

**WOMEN IN LOVE HISTORIES**

Graziella Strauss-Kelly

**Famous Artists and Their  
Moving Passions**

feat. Mary Godwin Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett  
Browning, Robert Browning, Pablo Picasso, Olga Khokhlova, Sylvette  
David, Gala, Salvador Dali, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera

*... and Its Intriguing Dangerous  
Splendour*

**INTEGRAL**

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**#5**

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## “Soul Meets Soul on Lovers’ Lips”: The Scandalous and Controversial Affair of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley

When the young Romantic poet Percy Shelley met Mary Godwin, she was the teenage daughter of a famous trailblazing feminist, the long-dead Mary Wollstonecraft. The two of them shared a love of the mind—“Soul meets soul on lovers’ lips”, he wrote—but physical desire swept them away too, consummated near the grave of Mary’s mother. When they ran away to Europe, it caused a major scandal, but the couple proclaimed themselves indifferent to judgment. “It was acting in a novel, being an incarnate romance”, she later said.

They traveled together to visit the debauched Lord Byron and Mary wrote *Frankenstein* during two weeks in Switzerland. After Percy died in a boating accident in 1822, Mary never remarried. She said having been married to a genius, she could not marry a man who wasn’t one.

Mistress of the Gothic novel, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley—née Godwin—was born August 30, 1797 in London, England. Her parents were famous intellectuals: writer and philosopher, William Godwin, and women’s rights activist, Mary Wollstonecraft. Sadly, complications from childbirth led to Wollstonecraft’s death just days following Mary’s birth.

Although Mary had a relatively happy childhood, her father’s remarriage to Mary Jane Clairmont led to discord. Godwin’s friends were not fond of Clairmont and Mary also disliked her stepmother. These struggles aided her art, however, for at a young age Mary was taught to channel her emotions into writing. Despite minimal formal schooling, Mary received an excellent education for a woman of her time. She had access to an extensive library and constant exposure to intellectuals of the day, explains Lauren Corba.

When Mary was seventeen years old, she began a relationship with her father’s married acquaintance, Percy Bysshe Shelley. The two met in secret, arranging secret rendezvous at Wollstonecraft’s grave. Once her father discovered their involvement, he attempted to break off the relationship but was unsuccessful.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born into an aristocratic family on September 4, 1792. Percy enjoyed a life of privilege and was sent to Eton College when he was twelve. After six years at Eton, where he became known for his anti-authoritarian views and began writing poetry and prose, he entered Oxford University in 1810. At Oxford he and a friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, influenced each other’s growing rejection of societal rules. Their collaboration on a pamphlet titled *The Necessity of Atheism* resulted in their expulsion from Oxford. Percy’s father, angered by his expulsion and refusal to renounce the pamphlet’s atheist ideas, cut him off financially until he came of age two years later. While living in poverty, Percy eloped with sixteen-year-old Harriet Westbrook.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin’s childhood has elements of “Cinderella,” complete with a malevolent stepmother. Mary was the child of two renowned freethinkers—reformer and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), and William Godwin, noted writer, philosopher, and atheist. Mary Wollstonecraft died days after Mary’s birth on August 30, 1797. William then married Mary Jane Clairmont, a widow with two young children. The new Mrs. Godwin favored her children over Mary and was jealous of William’s attention to her. She made life difficult for Mary and promoted her children’s education at the expense of Mary’s. Despite Mrs. Godwin’s efforts, Mary received an excellent education. She had access to her father’s library, listened to his discussions with other leading intellectuals, and immersed herself in her late mother’s writings. Due to clashes with her stepmother, Mary was sent to live with the Baxter family in Scotland. Here she finally found a loving family, and began to focus on her writing.

On a visit home in 1812, fifteen-year-old Mary met Percy Shelley, an admirer of her father. Percy visited the Godwin home often and became friendly with Mary, whom he recognized as an intellectual soulmate. Percy resented that his wife Harriet, preoccupied with one child and pregnant with another, no longer made him the center of attention, explains Sharon Reily.

