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My project is a biographical criticism exploring Mary Shelley and her authorial presence amongst the most prolific authors of the 19th century such as Lord Byron, Leigh Hunt, John Keats, Charles Lamb, Thomas Hogg, and lesser-known political revolutionaries associated with her father William Godwin, who is famous for his own political radicalism. These brilliant minds surrounded Mary her entire life as guests of her father's or associates of her husband, the poet Percy Shelley (Seymour, 23). Mary was respected in this community of academia as the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, but also as an author herself. However, after her death she is remembered solely as the wife of Percy and the author of *Frankenstein*. This novel projected her to the forefront of gothic literature in the Romantic era but left her vulnerable for attack from critics against her authorship. For example: On the back of a Bantam Classic edition of *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus*, published in 1980, there is a brief synopsis drafted by the editor Diane Johnson: "A summer evening's ghost stories, lonely insomnia in a moonlit Alpine room, and a runaway imagination- fired by philosophical discussions with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley about science, galvanism, and the origins of life- conspired to produce for Mary Shelley this haunting night specter. By morning it had become the germ of her Romantic masterpiece, *Frankenstein*." Even the phrasing on the backside of her novel undermines Mary's fantastic work of fiction, commenting instead on the circumstances of its conception. Instead of highlighting Mary's creativity and the work of art that the novel became, Johnson instead focuses her attention on the men surrounding her.

The question was asked frequently by the first readers of *Frankenstein*, "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?" and Mary answered in

her introduction to the 1831 publication (Robinson, 437). The study of women in the 19th century is relevant now as we explore the injustices they endured despite their brilliant minds. Mary Shelley is a perfect example of a female thriving amid hypocrisy, fierce radicalism, and a shift in social discourse about a woman's role as a wife and mother. My project also explores the other women in Percy's life, specifically Harriet Westbrook, Percy's first wife, Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister, and Claire Clairmont, Mary's stepsister. These three females are all influenced by the carelessness with which Percy focused his attentions, falling for his passionate romance but ultimately being discarded for something he deems superior. Two of these relations ended with depression and eventual suicide. While many biographers choose to marginalize women such as these, I have dedicated this thesis to exploring the injustices and discrepancies in the biographical record then and now. My paper discusses the interwoven stories told by biographers of this popular literary society, while giving special attention to the women that fade into the background.

Mary Godwin Shelley is one of the most fascinating women to emerge from the Romantic Period and lived among the most widely written about group of people of the century. As a female writer, the authenticity of her work is easily credited as stemming from the brilliant husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, a prolific poet and radical author of the 19th century, and his companions, -not her own mind. It is true that no author writes in a vacuum. Mary Shelley was born at the cusp of the French Revolution, where political and scientific advancements were rampant. Her mother, the earliest feminist Mary Wollstonecraft partnered with political writer William Godwin. These two philosophers, engaged in a social circle of interesting people, found a common ground in their views about marriage and the role of the female. Unfortunately for her daughter, Wollstonecraft passed away eleven days after Mary's birth. Mary would only know her

mother through the texts she left behind, and stories shared by her father with whom she was close (Seymour, 19).

The question arises, would Mary have run away with Percy at age 16 had her mother been present? It is well known that William Godwin's second marriage was practical rather than passionate, and that affected Mrs. Godwin's open distaste of her stepchildren (Carlson, 35). The hostility of this household was obviously too much to bear as Mrs. Godwin's own daughter Claire saw the opportunity for freedom and ran away with Mary and Percy, leaving Fanny, Charles, and the youngest, William. It seems darkly ironic that Mary Wollstonecraft, celebrated as the first woman to call for the education of women and its direct correlation with improving the household, was never able to practice her doctrines in her own life. Domesticity was never her goal, but Wollstonecraft directly united the contentment of the household to the education received by the mother figure (Carlson, 15). Mrs. Godwin was educated but disagreed with the amount of knowledge that should be allowed by the daughters in the Godwin home. Claire was lucky enough to learn French from her mother before running away with Percy and Mary (Gittings, 11).

Mary Shelley's life as a mother and wife was marked by the death of all her children but one, infidelity in her marriage, and after her husband's death, his reputation for radicalism weighed on her shoulders. Many of the people Mary considered friends were the ones who turned on her, telling people it was Mary's depression and negativity that drove Percy to risk his life at sea. Life was unfair to Mary Shelley, a woman who was set up for success at a young age, and whose image was unfortunately a reflection of her husband's indiscretions.

