenty-nine. Two of his three children by Mary died in infancy. Claire's daughter by Byron died in a convent in Ravenna. The loss of her children drove Mary and Shelley apart, and after Shelley's sudden death Mary never forgave herself for what all their circle described as her coldness towards him in the final years.

How great then should we judge him? I find it hard to say. What can we ever certainly know of the distant past; what, that is, with sufficient certainty to make confident moral judgement? It is moreover very dangerous to judge the past by the values of the present: consider the paradox of trying to conduct oneself in the present in the light of the values of the future. And, finally, how should we weigh the private life of a great writer? Can the creation of a major poetic oeuvre ever have a human cost that we count as simply too great?