In 1814, Mary and Percy met again, began spending time together and fell in love. William Godwin forbade the relationship and Mary promised not to see Percy. But after Percy threatened to commit suicide, she agreed to flee to France with him. Mary's stepsister, Jane Claire Clairmont, accompanied them. Mary's stepmother followed in hot pursuit to try to stop the elopement. She caught up with the three at the French port of Calais, but couldn't persuade them to return with her. When the two lovers ran out of money and returned to England, William Godwin wouldn't see them and didn't speak to Mary for almost four years. Percy's father, angered by his son's abandonment of Harriet, cut off his allowance and Percy had to spend months on the run to avoid creditors.

In 1814, the adulterous couple left for France with Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont. The trio traveled throughout Europe reading the works of Mary's mother, keeping a journal of their travels, and developing their own writing.

By the fall of 1814, money had run out and they were forced to return home. To further complicate matters, Mary discovered that she was pregnant. Mary tried her best to maintain a normal lifestyle despite a sickly pregnancy but it is rumored that during this time Percy began an affair with Claire. Little evidence supports the claim, however; several sections of Mary's journals are missing from the period, Claire's journal has disappeared and Thomas Hogg—Percy's friend and biographer—does not include a history past 1815. In any case, Mary was frequently left alone while Shelley visited his wife or engaged in outings with Claire.

February of 1815 proved devastating for Mary, as her daughter was born two months premature and died two weeks later. Percy's apathy towards the loss of their child compelled Mary to search elsewhere for comfort and she turned to Thomas Jefferson Hogg for companionship. It is often thought that Percy encouraged a relationship between Mary and Hogg, especially after his own alleged affair with Claire. Mary had no interest in a romantic relationship beyond Percy, however.

Once she was healthy enough to travel, the couple moved about in hopes of relieving Mary's depression. Eventually their travels intersected with those of Lord Byron and they spent a summer together. The season proved rainy, forcing the friends to remain often indoors. There, they read old ghost stories and invented their own. Mary's anxiety impaired her creativity. However, on an evening in mid-June, she imagined a corpse reanimating through galvanism—the contraction of muscles due to electric shock. Once the idea came to her, she could not let it go and began writing what she thought would be a short story. Instead, she wrote *Frankenstein*, one of the greatest "dark" novels of all time.

In May 1816, Mary Godwin, Percy Shelley and their son travelled to Geneva with Claire Clairmont. They planned to spend the summer with the poet Lord Byron, whose recent affair with Claire had left her pregnant. The party arrived at Geneva on May 14, 1816, where Mary called herself "Mrs. Shelley". Byron joined them on May 25, with his young physician, John William Polidori, and rented the Villa Diodati, close to Lake Geneva at the village of Cologny; Percy Shelley rented a smaller building called Maison Chapuis on the waterfront nearby. They spent their time writing, boating on the lake and talking late into the night.

"It proved a wet, ungenial summer", Mary Shelley remembered in 1831, "and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house". Sitting around a log fire at Byron's villa, the company amused themselves with German ghost stories, which prompted Byron to propose that they "each write a

ghost story". Unable to think of a story, young Mary Godwin became anxious: "Have you thought of a story? I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative". During one mid-June evening, the discussions turned to the nature of the principle of life. "Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated", Mary noted, "galvanism had given token of such things". It was after midnight before they retired, and unable to sleep, she became possessed by her imagination as she beheld the *grim terrors* of her "waking dream", her ghost story: "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. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world".

She began writing what she assumed would be a short story. With Percy Shelley's encouragement, she expanded this tale into her first novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1818. She later described that summer in Switzerland as the moment "when I first stepped out from childhood into life".

Mary completed the first variant of the novel in the spring of 1817. Just 500 copies were printed the following January by a small publication house in London. She released the novel anonymously, but it was dedicated to William Godwin and included a preface by Percy Shelley. The novel was not well received, mainly due to the bold and horrifying subject matter. Its audience was further shocked upon learning that such an "atrocious" work was written by a woman. Her third and most widely read version of the story was published in 1831 and in this edition Shelley revised her novel to comply with more conservative ideals. Despite its uncertain beginning, the story has become a classic.