Another woman who knew of these injustices was Percy's first wife Harriet Westbrook Shelley. Harriet Westbrook was the first woman to endure Percy's vacillating affections. At age

16 she was rescued from boarding school where she threatened suicide from depression according to letters she sent to Shelley after meeting through her classmate Helen Shelley, Percy's sister. He was ready to turn against his family's wishes after being expelled from Oxford University for co-authoring an anti-Christian pamphlet for the student body (St Clair, 34). Percy was barely 19, Harriet only 16, and the pair eloped to Scotland where they were married and by the time they returned to England Harriet was pregnant with their first child. A baby girl named Ianthe was born at the same time Percy began exploring elsewhere for educated female conversation. Harriet was distraught but knew her husband despised female jealousy and did everything she could to hide her feelings and remain a loyal wife. Despite getting Harriet pregnant again in 1814, three years after their initial union, Percy was emotionally disconnected from his wife and had moved on to his mentor's daughter, the future Mary Shelley. Percy had fallen for Mary during his intellectual visits to Godwin's home and they frequently met at the gravesite of Wollstonecraft with stepsister Claire tagging along. Harriet moved back into her parent's home and sought to comfort herself with her children, Ianthe and William. While Percy was abroad with his new wife he "gallantly" offered to move Harriet and the children to Switzerland with himself, Mary and Claire, but she must behave as his sister. She refused the proposal and her depression worsened beyond a state calmed by children. In November of 1816, Harriet left her home and checked into lodgings, registered herself as H. Smith. Biographers believe she was seeing a military officer and after becoming pregnant with his child he became distant. Fearing another man would leave her Harriet filled her pockets with stones and walked into the Serpentine River with her unborn child in her belly. Her body was found two weeks later (St Clair, 40).

Another tragic story occurred close to the Shelley couple only a few weeks prior to the discovery of poor Harriet. Mary's half-sister Fanny was a bright child, talented in the arts, but domestic duty as the eldest child in a household that suffered financially sobered Fanny. Her stepmother did not make it easier, openly preferring her own children, and Fanny became known for her somber attitude. Many who knew Wollstonecraft saw much of her depressive nature in her daughter Fanny. After being left behind by the only other young women in the household Fanny's depression overwhelmed her. When Mary, Claire, and Percy moved back to England they received a letter from the distraught sibling expressing terrible anguish. Percy immediately went in search of Fanny but it was too late. The next day they discovered the body of Fanny Imlay beside an empty bottle of laudanum and a suicide note (Todd, 44).

The stories of these tragic women are known because of their proximity to these famous authors. Mary Shelley deserves to be known as a single literary contributor to the 19th century, separate from her husband. Literary scholars heavily study this circle of people today, with the female masterpiece being Mary Shelley with her role as the author of *Frankenstein* and the wife of Percy Shelley. We know her today for the writing of *Frankenstein*, a vexing & complicated telling of a scientist and his creation. Many of the events of the novel mirror Mary's emotional state during different times of her life. It is true that she pulls from many other literary sources published during the time she was writing and also texts from the ancient past. Other writers inspire each other every day, so why did Mary receive so much criticism claiming the story wasn't her own? Mary Shelley is among the first of her kind, a woman with access to the most brilliant people of her time, while using her own talents at writing. Percy edited drafts of this novel in its early stages, and biographers have concluded that he and not Mary wrote approximately 6% of the words used in the novel. This does not give enough proof that Mary

didn't write the novel herself, though upon its first publication in 1818, the author was listed as anonymous until four years later (Robinson, 19). Percy's overpowering presence shadowed Mary until his death. Only then was she free to manipulate her own destiny in the literary world. Upon her arrival back to England after living in Italy with Percy, her father wrote this about her potential: "[Frankenstein] is the most wonderful work to have been written at twenty years of age that I ever heard of. You are now five and twenty. And, most fortunately, you have pursued a course of reading, and cultivated your mind in a manner the most admirably adapted to make you a great and successful author. If you cannot be independent, who should be?" (Seymour, 255). For every person telling Mary that she couldn't, there were just as many supporting this young woman's ambition. Most of her talent went to editing her husband's works and molding his image posthumously, yet Mary and the other women made to feel less in the historic telling of Percy's life, will reside today in our memory through this and other biographies.

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