Mary and her lover collaborated on the story but the extent of Percy's contribution to the novel is unknown and has been argued over by readers and critics. There are differences in the 1818, 1823 and 1831 editions and Mary Shelley wrote "I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband, and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world". She wrote that the preface to the first edition was Percy's work "as far as I can recollect". James Rieger concluded Percy's "assistance at every point in the book's manufacture was so extensive that one hardly knows whether to regard him as editor or minor collaborator", while Anne K. Mellor later argued Percy only "made many technical corrections and several times clarified the narrative and thematic continuity of the text". Finally, Charles E. Robinson, editor of a facsimile edition of the *Frankenstein* manuscripts, concluded that Percy Byshe Shelley's contributions to the book "were no more than what most publishers' editors have provided new (or old) authors or, in fact, what colleagues have provided to each other after reading each other's works in progress".

On their return to England in September, Mary and Percy moved—with Claire Clairmont, who took lodgings nearby—to Bath, where they hoped to keep Claire's pregnancy secret. At Coligny, Mary Godwin had received two letters from her half-sister, Fanny Imlay, who alluded to her "unhappy life"; on October 9, Fanny wrote an "alarming letter" from Bristol that sent Percy Shelley racing off to search for her, without success. On the morning of October 10, Fanny Imlay was found dead in a room at a Swansea inn, along with a suicide note and a laudanum bottle. On December 10, Percy Shelley's wife, Harriet, was discovered drowned in the Serpentine, a lake in Hyde Park, London. Both suicides were hushed up. Harriet's family obstructed Percy Shelley's efforts—fully supported by Mary Godwin—to assume custody of his two children by Harriet. His lawyers advised him to improve his case by marrying; so he and Mary, who was pregnant again, married on December 30, 1816, at St Mildred's Church, Bread Street, London. Mr and Mrs Godwin were present and the marriage ended the family rift.

Claire Clairmont gave birth to a baby girl on January 13, at first called Alba, later Allegra. In March of that year, the Chancery Court ruled Percy Shelley morally unfit to assume custody of his children and later placed them with a clergyman's family. Also in March, the Shelleys moved with Claire and Alba to Albion House at Marlow, Buckinghamshire, a large, damp building on the river Thames. There Mary Shelley gave birth to her third child, Clara, on September 2. At Marlow, they entertained their new friends Marianne and Leigh Hunt, worked hard at their writing and often discussed politics.

Early in the summer of 1817, Mary Shelley finished *Frankenstein*, which was published anonymously in January 1818. Reviewers and readers assumed that Percy Shelley was the author, since the book was published with his preface and dedicated to his political hero William Godwin. At Marlow, Mary edited the joint journal of the group's 1814 *Continental journey*, adding material written in Switzerland in 1816, along with Percy's poem "Mont Blanc". The result was the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, published in November 1817. That autumn, Percy Shelley often lived away from home in London to evade creditors. The threat of a debtor's prison, combined with their ill health and fears of losing custody of their children, contributed to the couple's decision to leave England for Italy on March 12, 1818, taking Claire Clairmont and Alba with them. They had no intention of returning.

One of the party's first tasks on arriving in Italy was to hand Alba over to Byron, who was living in Venice. He had agreed to raise her so long as Claire had nothing more to do with her. The Shelleys then embarked on a roving existence, never settling in any one place for long. Along the way, they accumulated a circle of friends and acquaintances who often moved with them. The couple devoted their time to writing, reading, learning, sightseeing, and socialising. The Italian adventure was, however, blighted for Mary Shelley by the deaths of both her children—Clara, in September 1818 in Venice, and William, in June 1819 in Rome. These losses left her in a deep depression that isolated her from Percy Shelley, who wrote in his notebook:

"My dearest Mary, wherefore hast thou gone,  
And left me in this dreary world alone?  
Thy form is here indeed—a lovely one—  
But thou art fled, gone down a dreary road  
That leads to Sorrow's most obscure abode.  
For thine own sake I cannot follow thee  
Do thou return for mine".

For a time, Mary Shelley found comfort only in her writing. The birth of her fourth child, Percy Florence, on November 12, 1819, finally lifted her spirits, though she nursed the memory of her lost children till the end of her life.

Italy provided the Shelleys, Byron and other exiles with a political freedom unattainable at home. Despite its associations with personal loss, Italy became for Mary Shelley "a country which memory painted as Paradise". Their Italian years were a time of intense intellectual and creative activity for both Shelleys. While Percy composed a series of major poems, Mary wrote the novel *Matilda*, the historical novel *Valperga* and the plays *Proserpine* and *Midas*. Mary wrote *Valperga* to help alleviate her father's financial difficulties, as Percy refused to assist him further. She was often physically ill, however, and prone to depressions. She also had to cope with Percy's interest in other women, such as Sophia Stacey, Emilia Viviani and Jane Williams. Since Mary Shelley shared his belief in the non-exclusivity of marriage, she formed emotional ties of her own among the men and women of their circle. She became particularly fond of the Greek revolutionary Prince Alexandros Mavrokordatos and of Jane and Edward Williams.

In December 1818, the Shelleys travelled south with Claire Clairmont and their servants to Naples, where they stayed for three months, receiving only one visitor, a physician. In 1820, they found themselves plagued by accusations and threats from Paolo and Elise Foggis, former servants whom Percy Shelley had dismissed in Naples shortly after the Foggis had married. The pair revealed that on February 27, 1819, in Naples, Percy Shelley had registered as his child by Mary Shelley a two-month-old baby girl named Elena Adelaide Shelley. The Foggis also claimed that Claire Clairmont was the baby's mother. Biographers have offered various interpretations of these events: that Percy Shelley decided to adopt a local child; that the baby was his by Elise, Claire or an unknown woman; or that she was Elise's by Byron. Mary Shelley insisted she would have known if Claire had been pregnant, but it is unclear how much she really knew. The events in Naples, a city Mary Shelley later called a paradise inhabited by devils, remain shrouded in mystery. The only certainty is that she herself was not the child's mother. Elena Adelaide Shelley died in Naples on June 9, 1820.

After leaving Naples, the Shelleys settled in Rome, the city where her husband wrote where "the meanest streets were strewn with truncated columns, broken capitals...and sparkling fragments of granite or porphyry... The voice of dead time, in still vibrations, is breathed from these dumb things, animated and glorified as they were by man". Rome inspired her to begin writing the unfinished novel *Valerius, the Reanimated Roman*, where the eponymous hero resists the decay of Rome and the machinations of "superstitious" Catholicism. The writing of her novel was broken off when her son William died of malaria. Shelley bitterly commented that she had come to Italy to improve her husband's health, and instead the Italian climate had just killed her two children, leading her to write: "May you my dear Marianne never know what it is to lose two only and lovely children in one year-to watch their dying moments-and then at last to be left childless and forever miserable". To deal with her grief, Shelley wrote the novella *The Fields of Fancy*, which became *Matilda* dealing with a young woman whose beauty inspired incestuous love in her father, who ultimately commits suicide to stop himself from acting on his passion for his daughter, while she spends the rest of her life full of despair about "the unnatural love I had inspired". The novella offered a feminist critique of a patriarchal society as Matilda is punished in the afterlife though she did nothing to encourage her father's feelings.

In the summer of 1822, a pregnant Mary moved with Percy, Claire and Edward and Jane Williams to the isolated Villa Magni, at the sea's edge near the hamlet of San Terenzo in the Bay of Lerici. Once they were settled in, Percy broke the "evil news" to Claire that her daughter Allegra had died of typhus in a convent at Bagnacavallo. Mary Shelley was distracted and unhappy in the cramped and remote Villa Magni, which she came to regard as a dungeon. On June 16, she miscarried, losing so much blood that she nearly died. Rather than wait for a doctor, Percy sat her in a bath of ice to staunch the bleeding, an act the doctor later told him saved her life. All was not well between the couple that summer, however, and Percy spent more time with Jane Williams than with his depressed and debilitated wife. Most of the short poems Shelley wrote at San Terenzo were addressed to Jane rather than to Mary.

The coast offered Percy Shelley and Edward Williams the chance to enjoy their "perfect plaything for the summer", a new sailing boat. The boat had been designed by Daniel Roberts and Edward Trelawny, an admirer of Byron's who had joined the party in January 1822. On July 1, 1822, Percy Shelley, Edward Ellerker Williams and Captain Daniel Roberts sailed south down the coast to Livorno. There Percy Shelley discussed with Byron and Leigh Hunt the launch of a radical magazine called *The Liberal*. On July 8, he and Edward Williams set out on the return journey to Lerici with their eighteen-year-old boatboy, Charles Vivian. They never reached their destination. A letter arrived at Villa Magni from Hunt to Percy Shelley, dated July 8, saying, "pray write to tell us how you got home, for they say you had bad weather after you sailed monday & we are anxious". "The paper fell from me", Mary told a friend

later. "I trembled all over." She and Jane Williams rushed desperately to Livorno and then to Pisa in the fading hope that their husbands were still alive. Ten days after the storm, three bodies washed up on the coast near Viareggio, midway between Livorno and Lerici. Trelawny, Byron and Hunt cremated Percy Shelley's corpse on the beach at Viareggio.

In the summer of 1824, Mary Shelley moved to Kentish Town in north London to be near Jane Williams. She may have been, in the words of her biographer Muriel Spark, "a little in love" with Jane. Jane later disillusioned her by gossiping that Percy had preferred her to Mary, owing to Mary's inadequacy as a wife. At around this time, Mary Shelley was working on her novel, *The Last Man* (1826); and she assisted a series of friends who were writing memoirs of Byron and Percy Shelley—the beginnings of her attempts to immortalise her husband. She also met the American actor John Howard Payne and the American writer Washington Irving, who intrigued her. Payne fell in love with her and in 1826 asked her to marry him. She refused, saying that after being married to one genius, she could only marry another. Payne accepted the rejection and tried without success to talk his friend Irving into proposing himself. Mary Shelley was aware of Payne's plan, but how seriously she took it is unclear.

Mary continued to practice her mother's feminist principles by extending aid to women whom society disapproved of. For instance, Shelley extended financial aid to Mary Diana Dods, a single mother and illegitimate herself who appears to have been a lesbian and gave her the new identity of Walter Sholto Douglas, husband of her lover Isabel Robinson. Mary Shelley also assisted Georgiana Paul, a woman disallowed for by her husband for alleged adultery. Shelley in her diary about her assistance to the latter: "I do not make a boast—I do not say aloud—behold my generosity and greatness of mind—in truth it is simple justice I perform—and so I am still reviled for being worldly".

Mary Shelley continued to treat potential romantic partners with caution. In 1828, she met and flirted with the French writer Prosper Mérimée, but her one surviving letter to him appears to be a deflection of his declaration of love. She was delighted when her old friend from Italy, Edward Trelawny, returned to England and they joked about marriage in their letters. Their friendship had altered, however, following her refusal to cooperate with his proposed biography of Percy Shelley; and he later reacted angrily to her omission of the atheistic section of *Queen Mab* from Percy Shelley's poems. Oblique references in her journals, from the early 1830s until the early 1840s, suggest that Mary Shelley had feelings for the radical politician Aubrey Beauclerk, who may have disappointed her by twice marrying others.

Her letters show that, in fact, the author of *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* turned to women after her husband's death, says Fern Riddell. Mary Shelley has become an idol for those whose souls search for belonging in dark times. After all, this is the woman said to have married her lover, Percy Bysshe Shelley, after losing her virginity to him at the graveside of her mother. And then, after he drowned in a storm in 1822, carried his calcified heart—the only thing to survive his cremation—with her, wrapped in a silk shroud, until her death in 1851. (It was found in her desk, wrapped in the pages of one of his last poems.) But Fiona Sampson, author of *In Search of Mary Shelley*, taught the readers something new: Mary was bisexual. Writing to her close friend Edward Trelawny in 1835, Shelley recalled the years of loneliness and longing that followed Percy's death, saying: "I was so ready to give myself away—and being afraid of men, I was apt to get tousy-mousy for women".

Reading this as a historian of sexual culture, Dr. Riddell recognised this as sexual slang—but did this allude to masturbation or actual relationships?

"When I tweeted the quote above, revelations flooded in thick and fast. Jonathon Green, one of our most important historical lexicographers, was able to tell me that *tuzzy-muzzy* as slang for the vagina dates back to 1642. There are also stories of Shelley having a love affair with Jane Williams not long